

The Balloch Charrette – the Lomond and Trossachs National Park’s failure to deliver

Description



The pierhead area, Balloch, viewed from close to where Flaming Land wants to build the centre of its LLTNPA was supposed to deliver on a spatial plan for the pierhead area (see below)

At the end of November, I took a critical look at the Balloch Charrette, the community planning event that took place in 2016 ([see here](#)) AFTER the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority had already committed to Flamingo Land going ahead. Out of the event came an Action Plan ([see here](#)) complete with lead partners and timescales. In September the LLTNPA provided its first update on progress, the “Village Square” work being led by West Dunbartonshire Council. Nothing was said

about progress on other actions so I asked for these under Freedom of Information. In December I received a response [EIR 2018-033 Response](#) together with 13 attachments containing agendas and minutes of meetings (these have NOT been placed on the Information response section of the LLTNPA website). This is important because what the minutes shows is that the LLTNPA is not delivering the actions it said it would.

The most likely explanation for this failure is that the LLTNPA has been diverting resources to helping Flamingo Land, the company it and Scottish Enterprise appointed to develop the Riverside Site, and the effect of this is to reduce further any possibility that the local community could develop alternatives. This post takes a look at what's been going on.

Actions where the LLTNPA is lead public authority – with two year timescales

The Action Plan tasked the LLTNPA with developing two strategies within two years, i.e. by May 2018. The LLTNPA responded to my questions about progress in relation to them as follows::

1) *Event Strategy and Plan – Following charrette feedback in favour of developing more events for Balloch, the focus was on a festival held in the village as part of the European Championships 2018 Cultural Programme. Lessons learnt from this event will be used to produce an events and festivals toolkit for Balloch and other communities in the National Park.*

In other words NO strategy has been developed. The Minute of the Steering Group held in March 2017 ([see here](#)) re-iterated the need for such a strategy “ACTION: CC (LLTNPA staff member) to scope out the opportunity to develop a longer-term Joint Events Strategy for Balloch.” That now appears to have been replaced by a “toolkit”. There is, as usual. no indication of who or how this was agreed.

2) *Signage strategy and development plan –“A public consultation on signage was held in March 2018 asking for feedback on proposals. Details can be found [here](#). The results of the public consultation will feed into the finalised signage.”*

The link leads to some interesting DESIGN proposals for signage which were consulted on locally – all good stuff from the staff involved – but this was part of a separate action being led by West Dunbartonshire Council!

<p>Integrate new/improved pedestrian/cycle routes with local path network:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">National Cycle Network, River Leven towpath, John Muir Way, Three Lochs Way and via Loch Lomond Shores to Cameron House		<ul style="list-style-type: none">Design signage and path improvements to connect riverside walkway to wider path network, including Management & Maintenance Plan.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Implement signage and path connections
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NO strategy or development plan has been developed by the Park as promised. The minute of 10th May 2017 ([see here](#)) indicates WHY a strategy was required:

“reminder of the need for inter-agency discussion on signage to ensure that prompt introduction can be achieved without disagreement at a stage that results in extensive delay as has occurred in the past.”

The minute also records contradictory information about what was being done to develop a strategy::

“As part of the village improvements there will be some signage included in the plans, but not a full signage strategy for Balloch. A National Park signage strategy is in development but requires more work and bringing up to date. Agreed that a cohesive signage strategy for Balloch is needed to ensure consistency throughout the village.

ACTION: CC to forward NPA signage strategy when available.”

The first sentence appears to say that a full signage strategy for Balloch is not needed but then in the third sentence says it is!. Help! Whatever the case, it appears there will be no further work until the National Park signage strategy appeared. A Park wide strategy as it might help redress the situation where the Park has spent a fortune on NO camping signs and as a result has no money for other signage to advise people how they might enjoy their access rights. But where is that strategy? Its certainly not been presented to the LLTNPA Board.

Actions where the LLTNPA has a lead role – with five year timescales

The LLTNPA also had a lead role on two projects with five year timescales. The first was to develop proposals for a new crossing over the River Leven near the pierhead, something that has been suggested by the local community now for over thirty years. Here is the LLTNPA response:

– “It is noted that Scottish Enterprise and West Dunbartonshire Council are listed as lead partners with the Authority. See information held in Appendix A.”

That is quite true, three leads were appointed. The only information about progress however is contained in the March 2017 Minutes:

“Connectivity – bridge across R. Leven – longer term priority”

So, that's two and a half years gone and absolutely nothing appears to have been done. The most likely explanation is that, after Flamingo Land indicated that a pedestrian bridge was NOT on their agenda for the Riverside Site, Scottish Enterprise and the LLTNPA decided to go quiet and hope this would go away. Instead of spending money funding a feasibility for a new pedestrian crossing over the Leven, Scottish Enterprise have been forking out public money to Flamingo Land ([see here](#)). One wonder why couldn't the LLTNPA and Scottish Enterprise acted in the public interest and ruled out any planning proposals from Flamingo Land for the Riverside Site unless these included a new crossing?

On the second 5 year project, the Collaborative Review of the Pier Area, the LLTNPA is the sole lead. This is the area leased by the National Park Authority where the Maid of the Loch and Duncan Mills slipway is located. The LLTNPA's response to my question on progress was even shorter:

“See information held in Appendix A”.

The only information I can find on this dates from March 2017:

Pier area – short term amenity issues to be reported to relevant agencies; longer term issues include the need for a spatial review of area by NPA.

A spatial review of the pierhead area is critical to any decisions about development on the Riverside Site. The pierhead offers the best views out over Loch Lomond (the views from Loch Lomond shores on Drumkinnon Bay are far more limited). That is why Flamingo Land wants to place its luxury hotel just next to the site. In tourism terms the pierhead area is the most important part of the whole site. That importance is enhanced by the Maid of the Loch and the steam slipway, yet the whole area is a mess and blighted by car parking. The pierhead should have been an absolute priority for spatial review, particularly because of the failed Local Development Plan consultation and the Charrette’s failure to consult on the Riverside site itself. Here was an opportunity for the LLTNPA to engage with local people, recreational and conservation organisations and develop a vision for the area. Yet they have done nothing. Had they done so, the 35,000 people who have objected to the Flamingo Land development might just have something to say.

The contrast between what the LLTNPA and West Dunbartonshire Council have delivered

West Dunbartonshire was given the lead role for seven actions under the Charrette Plan compared to just four for the LLTNPA. They have not delivered everything, with securing a viable future for Balloch Castle being a huge challenge, but given that a number of the actions they were tasked with have required significant resources, the progress they has made has been significant (whether or not you agree with the detail of what has been done).

The LLTNPA’s progress reports on the Balloch Charrette have basically featured projected delivered by WDC rather than themselves. The latest, in February, is all about the Village Square and Moss O’ Balloch Parking ([see here](#)).

WDC’s effectiveness in delivering these developments raises the question of why the Scottish Government and Scottish Enterprise did not also ask it to lead for the Riverside Site ? That could have retained the land in public ownership instead of flogging it off cheap for private profit. Unfortunately we have moved from a position post-war where Councils had the resources to buy land and develop it (eg to construct housing) to a position where they are starved of all resources – deliberately so, so private developers and services are the only option on the table.

What’s also significant about these actions where progress is being openly reported is that they are those OUTWITH the Riverside Site. The open way that WDC has been engaging on the projects where it leads, contrasts with the secretive approach of Scottish Enterprise and the LLTNPA to the deals they are trying to do with Flamingo Land.

West riverside

A strong link connecting the village, the West riverside site, the pier and Loch Lomond Shores is of critical importance for Balloch. The opportunity is that a generous, active and well used walkway along the river can become synonymous with Balloch and an attraction in itself.

An illustration of how it might look is shown here. It incorporates a number of key aspects that are important to its success.

- o The walkway is on the water's edge
- o It is generous and visible from the bridge through Balloch
- o It is animated by small scale pavilion buildings providing accommodation for a range of uses
- o There is opportunity for integrated art installations, seating and play areas
- o Trees are maintained in pockets and clusters but the primary aim is to reveal views of the river and the Loch
- o Wayfinding and lighting is an integral part of the design and relates back to a Balloch wide strategy



Existing Riverside Path



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Extract from the charrette report

I have been informed that one of the reasons why the Riverside Planning Application has been suspended for so long is that the LLTNPA are trying to get Flamingo Land to include a walkway along the River Leven. That, along with a new riverside crossing, was one of the main recommendations to come out of the Charrette. To justify the development and avoid a political backlash the LLTNPA needs to show Flamingo Land will deliver at least one of the local community's aspirations and hope this is sufficient to persuade enough people that there is no alternative.

My suspicion therefore is that the Park's resources are being diverted to delivering development of the Riverside Site rather than all the other actions listed in the Charrette Action Plan, some of which conflict with this. The Director of Planning happens to be the senior staff member responsible for delivering both the Riverside Development and the Charrette Action Plan. Given the Park's current Partnership Plan commits it to delivering the development of the Riverside Site within 5 years it is not surprising where his priorities lies.

All this is happening within a complete vacuum when it comes to governance. There have been no reports to the Board about progress on the Charrette Action Plan. Had there been, it would helped expose what is going on.

What needs to happen

The lack of progress by the LLTNPA on the Charrette Action Plan provides more evidence to show that

the Charrette was, when it came to the Riverside Site, largely a sham. Its main purpose was to try and cover up the gaping holes in the LLTNPA's Local Development Plan consultation ([see here](#)).

The LLTNPA has made a serious mistake in prioritising Flamingo Land over anything that the local community or the public might want. Until it redresses this, it will continue to lack any credibility as a National Park Authority. Unfortunately, every time there is an opportunity to take a new approach – such as by developing a spatial plan for the pierhead – the LLTNPA's senior staff fail to grasp it. Unless the LLTNPA Board takes back control, recognises the Park's failures to date and commits to proper consultation, a major political confrontation appears inevitable. Scrutiny of the lack of progress by the Park under the Charrette Action Plan would be a good place for the Board to start.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. Development Plan
2. flamingo land
3. Freedom of Information
4. Governance
5. landscape
6. Local communities
7. planning

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