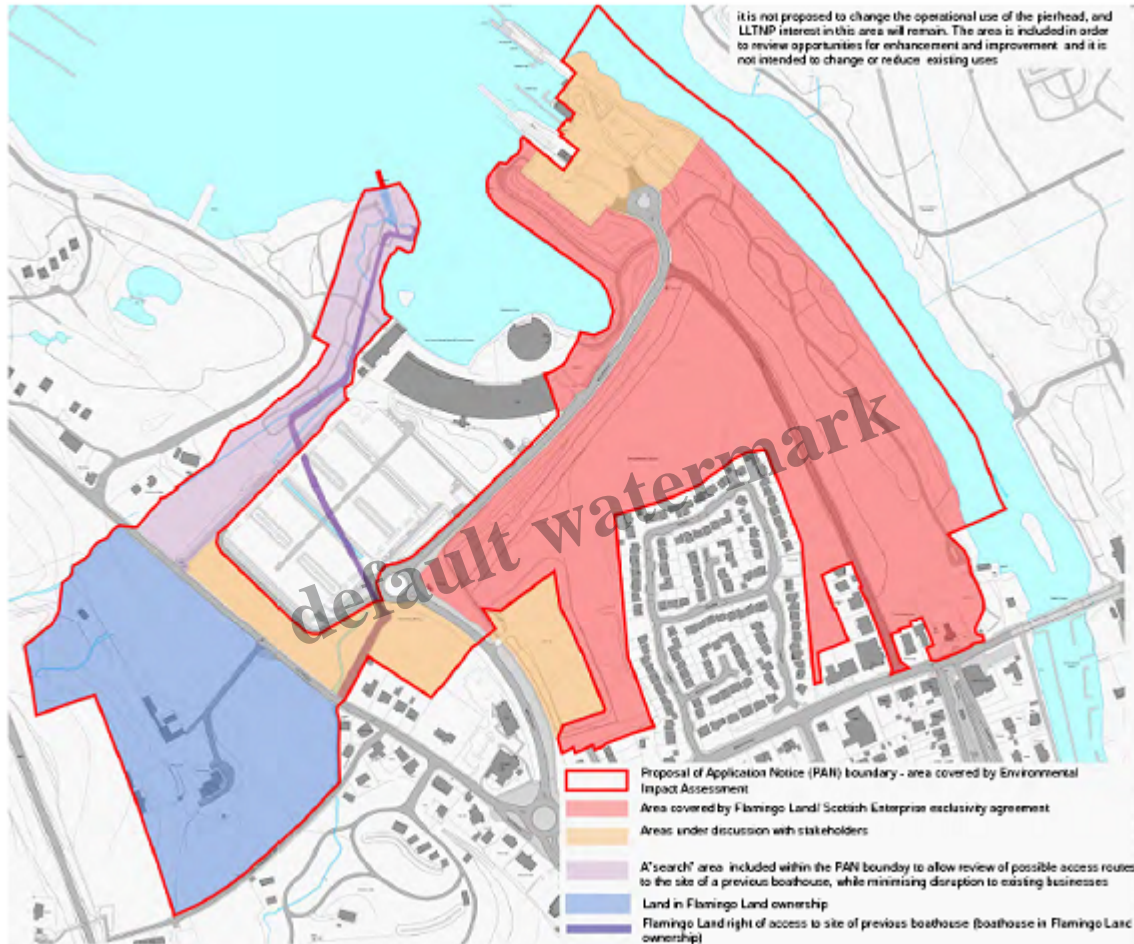


Scottish Enterprise, Flamingo Land and community disempowerment

Description

LAND OWNERSHIP



The pinkish red area is owned by Scottish Enterprise and covered by the Exclusivity Agreement

Just before Xmas Scottish Enterprise (SE) announced ([see here](#)) it intended to renew its Exclusivity Agreement (EA) with Flamingo Land which was due to expire at the end of December. If approved by Scottish Ministers, the EA will legally commit SE to selling the land it owns at Balloch to Flamingo Land, should they secure planning permission to develop it, while preventing them from engaging with the local community about alternative plans for the site.

At the beginning of December the Greens had presented a petition with almost 13,000 signatures to the Scottish Government asking for the EA to be scrapped ([see here](#)). They responded immediately to the latest news by calling on people to write ([see here for sample letter](#)) to Fiona Hyslop, the Cabinet Secretary for the Economy (CabSecEFWC@gov.scot) asking her to stop SE's EA with Flamingo Land

being renewed. This post takes a look at some further reasons why Ms Hyslop should veto the EA.

Scottish Enterprise is not to be trusted

There are a number of serious errors and misleading claims in Scottish Enterprise's news release:

- SE refers to *"the redevelopment of the brownfield site adjoining the River Leven at Balloch"*. There is no such brownfield site, as SE well know because they paid to restore it and turn it into greenspace. The claim is therefore a lie, as anyone who lives in Balloch or has visited the area will know. As further supporting evidence, one could add that the land is NOT on the Loch Lomond and Trossach's National Park Authority's derelict land register and the ground investigations which SE paid Flamingo Land to do at the site ([see here](#)) found nothing environmentally untoward.
- SE repeats a previous claim that the negotiations have been with *"Lomond Banks, a subsidiary of tourism firm Flamingo Land Ltd"*. There appears to be no such subsidiary. A company called Lomond Banks Ltd was created on 7th May 2019 ([see here](#)), preceded a couple of weeks earlier by the incorporation of a company called Iconic Leisure Developments Ltd, both with addresses in Grantown on Spey and a single Director, Aaron Sneddon. If SE has been negotiating with this gentleman, I will eat my bunnet, as it appears Mr Sneddon has nothing to do with Flamingo Land and rather is a budding Highland entrepreneur who got there first in terms of registering the names of the two companies!
- SE claims that refreshed plans *"will be drawn up"*, begging the question what exactly have they and Flamingo Land been doing in the year and a quarter since the planning application was withdrawn? SE's Allan McQuade then goes on to say: *"The plans for Lomond Banks present a really timely positive news story for the local economy but also for tourism in Scotland, both of which have suffered hugely as a result of the pandemic"*. Both statements cannot be true, plans cannot be positive if they are still to be drawn up.
- SE claims that the development *"could lead to the creation of hundreds of jobs and millions of pounds in investment"*. This is so vague as to be meaningless, but rather supports the idea there are no plans:
- SE repeats the canard that the problem was not the original plans, but that people misunderstood them, no less than three times in the one news release. For example, *"while the company does run a theme park in Yorkshire, there are not – and never have been – any plans to bring either rollercoasters or flamingos to Lomond Banks and suggestions otherwise were completely unfounded and untrue"*. SE should come clean about who exactly it believes was making those claims because I don't know of anyone who was. SE appear incapable of comprehending that what people objected to was the loss of local greenspace, a large hotel by the loch shores and Drumkinnon Woods being turned into an adventure playground, when there was already one nearby, increased traffic etc.

Community dis-empowerment

Scottish Enterprise could have taken the opportunity offered by the current EA running out at the end of December to engage with the local community about the future of the Riverside site. Instead, they have chosen to renegotiate their agreement with Flamingo Land for another two years. The news

release suggests that they don't see it as their job to engage with the local community: "*the developers will continue to ensure that there is full consultation with the local community.*" This is fake consultation, which we see so much of in Scotland, consultation that takes place after everything has been effectively decided behind close doors.

Visit Scotland, as quoted in the news release, is little better: "*Our priority is to use this opportunity to reset tourism in a responsible way. We want to work with communities to ensure that visitors and locals can both have a fantastic experience when tourism starts to rebuild itself*". Nothing about giving local communities or the wider public a real say in what tourism businesses might be appropriate.

The stance of both SE and Visit Scotland is contrary to Scottish Government policy on community involvement, as set out in their Programme for Government published on 1st September ([see here](#)). Some examples:

"The Social Renewal Advisory Board is advising the Scottish Government on how to build a stronger, fairer and more equal Scotland for the post-pandemic period. The Board aims to build on the shifts in policy and practice we saw in the immediate response to COVID-19 where, by working at pace and in partnership, we challenged traditional ways of working to deliver real change. [Comment: clearly SE were not included in this]. Proposals are being developed by a series of expert discussion groups known as 'policy circles'. The circles are focusing on Age and Disability, Addressing Low Income, Community-led Place Based Renewal,....."

Comment SE's EA effectively prevents any form of community-led place based renewal taking place on its land.

"We will also establish a Place Based Investment Programme, linking and aligning all place-based funding initiatives to ensure we have a coherent approach to effectively progress our 20 minute neighbourhood ambitions. As part of this Programme, we will invest £275 million to support community-led regeneration and town-centre revitalisation, including the repurposing of buildings, maintenance and repairs, reallocating external space and community-led land acquisition. This will also support the ongoing work on Clyde Gateway."

Comment: SE have always put selling off the publicly owned Riverside Site to business before the interests of local communities or the country as a whole.

"Communities can be anchors too. Community Trusts play key roles in the resilience and wellbeing within communities; and their impact in helping communities weather the COVID-19 emergency has been documented by Community Land Scotland. We only need to look at the current crisis to understand the critical value community power and local economic energy can have on a place and the people who live there. We want to harness the energy of communities to ensure they are a core part of how we do economic development in Scotland."

Comment: except, it appears, where the land concerned is controlled by the Scottish Government's Enterprise Companies, whether Highlands and Islands Enterprise at Cairn Gorm or SE at Balloch.

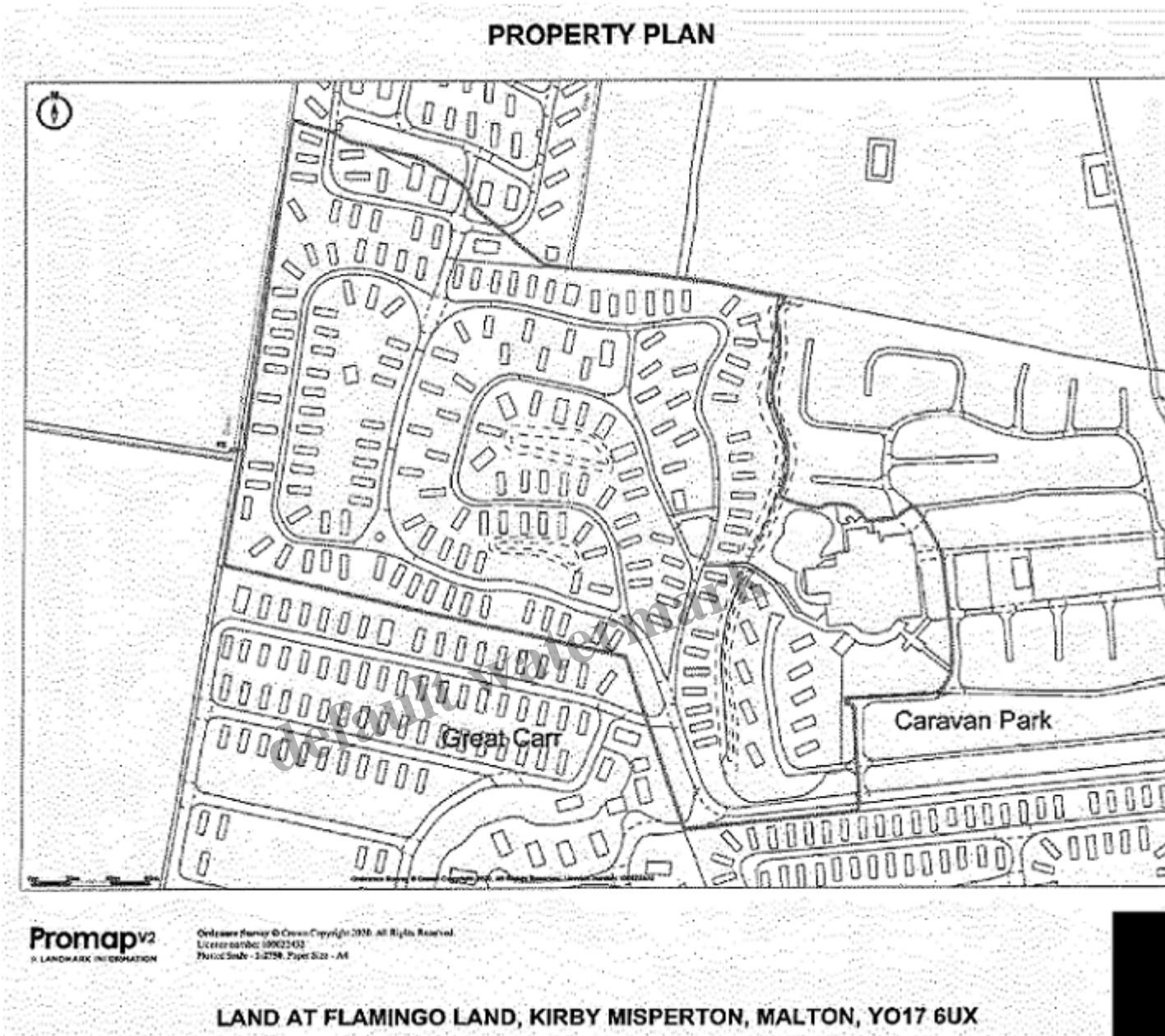
“We have given an unwavering commitment, as part of our community empowerment and land reform work, to support groups across Scotland to tap into the potential resources around them, through land and asset purchases, helping tackle the inequalities of land ownership and the ‘democratic decision deficit’ that afflicts so many of our communities who are often excluded from participation in local decision making about their places.”

Comment: so exactly what support has the Scottish Government or SE given to local people at Balloch to tap into the land resource at the Riverside Site?

SE would no doubt respond by saying they don't see any strong community organisations at Balloch that could take over the Riverside Site and the only option they can see is to hand it over to business. But that is the point, SE have offered no support for community development locally in the 31 years they and their predecessors have owned the site. Without public authorities which are prepared to support local communities and communities of interest, there is no point anyone getting involved. Campaigners who had lots of alternative ideas for the Riverside Site were unable to engage with SE because of their EA with Flamingo Land and, if its renewed, won't be able to do so for another two years. The £71,855 SE paid Flamingo Land for site investigations, could have paid for a fair bit of community development. Its easier though for public authorities to put private business interests before local communities and SE is far from the only culprit.

The financial position of Flamingo Land

Whether Flamingo Land is in a strong enough position financially to proceed with a new development is a moot point. Their next accounts, up to the end of March 2020, are due in January, but they won't tell us the impact that Covid-19 has had on the business. On the 2nd December, however, a new charge was registered on the Companies House website ([see here](#)) mortgaging part of their business in Yorkshire to HSBC



Extract from the charge, the land mortgaged is marked by the darker line

Companies House never provides the reasons for charges over assets, nor the amounts involved, so it is not clear what this might tell us about the financial position of Flamingo Land. There are also other charges over Flamingo Land's assets in Yorkshire, connected to the pension fund of the owners, the Gibb family. Taken together, these charges and the huge business uncertainty created by the Covid-crisis, do raise questions about whether Flamingo Land is still capable of delivering the type of top-down development SE so clearly still want. The question is has SE properly investigated this?

What needs to happen

Whatever the financial position of Flamingo Land, Fiona Hyslop, the Cabinet Secretary for the

Economy, needs to stop SE flouting Scottish Government policy and favouring business interests over local communities by vetoing any further Exclusivity Agreement. Instead, she should tell SE that she expects them to support the local community at Balloch and those with an interest in the area to come up with new proposals for the use of the land at the Riverside Site that support the statutory objectives of the National Park. What happens at Balloch will demonstrate whether the Scottish Government's "unwavering commitment" to community empowerment and land reform in its latest Programme for Government has real substance or is simply hot air.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. LLTNPA
2. Local communities
3. planning
4. Scottish Enterprise

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