

The A82 upgrade north of Tarbet – the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park’s abdication of responsibility

Description



Work in progress to upgrade the A82 at Pulpit Rock May 2014 illustrating just how difficult and damaging it will be to upgrade the current route along Loch Lomond.

Following his post on the A82 upgrade ([see here](#)), John Urquhart and other volunteers from the Helensburgh and District Access Trust (HADAT) requested a deputation to the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority Board on their alternative proposals for a high road linking Tarbet and Invernan. This was accepted and the HADAT delegation was put on the agenda for the prime after-lunch slot!

Lunch Break: 12:45pm – 1:30pm

Session 3: 1:30pm – 3:00pm

Deputation

11. A82 Upgrade – Tarbet to Inverarnan (Deputation from Helensburgh and District Access Tr

12. Visitor Management (Simon Jones / Stuart Mearns / Kenny Auld)

Appendix 1 2021 Season Report

Appendix 2 Loch Achray Map

13. Any Other Business

Unfortunately, while it was clear from the later discussion that Board Members had been sent copies of HADAT's proposals and some had read them carefully, they weren't published on the LLTNPA website along with the other meeting papers. That meant that unless a member of the public observing the meeting had read John's post on parkswatch, they would not have known what HADAT is proposing. This was not HADAT's fault: with deputations limited to five minutes, they had to focus on the arguments rather than explaining the detail of their proposed route.

Unfortunately too, unlike most Local Authorities, the LLTNPA still refuse to make the recordings of their meetings available online. That rather confirms what I noted in my short post on the change in the arrangements for the meeting ([see here](#)), the last people the LLTNPA want to put in the picture are the public whom they are meant to serve.

There is no doubt, however, that the deputation has had an impact.

The Chief Executive's report to Board Members about the upgrade

Hidden away in the CEO's Report ([see here](#)), which was considered after the morning break, there were four pages on the A82 upgrade. This appears to be first time there has been any substantive report to Board Members on the issue since Transport Scotland started their consultation on route options back in 2013. All thanks to HADAT's deputation.

Gordon Watson's justification for nine years of silence about the upgrade proposals was that:

the National Park Authority will only be able to take a considered view on the whole scheme once a design has been finalised.

This claim, as Mr Watson should know, is contrary to the entire direction of travel of the Scottish Parliament's attempts to reform the planning system, where the emphasis is on early engagement and the importance of early consideration of development proposals to ensure they are in the right place.

Transport Scotland has a standard three stage design process which starts by looking at route options that is the crucial stage. In 2013 Mr Watson, who was then directly responsible for planning in the National Park, allowed Transport Scotland to choose the shore route as their preferred option ([see here](#)), without proper consideration of the alternatives and without the involvement of his Board. Mr Watson's decision has made it very hard, if not impossible, for the Board to lodge an objection at the final stage without the LLTNPA losing face. Why let Transport Scotland incur all the expense of ground investigations along the loch shore if you are then going to object to their plans?

Several Board Members picked up on this, asking that their role was in the process and what power they had to challenge Transport Scotland's decision. The answer is that, as a statutory consultee, if the LLTNPA object to the upgrade that could trigger a public inquiry. Just imagine the LLTNPA trying to explain to the Reporter the name for the person overseeing such an inquiry why they had kept quiet for ten years. Sadly no Board Member thought to ask Gordon Watson why, given the Cairngorms National Park Authority Board was involved in considering issues with the Beaulieu Denny powerline upgrade right from the start, he hadn't chosen to do the same with the LLTNPA Board on the A82 upgrade?

All credit, however, to the LLTNPA ecologist, Alan Bell, for describing the extent of the damage that will be caused by the upgrade work: the carbon cost of concrete and blowing up areas of rock; significant areas of ancient native woodland native destroyed; the shoreline of Loch Lomond scarred, with landscape cuts on past experience taking 40 years to soften; and the ability of the public to enjoy the loch barely improved. His conclusion: there are *no easy or obvious solutions* to Transport Scotland's preferred route. No-one disputed that.

How that consensus, that this development will be extremely damaging, fits with the claims made in Gordon Watson's report is unclear:

Environmental design principles were agreed during this stage were developed in line with Transport Scotland's Fitting Landscapes guidance, to ensure that the proposed scheme was designed with respect of the distinctive local landscape character, quantities and cultural heritage of the National Park and the National Scenic Area.

HADAT's deputation

In a brief presentation John Urquhart made a number of points that focussed on the recreational perspective:

- There is very high demand from the public to be able visit beautiful lochside locations and from the perspective of a National Park Authority there should be nothing more important than this;
- The new path it is proposed to build along the A82 is so close to the road that it will not be a pleasant experience;

- We already know from the upgrading of the A82 between Balloch and Tarbet of what can go wrong.

He then asked the question, “how important does the National Park think this shoreline is?”

The Convener of the LLTNPA, James Stuart, immediately stamped on this saying it was not the place of the deputation to ask questions of the Board and urged the deputation to use the rest of the five minutes they had been allotted to put their case.

HADAT’s question, however, is the right one and needs answering: is the LLTNPA Board content to see the destruction that has taken place at Pulpit Rock carry down the shore of Loch Lomond to Tarbet?



How far down the shore do we want this sort of destruction to extend?

After a rather good question from Board Member Martin Earl to officers about the extent to which Transport Scotland had considered the possibility of a higher route at the options stage (Gordon Watson didn’t know but Alan Bell clarified that HADAT had come up with a much more specific proposal than anything Transport Scotland had considered) the Convener and his Depute tried to go on

the offensive.

Had HADAT participated in Transport Scotland's first consultation, James Stuart wanted to know? Yes, replied John Urquhart, HADAT had attended a consultation session in the Arrochar village hall in 2013 with the consultants, Jacob's, and advocated alternatives then. They were given the very strong impression that a decision on options had effectively already been made. Consultees had been presented with a 'flyover' of the shoreline proposal which was very similar to the 'flyover' in Transport Scotland's most recent consultation. Touch!

Then it was Will Nisbet, the Depute-Convener's turn. After asking what the reaction from the Scottish Government would be to an alternative route after all the money (£140m) that had been spent widening the A82 at Pulpit Rock, he challenged whether a higher route could be faster and safer while offering good views. What about the risk of accidents of people looking out the window?

In response to the first part of the question John Urquhart stated that HADAT had put in an FOI to Transport Scotland about the costs of the various options and had never had a reply. He urged the National Park Authority to ask Transport Scotland this question. In response to the second, he pointed out that it would be people like passengers in tour buses, not drivers, who would be able to enjoy the views from a higher route but that HADAT's proposals also included a number of viewpoints where drivers could stop off safely.

At which point James Stuart asked another member of the delegation, Jack Fordy, to respond to the issue of the investment at Pulpit Rock being wasted. (Both James Stuart and his Depute-Convener seemed unaware that the Pulpit Rock 'improvements' had been a stand-alone decision, the planning for which started in 2006, well before Transport Scotland's consultation on route options for the new road in 2013). Mr Fordy introduced himself as a cyclist and pointed out that no cycle path had been included in the road widening at Pulpit Rock. That improvement therefore would no longer be fit for purpose if Transport's Scotland preferred option, which incorporates a cycle path along the length of the upgraded road, went ahead. This wouldn't matter, however, if the current A82 ceased to be used as the main road and was dedicated instead to local access, cyclists, walkers and drivers wanting to stop off by the loch. Touch!

With great diplomatic skill Mr Fordy then stopped the fencing and handed the LLTNPA a get out of jail card: there had been a massive increase in walking and cycling since 2013 - he avoided the usual 'active travel' jargon - as a result of which, he suggested, circumstances are now very different to what they were then. You could sense the relief. There are plenty of reasons the LLTNPA could use to justify opposing Transport Scotland's upgrade proposals at this late stage, not just recreation but the climate and nature emergencies.

Further questions from Board Member David McCowan, who suggested any decision would ultimately be determined by money, elucidated an admission from staff that they didn't know the cost of the various options.

The highlight of the discussion, however, came with Billy Ronald, who lives and works just up the road in Strathfillan and up until now has said very little in the middle class milieu that is the National Park Board. 'I know the ground well', he said, before going on to say he thought HADAT's proposal was a far better idea than the route along the shore. James Stuart, instead of asking Billy the reasons for his views, retorted to the effect that it was not appropriate for Board Members to express their

private opinions in the public realm. You can understand why the LLTNPA doesn't make recordings of Board meetings public, this would have gone viral.

If James Stuart was still a Major in the army he dropped the title on his appointment to the Board I am sure he would have had Billy court martialled. But in my view it was James Stuart, stifling democracy, not Billy Ronald who was in the wrong. Mr Stuart's action reminded me of the attempts by Peter Argyle, then convener of the Cairngorms National Park Authority Board, to gag Councillor Bill Lobban five years ago ([see here](#)). But that was an attempt to force Board Members to support decisions once they were made. This was far worse, an attempt to prevent Board Members expressing their opinions.

What needs to happen now?

While several Board Members welcomed HADAT's deputation and the opportunity this had given them to discuss the upgrade, James Stuart studiously avoided making any commitments to future action and left it that the LLTNPA will consider Transport Scotland's proposal when it is finalised, i.e. when it is too late. Mr Stuart could have asked staff to pursue Transport Scotland for the costs of various options, as John Urquhart had requested, or called a further special Board Meeting to consider the issues in detail. He chose, however, not to do so and that is unlikely to change without public pressure.

Public pressure, however, is only going to increase. HADAT had somehow and very cleverly got the Herald to publish an Agenda piece on their proposals, the same day they met the Board ([see here](#)). The Friends of Loch Lomond and Trossachs, while not going so far as to reject the shore-line route, have expressed serious concerns about Transport Scotland's proposals in the latest issue of their magazine, the Voice. In my view as soon as the general public realise Transport Scotland's A82 upgrade proposals will have an even greater impact on the landscape and natural environment of Loch Lomond than Flamingo Land's proposals for Balloch, there will be uproar. LLTNPA Board Members have a responsibility to act now.

High road makes perfect sense

THE A82 high road proposal by Helensburgh and District Access Trust as penned by Convener John Urquhart (“Take the high road with A82 upgrade”, Agenda,

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The Herald, December 13) is logically presented, has nothing but plus points, and leads me to despair that a shoreline alternative is even considered.

We already have evidence of the utter vandalism that a shoreline “upgrade” would create when viewing the cantilevered concrete solution to just one previously-tight bend at a section between I Vow island and Ardluie. An added advantage of the high road plan would be the chance to remove that carbuncle.

Eddie Riach, Milngavie.

Response to John Urquhart's agenda piece in the Herald 14/12/21

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. climate change
2. conservation
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