

The Hunter Foundation withdraws – a victory for Loch Lomond and the local community

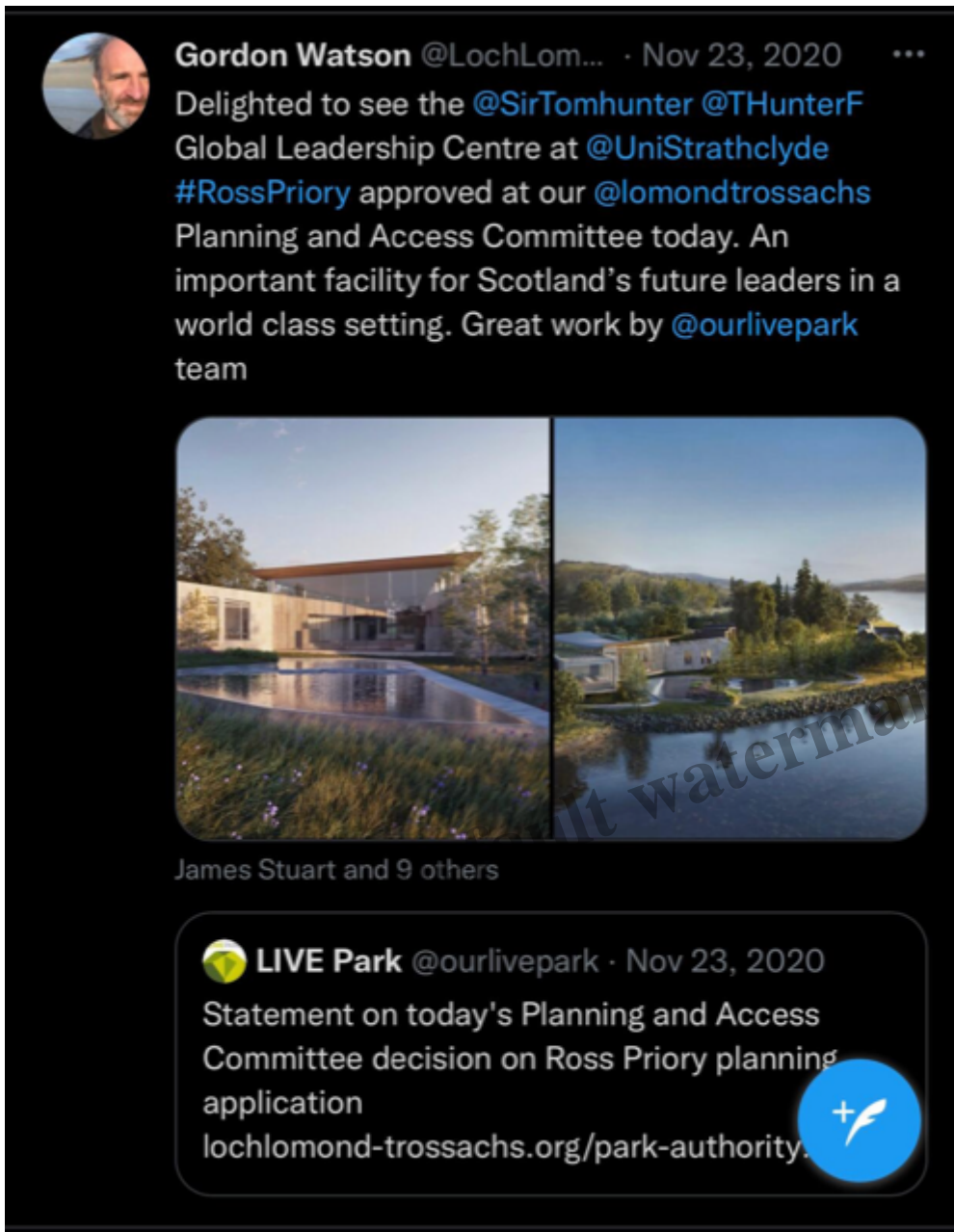
Description

[I started drafting this post a month ago before my unanticipated lay off ([see here](#)). It may no longer be news but what has happened has implications for the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority].

On 22nd March The Hunter Foundation (THF) wrote to the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) ([see here](#)) withdrawing their misconceived and inappropriate plans for a “global leadership” centre at Ross Priory. The next day THF announced ([see here](#)) that it had bought Blair Castle in Ayrshire “as its new headquarters and home to all its leadership programmes”. Having opposed the development ([see here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)), in my view THF’s decision is most welcome.

Blair Castle is a far more appropriate location, making use of an existing building rather than an undeveloped south-east shore of Loch Lomond, is relatively close to public transport (Dalry station is less than a mile away) and offers opportunities for THF to show real leadership and demonstrate how historic buildings can be made carbon neutral.

The LLTNPA’s response to the application and its withdrawal



After their Planning Committee ignored all the well-founded objections to the development and gave it the go-ahead, the leadership of the LLTNPA could not contain their delight. Besides twitter, the LLTNPA issued a short news release ([see here](#)) which, after claiming how careful and balanced they had been through the decision-making process, concluded:

"The application was for a unique facility of the highest architectural quality that will help secure the future of Ross Priory and its estate in the longer term but broadening its use providing huge benefits for both the National Park and for Scotland."

Contrast this with the LLTNPA's response to the withdrawal. Six weeks later there has been no news release and it took six days for the LLTNPA to post THF's letter on their planning portal. The next day the LLTNPA sent out an extraordinary letter, unsigned and unchecked, to people who had commented

on the application claiming that the LLTNPA “has made a decision to Withdrawn (sic) this application”.

29 March 2022

Dear Mr Nick Kempe

NOTIFICATION OF DECISION

Application Number: 2020/0055/DET
Development Proposed: Erection of training centre (use Class 8) comprising leadership centre and 4 no. visitor accommodation buildings with associated parking and landscaping
Location: Land Adjacent To Ross Priory Gartocham West Dunbartonshire G83 8NL

I refer to previous correspondence in connection with the above and write to advise you that after considering the proposal, your comments and other comments received, the Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park Authority has made a decision to Withdrawn the application.

If you would like to obtain further information about this application, the Authority's website contains details of the decision: <https://eplanning.lochlomond-trossachs.org/OnlinePlanning/>

If you wish to discuss the decision, we would ask that you email planning@lochlomond-trossachs.org.

Thank you for your comments and interest in this application.

Yours sincerely,

PLANNING SUPPORT TEAM

Tel (01389) 722024

Email: planning@lochlomond-trossachs.org

Planning Authorities can reject applications but cannot withdraw them

Later the same day the LLTNPA sent out another email which stated “*Please delete the previous email which was sent to you earlier this morning with the wrong letter attached, due to an administrative error. We apologise for any inconvenience.*”

The wrong letter? Surely an example of more incompetence ([see here](#))! That is not, I believe, an accident. The leadership of the LLTNPA take no ownership of basic issues and expect their staff to fix the shambles they have created, hence errors such as this.

One explanation for this public relations disaster – another allegedly world class development not happening – is that the gleam of an award for services to empire, whether OBE or MBE, was too much for the leadership team at the LLTNPA to resist. Then, when that prospect disappeared, they were left in complete disarray.

The reasons for THF's withdrawal

Had the LLTNPA been true to their own policies and the statutory objectives of Scotland's National Parks when initially approached by the THF about the proposed development they would either have advised them to renovate Ross Priory – which is still desperately in need of attention – or directed them elsewhere. Instead they enticed THF into a lengthy planning process which THF have used to justify withdrawing from the proposed development: *“the timescales on this have, to be frank, been incredibly onerous”*.

THF has got it wrong, however, in claiming in their letter that the delays were not due to the LLTNPA's assessment but rather to general planning processes. The reason the processes were so onerous and lengthy was in large because the LLTNPA had encouraged THF to proceed with an application which was inappropriate. The LLTNPA therefore required THF to produce large amounts of paperwork, produced by expensive consultants, and to keep changing its plans in order to allow the National Park to get around its own policies.

Added to that was the LLTNPA's failure to require an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) BEFORE giving THF the go-ahead to produce detailed plans. An EIA would have identified, for example, that a loch shore development would pose serious problems in terms of sewerage and waste water disposal. But instead of this being clear from the start, 10 weeks into the planning process an objection from the Scottish Environment Protection Agency forced THF into abandoning their proposal for a reedbed and to develop an expensive proposal to pump waste up to the Scottish Water treatment works at Gartocharn.

The LLTNPA only published a screening opinion, dated 30th October 2020, stating that an EIA was not necessary on 11th November, twelve days before the Planning Committee took place. The failure to conduct a proper EIA resulted in an appeal to the Scottish Government from local Councillor, Sally Page. This delayed the planning process by another couple of months but should have put an end to it if there was any justice.

Among the incredible logic used by Scottish Government officials to determine that an EIA was not required was the statement that *“the decision [by the LLTNPA] to consider the proposal as an urban development project [which they did to avoid admitting they had made a serious mistake] is not an unreasonable one.”* This was for a development on the unspoiled shores of Loch Lomond several miles from Balloch. It would appear that nowhere in the National Park is now safe from urban style developments but particularly when a developer like THF is a close partner of the Scottish Government ([see here](#)).

Local communities may have more influence than may sometimes appear

Almost no-one in the local community around Gartocharn (apart possibly from LLTNPA Chief Executive Gordon Watson who lives there) appears to have supported the proposed development. During the planning process the LLTNPA simply rode roughshod over their concerns, whether this was reports of nesting ospreys – missed by the environmental surveys – increased traffic or a sense of place (in this case a quiet corner of the National Park). Environment, transport and place are all now meant to drive all planning policy.

On top of this THF's proposed development offered almost no benefits to the local community that might have won some people over to their proposals. A paltry amount was promised to Ross Priory, which is valued locally, but that was it.

While the local community formally failed to prevent the LLTNPA from approving the planning application, they have won in the end. It appears that THF may have eventually realised that without community support the development could have disastrous consequences for them as an organisation and this helped them decide to abandon the proposal. How can an organisation profess to offer global leadership while ignoring its impact on local communities?

What needs to happen

As yet there is no sign that the LLTNPA Board is going to consider what went wrong with the THF planning application or proposed development, let alone what it needs to do to address the very real issues surrounding Ross Priory and how the building and cultural landscape could be conserved in future. They now need to do so.

But they also need to start taking a far more robust approach to spatial planning in the National Park. More specifically they need to make a stand against further developments on the loch shores in the National Park, including the southern half of Loch Lomond, which are irresistible to developers. The LLTNPA need to end the current situation where developers like THF think they can buy a view. The National Park should be for all.

It is all very well the LLTNPA having an ostensible presumption against new developments in rural areas and constraints on developments in settlements, but there are so many exceptions to these in its policies that almost any development can be justified. The developers know this and, as a result, keep coming, encouraged by senior managers who are so dazzled by power and money that they have little hesitation in using those exceptions to enable developments go ahead.

THF may have seen sense at Ross Priory but similar issues are being repeated at Inchconnachan ([see here](#)) while the return of Flamingo Land at Balloch appears imminent. Until the LLTNPA starts acting like a National Park and protecting places like Loch Lomond, it will continue to let down the people of Scotland.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. LLTNPA
2. Local communities
3. natural environment
4. planning

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