

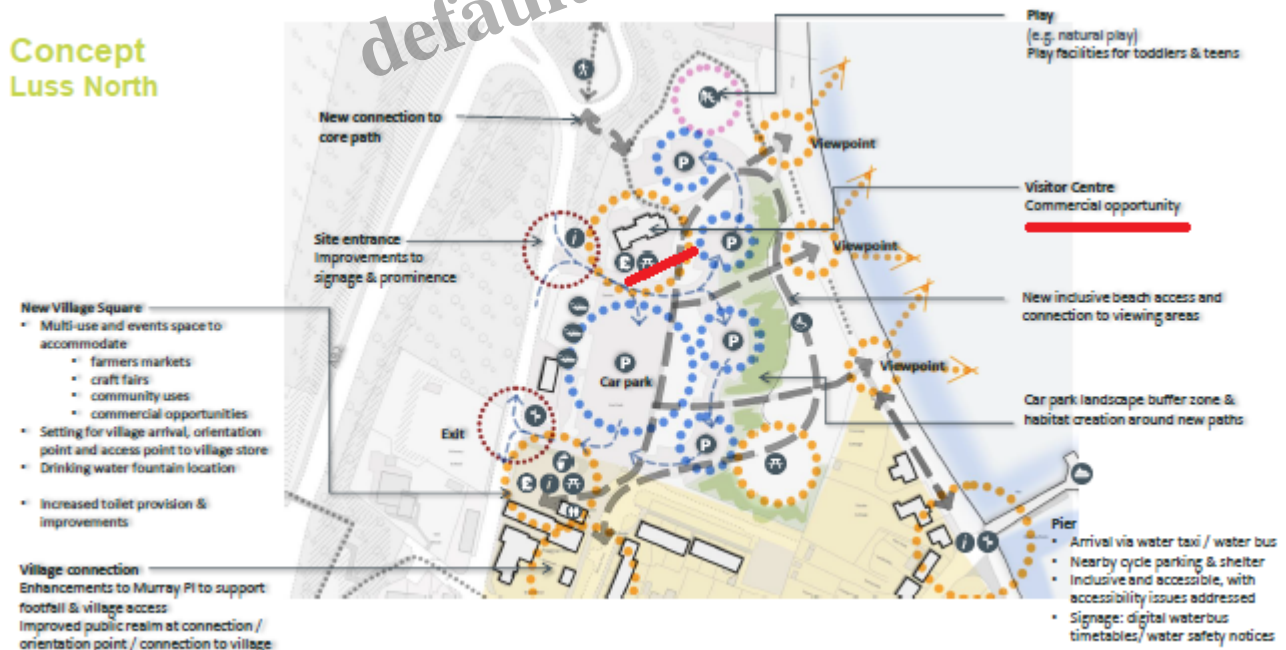
The recommendation of Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park staff to sell-off the Luss Visitor Centre

Description

This post takes a further look ([see here](#)) at the proposal to sell off the Luss Visitor centre which the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) Board Members will be asked to approve today. (The proposal is due to be discussed between 9.30 and 11 and the discussion can be viewed live – [see here](#) for link and papers).

Further evidence LLTNPA staff had no intention of supporting a community take-over

At the Board Meeting on 13th June ([see here for papers](#)), under item 5 “National Park Place Programme”, the Board were asked to approve a programme for capital investment for visitor infrastructure in the National Park. Boring stuff you might think, but Appendix 3 included a plan for the village of Luss as part of a new strategic development framework for West Loch Lomond:



The wording on the plan is not a mistake. In the preceding text there is also a reference to a “New commercial occupancy for Visitor Centre”, something that would be totally incompatible with community use.

This paper was agreed by the LLTNPA Board on 13th June, the very day the Luss and Arden Local

Development Trust submitted their application (asset transfer request) to take over the property! It therefore appears the consequent decision by staff to reject the community asset transfer request on a technicality was a foregone conclusion.

The hypocrisy of LLTNPA senior staff

On 24th July, the LLTNPA issued a news piece ([see here](#)) in which Gordon Watson, their Chief Executive, reflected on the 20 years since the National Park was created. Among the “achievements” claimed by Mr Watson was:

“The early establishment of community action planning which continues to this day and has led to so much being delivered with our communities through the extensive network of community trusts that we helped to get set up.”

So why the haste to exclude the Luss and Arden Community Development Trust from taking over the visitor centre? This claim will also ring hollow to other local communities in the National Park, for example the residents of Balloch where the LLTNPA has provided no support to the local community to set up a community development trust. What Balloch shares with Luss is that where there are public assets to be sold off to commercial interests LLTNPA staff support for local communities suddenly disappears.

The wider failure to engage about the future of the visitor centre

The Board paper recommending the sale makes no mention of the reasons why the Joint Committee that preceded the creation of the National Park decided to invest heavily in the visitor centre, extending the car park and creating footpath links with the shoreline. The centre then was seen as a strategically important site to support visitor management, to enhance the sense of arrival at the Luss car parks and to improve the quality of what is now known as “the visitor experience”. None of those issues have gone away and huge quantities of litter, for example, are collected from the shoreline at Luss each day.

As part of the National Park Place programme new visitor management groups are being created and one for West Loch Lomond was set up in 2021. Having campaigned about the abandonment of the visitor management groups set up by Grant Moir (now Chief Executive of the Cairngorms National Park Authority), this is very welcome. What is wrong is staff seem able to abolish and create such groups at will and without any discussion by their Board about their purpose.

That has led to a failure in joined up thinking as is illustrated by this extract from one of the papers the LLTNPA approved in June:

“In the coming years a significant focus for Visitor Management Groups will be working together to influence visitor infrastructure improvements. The groups are relatively newly formed and will take time to establish themselves in 2022, however early work for East and West Loch Lomond has been undertaken using additional funding made available from the Scottish Government through Visit Scotland’s ‘Strategic Tourism Development Fund’ to assist with the development of visitor infrastructure studies [it was this money that was used to produce the plan for Luss featured above]. This will ensure that longer term projects can be

developed to a stage where we can take advantage of additional funds such as the 'Rural Tourism Infrastructure Development Fund'. These studies and their development contributed to the Place Programme's place-based approach to strategic visitor infrastructure".

One wonders whether the West Loch Lomond Visitor Management Group had any discussion about the future of the visitor centre? The recommendation to sell it off before the group had any chance to develop proper plans for the area – which as the paper says will take time – pre-empts the whole process.

Manipulation of the board decision-making process

As I explained in my first post, the decision to proceed with the disposal of the visitor centre was taken at the March board meeting under the item "Luss Visitor Centre Update" and taken in confidential session.

I observed some of the public part of the meeting and at the start, David McCowan, the then locally elected member for Luss of the meeting, declared an interest in the confidential item but, if my memory is correct, stated he did not think this precluded him from taking part in the discussion. He was then overruled by the Convener, James Stuart, which I thought a little strange as normally it is up to individual board members to decide whether their interest in a matter might be a conflict or not.

David McCowan was at the time chair of the Luss and Arden local community development trust and, if the item had really only been an "update", would have been well placed to advise other board members that before any action was taken to dispose of the property, there needed to be a proper consultation with the local community. Mr McCowan saying that would not have created a conflict of interest, it would have been about him standing up for the interests of the local community he was elected to represent.

The minute of the meeting was very carefully worded to conceal what actually happened:

"DMcC has a previously stated conflict of interest relating to Luss Visitor Centre [what was this one wonders?] and will be excused [i.e it wasn't his decision] for the consideration of Item 15 during this afternoon's confidential session".

It is because of things like this that the recordings for all Board Meeting should be publicly available as happens now with most local authorities. The reason the LLTNPA is so secretive is because there is indeed something very rotten at the heart of the way in which they operate.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

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2. Local communities
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