

The Loch Lomond Visitor Centres – assets wasted by the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (1)

Description

The Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority used to operate three visitor centres around the southern half of Loch Lomond. It owns two, those at Luss and Balmaha, which date back to the Lomond Park Authority and were transferred to the LLTNPA on its creation. The third, at Balloch, was constructed by Scottish Enterprise as part of the development of Lomond Shores and was then leased to the newly formed LLTNPA as “the Gateway Centre” to the National Park. This post is the first of two looking at how the LLTNPA has managed these public assets.

The case for visitor centres

The concept of visitor centres dates back to the days when Public Authorities believed they had a duty to serve the public and there was a time that every local authority wanted one in their area. That partly explains the locations of the three Loch Lomond visitor centres, one in each local authority area. If you think that excessive, the south shores of Loch Lomond are one of the most visited places in Scotland and, while some people visit all three places, they do attract significantly different segments of the tourist market. At the risk of parody, day trippers at Balloch, bus tours at Luss and walkers at Balmaha. The differences, however, are important in terms of the LLTNPA legal duty to promote enjoyment and understanding of the National Park. To communicate with a wide range of visitors to the National Park, it would be quite easy to justify three separate visitor centres around the southern shores of Loch Lomond. Indeed the RSPB’s visitor centre at Wards Farm on the National Nature Reserve caters for a slightly different market again.

While it is positive that this year politicians and public authorities are once again making the case for investment in countryside ranger services, so far I have seen no acknowledgement of the role that visitor centres should play in this. A ranger, based in a visitor centre, is likely to be able to engage far more people than one sent out on patrol. What is going to influence more people, providing information about the impact that litter has on the natural environment or sending rangers out to try and catch people in the act and issue Fixed Penalty Notices? None were issued by the 364 patrols carried out by a service of 32 Ranger staff between 6th July and 30th September last year.

If my memory is right, last time I visited there was a good display at the Balmaha Visitor Centre about the time it takes for different types of litter to bio-degrade. We need more of that. Visitor centres also offer bases for rangers to work with schools and other groups, a refuge that supports learning in bad weather. This is not to argue that Rangers should be confined indoors, the last thing we need are Rangers sitting behind desks in visitor centres (something I witnessed at Balmaha a few years ago). But there is a strong case that visitor centres play a key role to play in making ranger services more effective.

Indeed, with a bit of imagination and investment the LLTNPA could have used the visitor centres to explain the interlinked natural and human history of the area: of how, for example, the coppiced oak woods on the shores of east Loch Lomond fed the pyroligneous acid factory at Balmaha which was then used to produce the fixative for the cloth dyeing industry at Balloch. Having visited the Gateway Centre at Balloch, people should then have been able to hop on a bus to the visitor centres at Balmaha or Luss and from there into the wider countryside.

While initially the LLTNPA saw visitor centres as having a key role – as late as 2012 ([see here](#)) it upgraded the visitor centre at Balmaha – it gradually changed course and, in 2013, adopted a

commercialisation strategy which changed the primary purpose of its assets from providing a service to the public to making money. That strategy, driven in part by funding shortfalls, has been an disaster and cost the LLTNPA far more money than it ever earned. The large increase in Scottish Government funding this year and the huge increase in numbers of people visiting the National Park should have provided an opportunity for a re-think. Instead, the June meeting of the LLTNPA indicates that they have endorsed more of the same.

The secret decision-making process

There was no mention of the LLTNPA's Visitor Centres in the paper which proposed the LLTNPA's final budget for 2021-22. None of the £960k that had been held back at the March Board Meeting ([see here](#)), which comprised easily enough capital and revenue to take the centres back in-house, appears to have been allocated to them. There was no discussion about the future role of the buildings in either the March or June Board meetings.

Instead, the final part of the agenda, held in secret session, appears to have been in large part devoted to the fall-out from the failed leases at Balloch and Luss and the future of the visitor centres:

Session 3: Confidential Item (3.00pm to 4.00pm)

15. Corporate Risk Register update (Pete Wightman)

16. Vacant Assets

a. Luss Visitor Centre (Gordon Watson/ Carol Matthews)

b. Gateway Centre (Gordon Watson)

Agenda LLTNPA Board Meeting 14th June

There is something very wrong when a public authority, which should ultimately be accountable to the public, decides that consideration and approval of its risk register has to take place in secret.

The LLTNPA has, however, a long history of hiding its dirty washing from the public and I am confident, for the reasons set out below, that a significant part of the corporate risk register update will have concerned the financial fall-out from the collapse of the leases for the two visitor centres. In my view the LLTNPA should have set up an inquiry into its role in the disaster but its impossible to know whether there was even any critical questioning of the Chief Executive at the Board Meeting because it was held in secret. This is not conducive to good decision-making: our public authorities need to be open when they make mistakes and show they have learned from them.

The Luss Visitor Centre shambles

That looks highly unlikely in the case of the Luss Visitor Centre where the lease was put out to tender on 19th March ([see here](#)).

At the start of the June Board Meeting David McCowan, the elected member for West Loch Lomond

and Balloch, declared an interest in Confidential Item 16 as the chair of Luss and Arden Community Development Trust. Initially he stated he thought this would not preclude him from taking part in the discussion, but this was overruled by Board Convener James Stuart. Unless you had looked at the tender you would not know why:

“A new tenant operating a sound and prosperous business is an attractive starting place for the community and it is intended that the lease of the building will provide a direct return to the community as well as to the NPA”.

10% of the overall score for the tender was for “Community Benefits” and half of this was to be determined by the amount of any *“Regular financial contribution towards Luss & Arden Community Development Trust”* proposed by the tenderer. This was scored as follows: “0 = no offer; 1 = < £999 pa; 2 = £1, 000 – 1,999pa; 3 = £2,000 – £4,999 pa; and 4 = > £5,000 pa”

It is very clear, therefore, that the organisation David McCowan chairs had a direct financial interest in this tender and that James Stuart was right to insist he should not be present for the discussion.

It remains to be seen what, if anything, is offered to and invested in the local community but, given all the visitor pressures at Luss, the local community is likely to have been much better served by the LLTNPA operating the Visitor Centre itself and basing Rangers there. The basic costs of this would have been minimal: maybe £15k in lost rent; £6,922 in rates; and bills. If Rangers had been redeployed, there would be no extra staffing cost. So, it appears that by spending c£30k out of the extra £3m awarded by the Scottish Government this year ([see here](#)), the LLTNPA could have re-opened the visitor centre at Luss and provided a real service to the local community.

The tender, however, also makes it clear that the LLTNPA is trying to shunt other costs onto the tenant::

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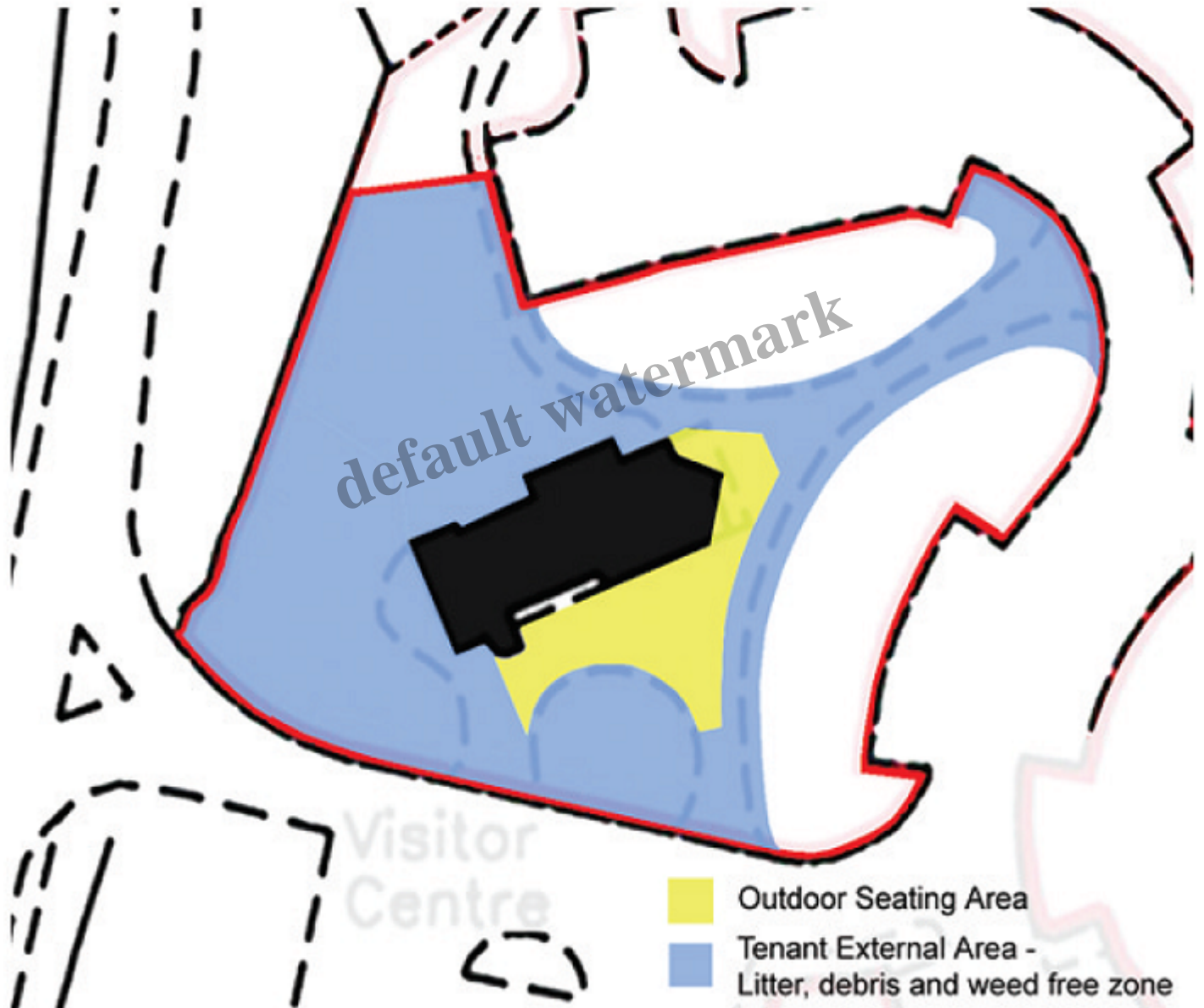
HEADS OF TERMS

LUSS PROPERTY

MARCH 2021

DRAFT – for indicative purposes only

Proposed External Area : Incoming Tenant Responsibility (to be agreed)



The tender states that in 2019/20 [in Luss] over £60,000 was spent on ongoing grounds and toilet maintenance. Instead of using the empty visitor centre at Luss as an opportunity to join up current services (with one body, for example, responsible for all the bins and litter collection), the LLTNPA's tender will perpetuate the current system which involves a number of players none of whom wants to assume responsibility for the costs. The Community Benefits clause is a figleaf designed to conceal how the LLTNPA ducking its responsibilities. The last tenants were a family business who had tried to run the building as a private visitor centre.

That they had great intentions can still be seen on Trip Advisor ([see here](#)):

“Luss Center is a family run, independent visitor center, We have put together a variety of information at our own cost, this is to help visitors to the area enjoy their experience so come and see the famous village of Luss here on the Bonnie Banks of Loch Lomond. View our information and visitor centre full of interesting facts about the history of the Loch, many things you will have not heard of before. Read about our vikings and see our amazing wall displays while watching and listening to the friends of loch lomond DVD. Sit and have something to eat or drink in our cafe with the view of the Loch.”

You cannot, however, run a visitor centre on the proceeds of a cafe alone and its not surprising that during lockdown the tenants gave up the lease. Even if it is too incompetent to do so itself, instead of supporting businesses which are prepared to support its statutory duty to promote public enjoyment and understanding of the National Park, the LLTNPA’s only real interest is how to extract money from the assets it holds.

This is partially concealed by the LLTNPA making reference to all the right policy boxes. Reading the tender you might think the LLTNPA is strongly committed to reducing carbon emissions:

“The NPA is responding to the Global Climate Emergency and has an active programme underway, which includes tracking greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions of its own organisation to help progress towards “Net Zero” over the next decade or so. In addition to our own sites and buildings, we are keen to work with our tenants and share our experience and learnings on opportunities for emissions reduction and renewable energy options. We are pleased to engage with tenants on lighting, heating, chilling and other energy use choices.”

Good stuff you might think but the Energy Certificate for the building, which dates from 2010, rates it as G, the worst possible ([see here](#)) and recommends a number of measures to improve the building’s energy performance, including installation of a heat pump. These don’t appear to have been actioned in eleven years.

The LLTNPA has prioritised the reduction of its own carbon emissions over those generated in the National Park as a whole. This was reflected in the budgetary decisions at the June Board Meeting where £187,000 revenue £214,000 capital was allocated to tackling the climate emergency, *“Including energy efficiency upgrades on our estate, our tree planting grant scheme, new electric vehicles, and budget for engagement activity including on COP26.”*

But not at Luss it appears. Instead of investing in the building, the LLTNPA appears to be offloading the problem of the poor energy performance onto the future tenant. With the building off their books, it will be that much easier for the LLTNPA to meet their climate change targets! No wonder LLTNPA senior management didn’t want any discussion about it reverting to a Visitor Centre.....

While we still don’t know the outcome of this latest mismanagement of the Visitor Centre at Luss in terms of who will operate the building, the consequences of the termination of the lease are likely to pale into insignificance compared to what has happened at the former Gateway Centre in Balloch ([see here](#)). I will consider that further in a second post.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. Governance
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