

Balloch, the National Park and Flamingo Land – charrette or charade?

Description

Charrette is the fashionable name given to events ostensibly designed to include and empower local communities in respect of local planning processes. The name appears designed to discourage and disempower, unless you happen to be French. Still, if well run, incomprehension can change to active participation while ideas and proposals can be produced and converted into coherent plans with widespread community support.

It was perhaps because the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority were aware that their Local Development Plan consultation was deficient ([see here](#)) and ([here](#)) that they decided to run a charrette in Balloch. Or perhaps West Dunbartonshire Council, who co-sponsored the Charrette, suggested it?

Normally, such a consultation exercise takes place BEFORE a plan is produced, not afterwards.

A comparison of the Charrette timeline to that of Flamingo Land’s appointment and the formal planning process is quite revealing and raises a number of questions.

Charrette – Flamingo Land – Planning timeline

(SE = Scottish Enterprise LDP = Local Development Plan)

Date	West Riverside – Flamingo Land	Charrette	Planning
? 2015	LLTNPA and Scottish Enterprise issue joint development brief for West Riverside		
April 2015			LLTNPA Board LDP consultation
June 2015	Closing date West Riverside submissions		Closure statutory LDP consultation
August 2015	Scoring of West Riverside submissions by SE and LLTNPA		
September 2015	Unsuccessful bidders West Riverside Site notified		
October 2015			LLTNPA approval Development Plan
Jan-Feb 2016		Pre-charrette visits	
Feb- March 2016		Charrette workshops	

May 2016		Charrette Final Report and Action Plan
September 2016	SE announce Flamingo Land as preferred bidder	
October 2017		Flamingo Land announce pre-application consultation
Nov - Dec 2017		Two pre-application consultations
May 2018		Planning Application submitted
September 2018		Final design for village square approved

- The West Riverside Development brief issued in early 2015 stated that *“Scottish Enterprise, in partnership with Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority, are promoting West Riverside and the undeveloped sites within Loch Lomond Shores for tourism and leisure-based developments.”* This strongly suggests that LLTNPA involvement was considerably greater than simply earmarking this site for Visitor Experience. They must have had discussions and shared ideas of what development proposals might be acceptable. Yet, the LLTNPA NEVER shared these with the charrette. Why not?
- That this was not accidental is shown by the LLTNPA’s two track – two faced? – approach to Drumkinnon Woods. In October 2015 their Board approved recommendations to the Scottish Government Reporter that Scottish Enterprise’s proposals to include Drumkinnon Woods in the Local Development Plan should be rejected. However, the West Riverside Development Brief developed by SE and LLTNPA staff six months earlier had agreed the opposite:

5.DRUMKINNON WOODS

Size: circa 19.03 acres / 7.7 ha

Brief Description: This is a woodland site and although there are no Tree Preservation orders the vendor would like to retain the majority of trees and would encourage low impact development.

- Why weren’t the people participating in the charrette ever told about the decision to appoint Flamingo Land as preferred bidder six months earlier? Were the consultants appointed to run the charrette aware of this appointment? SE and LLTNPA must have made a conscious decision to withhold this information. Why?

Omissions from the charrette consultation

The charrette process appears to have been well run, participative and produced good proposals.

Outline proposals discussed during the second Charrette Workshop defined three clear areas of focus within the village. A number of strategic approaches and opportunities were presented using examples that demonstrated a variety of approaches to river and loch-side public realm and village centre enhancements that formed the basis for debate.

Below is a summary of key priorities identified by the community:

East Riverside

- o There is a need to make people aware of Balloch Park and make it easier to get to - by bridge, ferry and/or by making the walk along the shore a nicer experience
- o Linking the village and Balloch Park to Loch Lomond Shores would be a positive thing
- o There should be a broad range of activities and attractions within the park and the castle

West riverside

- o Riverside walkway linking Loch Lomond Shores and the village should be green in character but have day and evening activity along it
- o The Riverside should feel safe and enjoyable in the evening as well as during the day
- o There needs to be better connections between the village, Loch Lomond Shores and Balloch Country Park.

Village Centre

- o Need to create a more people friendly environment
- o There needs to be more parking, and it needs to be better managed and regulated
- o Quality of environment could be improved for the benefit of residents and visitors.

What is interesting about the Balloch

Charrette Final Report ([see here](#)) in relation to the Flamingo Land Planning Application is less what was said, than what was not. The charrette covered some areas in considerable depth but practically ignored others. Maps from the Charrette Final Report illustrate this:

West riverside Strategy

The area along Pier Road and the River Leven, linking the village centre, Balloch Pier and Loch Lomond Shores, could work much better for the village. Many people have said that the connections between these places need to be improved.

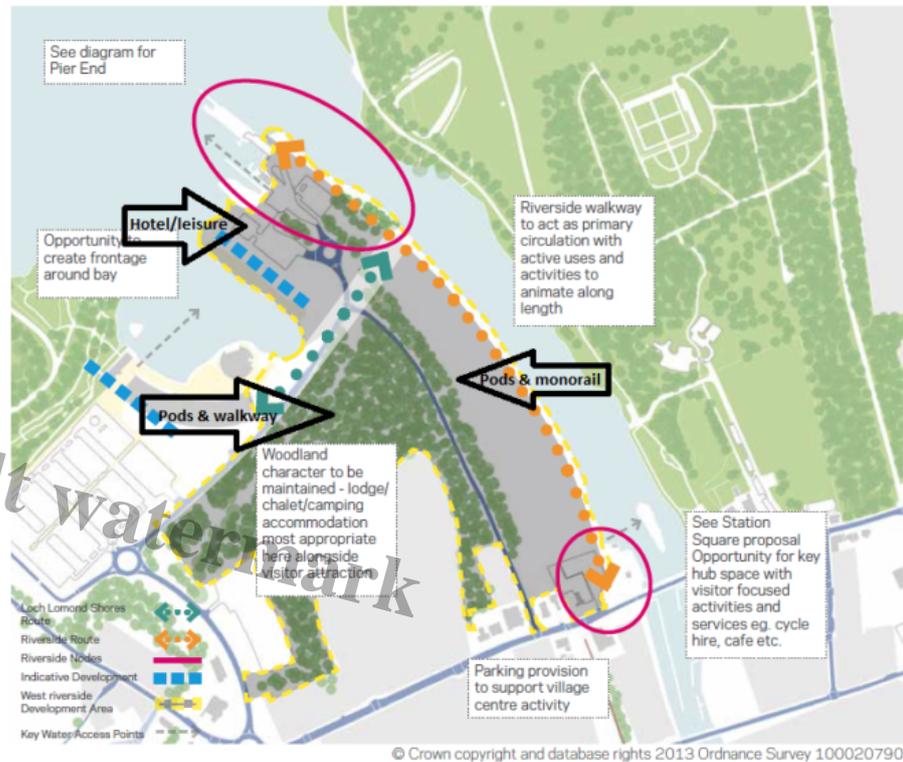
Scottish Enterprise owns much of the land and wishes to redevelop it for visitor accommodation, adventure activity, restaurant and retail. At Balloch Pier, Loch Lomond Steamship Company plans to get the 'Maid of the Loch' sailing again and build a visitor centre, and Loch Lomond Water Sports Association wants to build an activity centre for various water sports.

A riverside walkway that is active, visible and enjoyable to spend time walking along will provide a strong linking element for the pier, Loch Lomond Shores, Scottish Enterprise development and the village. It will become a distinctive part of Balloch and make much more of its riverside setting.

What should happen?

- o An enhanced riverside walkway connecting village centre, Balloch Pier and Loch Lomond Shores.
- o Integration of existing routes: River Leven towpath, John Muir Way, Three Lochs Way and via Loch Lomond Shores to Cameron House.
- o Develop guidelines for redeveloping pier-area for Maid of the Loch operations and new water sports centre.
- o Open up views of the river and loch, integrate facilities, improve pedestrian connections to village centre and Loch Lomond Shores.
- o Define guidelines for development to rear of riverside walkway: create opportunities for eating, drinking and outdoor activity to improve Balloch's offer and choice, connect rather than divide village centre and Loch Lomond Shores, maximise access for visitors and residents.
- o Put in place measures to reduce erosion of river banks.
- o See the 'Making it Happen' section for who should lead and who should support in manifesting these ideas.

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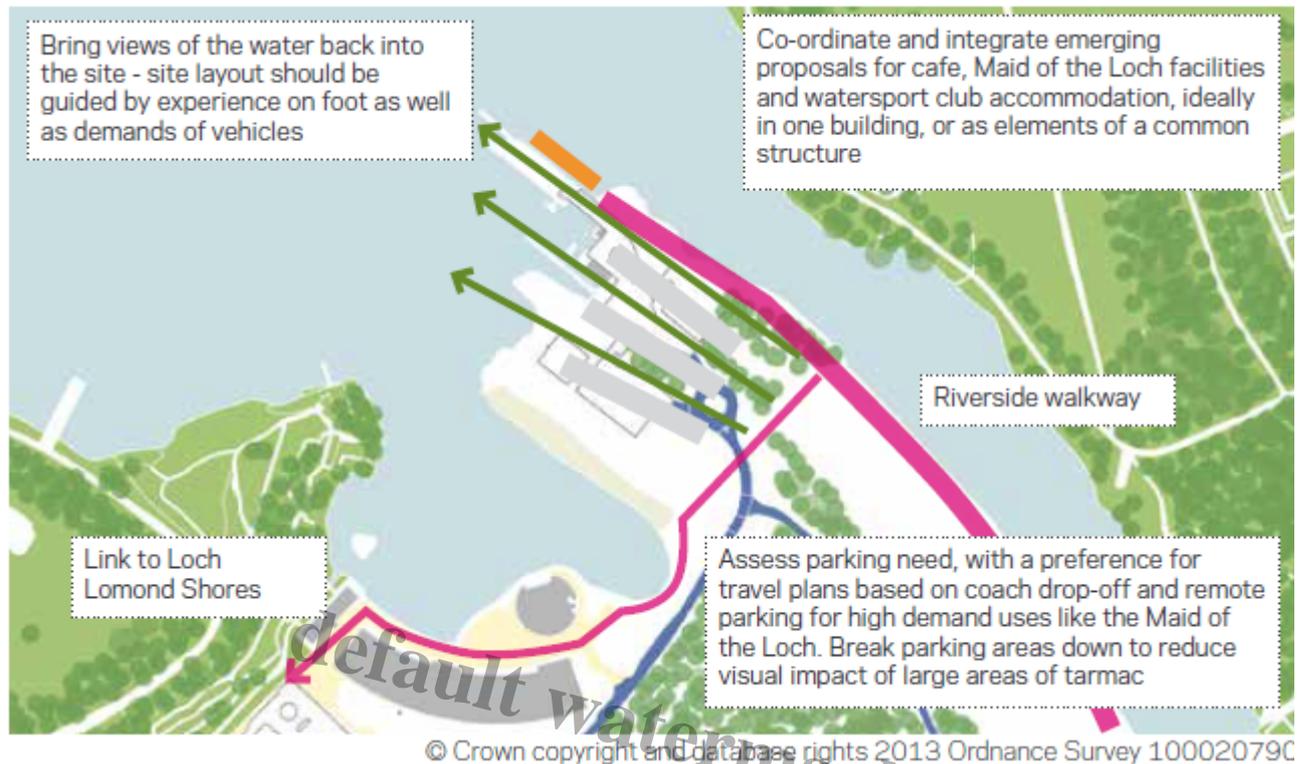
Extract from charrette final report. What was said is recorded on left. What was unsaid is marked by the blank grey areas on the map and the green of Drumkinnon Wood

Contrast the grey blank areas in the map above with the detailed proposals for the Station and Village Squares:



cannot find a detailed record of the four charrette sessions but, given the huge number of objections subsequently, one can reasonably question:

- Whether the proposal, marked on the map for chalet/camping accommodation in Drumkinnon Woods, was ever properly discussed?
- Whether anyone was asked their views on how the land (shaded grey), behind the riverside walkway (yellow dots), should be used? Had people been aware that the whole of this area could be covered in camping pods there might just have been a strong reaction.
- And that reaction might have been even stronger had people been made aware of the size and nature of the hotel/leisure complex by the Pierhead.



Extract from the Charrette Final Report on the Pierhead area

The Report's emphasis on the importance of views out from the Pierhead area is incompatible with Flamingo Land's proposal to build a large hotel leisure complex by the shore. Why didn't LLTNPA raise this when it had been included in their and SE's development brief for the West Riverside Site? There would have been a strong reaction.

It's fair to conclude that the charrette consultation on the West Riverside Site was deliberately skewed, with people's attention being directed to the Station Square and the Riverside walkway and away from the main Flamingo Land development. The consequence was detailed proposals were produced for both these areas while other areas were left blank or almost so.

SE and LLTNPA never anticipated that their failure to consult and engage on what is the heart of the West Riverside Site would result in c30,000 objections to Flamingo Land's Planning Application.

Further proof that the process was pockled comes from the section of the Charrette Final Report which covers Woodbank House:

Woodbank House

Despite not being discussed at length during the Charrette Workshops, Woodbank House has been identified within the Local Development Plan (LDP) as a significant site for the village, offering visitor experience development opportunities.

The category A Listed Woodbank House was built in the 1770s and used as a hotel for much of the 20th century. It is privately owned and is on the Buildings at Risk Register for Scotland. Repairing the building will take a considerable amount of money, so restoration alone is not likely to be financially viable for a private owner. The building is therefore only likely to be restored if there is some "enabling development" in the grounds to generate money – for example, houses or flats which would cross-subsidise the cost of repairing the listed building.

The site is identified in the LDP as for 'Visitor Experience'. This suggests visitor accommodation as an appropriate use and in keeping with the house's past life as a hotel. Given the significant challenge of restoring Woodbank House, some non-tourism uses may be acceptable, combined with an overall approach that addresses the preference for 'Visitor Experience' development.

Regardless of proposed uses, any development will need to be sensitive to the historic building and associated structures and to the landscape setting. The diagram adjacent shows the two key aspects of the house, north-east and south-east that should be maintained. Development should not have an adverse effect to views to and from the house in these directions.

Tree management can restore the visibility of these key facades in line with the original setting of the house against the strong backdrop of the woodland behind. The primary area suitable for some development is identified along Old Luss Road, this can be at the road itself, screened with increased tree planting or potentially set within the woodland, subject to an assessment.

What should happen?

- Renovate and re-use historic A-listed building.
- Sensitive new development in grounds to generate funding.
- Appropriate landscaping, drainage and flood mitigation.
- See the 'Making it Happen' section for who should lead and who should support in manifesting these ideas.

Despite not being discussed at length, the Charrette Final Report produced some defined proposals for Woodbank. Where did these come from? With this site having been earmarked for Visitor Experience, how did the consultants know that Woodbank House would only be restored if there was some

“enabling development”? It seems likely they were told to write this by the LLTNPA as a result of their behind the scenes discussions with Flamingo Land. The wording of the report, “*despite not being discussed at length*” can be construed as the consultants’ attempt to preserve their integrity, a coded message that the Charrette Final Report did not actually reflect what the local community was saying.

What’s happened to the proposals which came out of the charrette?

The consultants produced an action plan ([see here](#)) along with the Final Report in May 2016. This included a timescales for projects which should be completed over the next two years. In September 2018 the LLTNPA issued, under LivePARK Balloch, what appears to have been its first update on the action plan ([see here](#)). Detailed proposals to upgrade the Village Square had been agreed and would be implemented by West Dunbartonshire Council.

No update has yet been provided on the three areas where the LLTNPA was designated as the lead body. I have asked, under Freedom of Information, for the signage strategy and the events strategy and plan. The collaborative review for the Pierhead area around Maid of the Loch was not scheduled to start until now. How the LLTNPA could take a decision on the Flamingo Land planning application BEFORE agreeing a plan for the Pierhead is unclear. The two are interdependent, whether its transport connections between Balloch Station and Maid of the Loch, parking provision or consideration of what type of development might be appropriate next door to the scheduled monument of the steam slipway. Another pockled process.

We do know, however, that while including Station Square in their Planning Application in principle, Flamingo Land omitted two other key recommendations from the charrette from its Planning Application:

- The walkway along the River Leven
- The pedestrian bridge over the River Leven, linking the Pierhead area to Balloch Country Park

One should not be surprised that Flamingo Land didn’t want to take the proposals for a walkway and bridge any further – there is no money for them in it. I understand however that one of the reasons for the delay in the planning application is that Scottish Enterprise and the LLTNPA are trying to get Flamingo Land to include a walkway in their application. This is an attempt to make the rest of it more acceptable.

Community empowerment and planning – what needs to happen

The history of how the local community has and is being involved in the planning process for the Riverside Site raises very serious issues. The LLTNPA’s award winning Main Issues Report ducked the issues, as did the Local Development Plan.

The subsequent charrette is best described as half charrette, half charade. The charade has continued in the timing of the collaborative review for the Pierhead area.

The proof of the multiple failures in the planning process lies in the huge number of objections to the Flamingo Land proposals.

While the warped consultation process may open up the LLTNPA to legal challenge, should they approve Flaming Land's current Application for Planning Permission in Principle, the failure in consultation is at heart a political issue.

One aspect of this is it should provide the Scottish Parliament with all the evidence it needs to introduce a third party right of appeal against planning decisions. When Public Authorities fail to consult properly and appear to manipulate processes to help developers, as has happened at Flamingo Land, the public must have the right to challenge those processes.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. Development Plan
2. flamingo land
3. Freedom of Information
4. Governance
5. LLTNPA
6. Local communities
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Date Created

November 29, 2018

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