

West Dunbartonshire Council supports Flamingo Land and votes for more traffic on Loch Lomondside

Description



Traffic at Stoneymollan roundabout on the A82 11th May viewed from the north – because it was a sunny Saturday there was far more traffic than the bank holiday. The turnoff to Balloch is the first exit. Photo credit Parkswatch reader

On 24th April councillors at West Dunbartonshire Council (WDC) decided by a majority vote to accept the recommendation of officers ([see here](#) for the committee report and proposed response) and not object to the Flamingo Land planning application at Balloch. This was a reversal of the previous

position WDC Councillors had adopted when, in June 2019, they had overruled officers and objected to Flamingo Land's earlier application *"on the grounds of capacity of the current road infrastructure, biodiversity, economic risk to local businesses and local area, no affordable housing and the quality of the development"* (the words are those used in the committee report).

The WDC committee report contains only a brief and not entirely accurate description of the difference between the two applications and no justification for why these might justify WDC changing its previous position – hardly unexpected given officers' support for the previous application. The answer as to why councillors have changed their position, however, may lie in behind-the-scenes discussions with Flamingo Land in the intervening four and a half years and the change in political control at WDC as a result of the 2022 council elections.

The controlling labour group certainly played the key role in getting officers' recommendations approved. Voting in favour of accepting WDC officers report was as follows:

Labour:

- Douglas McAllister
- Martin Rooney
- Michelle McGinty
- David McBride
- John Millar
- Clare Steele
- June McKay
- Daniel Lennie
- Lawrence O'Neill
- Gurpeet Singh Johal

SNP:

- Karen Murray Conaghan
- Ian Dickson

Of the 11 WDC Labour Councillors only one, Hazell Sorrell, did not vote in favour of Flamingo Land. Cllr Sorrell represents WDC on the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) and is thus one of the 17 Board Members who will determine the application. She declared a conflict of interest and excused herself from the discussion at the WDC Meeting.

One hopes that Cllr Sorrell has been as scrupulous in excusing herself from any internal Labour Party discussions about Flamingo Land. If not, with Labour apparently adopting a party line unlike the SNP Councillors who were split, it is difficult to see how she could participate in the decision-making process without opening it up to legal challenge.

The position local Labour Party councillors have adopted is contrary to the wishes of most local residents, as they should know from the poll conducted by local Labour MSP Jackie Baille two years ago ([see here](#)). This found 68% opposed to the development. The re-constituted Balloch and Haldane Community Council spoke at the WDC meeting against the development and has subsequently lodged a formal complaint against both officials and councillors for ignoring their views and the adverse impacts of the development

[\(see here\).](#)

Capacity of the road infrastructure in Balloch

Unlike the previous application, West Dunbartonshire Roads department now accept that the Flamingo Land development would result in increased traffic to Balloch, one vehicle every 14 seconds at peak periods [\(see here\)](#). Councillors, however, who were previously concerned their officials had ignored the impact of increased traffic, now appear to believe all those concerns can be mitigated if Flamingo Land is made to pay for a short new slip road at the Ballochloan roundabout.

The logic is bizarre given the committee report clearly stated:

“The proposal however has the potential for traffic impacts on the adjacent roads – A82, A811, Balloch Road, Old Luss Road, Pier Road and Ben Lomond Way. It is widely known that the summer season, good weather weekends and local events can increase traffic significantly on the A82, A811 and the local roads, all to the detriment of the local area”

Although the increased traffic would affect much of the village, WDC is only concerned about one roundabout.

The WDC committee report accepts the need to create more sustainable forms of transport and praises the “Lomond Promise” which was submitted by Flamingo Land to the LLTNPA claiming:

“it binds the applicant to vows made to the community at pre-application stage, and included providing sustainable transport measures such as:

- *Green Travel Plan.*
- *Summer Traffic Survey to be carried out once operational.*
- *Provision of an electric hopper bus to serve the development.*
- *Investigate integrated bus/rail tickets options.*
- *Cyclescheme initiative for employees.*
- *Provision of electric buggies for customers within the site.*
- *Provision of signage and facilities for walkers and cyclists.”*

While ignoring the fact most of the local community don't want Flamingo Land's vows, this fundamentally misses the point. A development which depends on attracting more people to visit Balloch by car cannot be sustainable.

In the body of their response WDC claim that the “the provision of Travel Noticeboards” will help “maximise uptake of public transport by employees, residents and visitors”. This is laughable. By the time people have driven to Balloch it is far too late to read about other options on a notice board. Flamingo Land's proposal to carry out a “summer traffic survey” once the development is equally useless and ridiculous.

Biodiversity

The biggest difference between Flamingo Land's two main planning applications and the current revised (Mark 3) application ([see here](#)), is that all the development proposals for Drumkinnon Wood have been removed..... for now. That will result in a significant reduction in the impacts the development would have on local biodiversity.

It is both interesting and significant, however, that the comments from WDC's biodiversity officer which are included in the response continue to express serious concerns about the impacts of the development on the natural environment locally:

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Biodiversity and natural places

Policy 3(a) of NPF4 requires development proposals to contribute to the enhancement of biodiversity and integrate nature-based solutions, where possible. Policy 3(b) requires major development to demonstrate that the proposal will conserve, restore and enhance biodiversity, including nature networks so they are in a demonstrably better state than without intervention. Policy 4 protects sites designated for nature conservation and protected species and Policy 6 Forestry, woodland and trees aims to protect and expand forests, woodland and trees.

The Council's Biodiversity Officer offers the following comments which should be taken into account when assessing the proposals against these policies:

The woodland loss of both ancient woodland and native/nearly native woodland remains at a high level. There is no evidence of compensatory planting plan proposal but this would be required. The retention of the Long Established Plantation Origin (LEPO) woodland would provide a much more mature and biodiverse habitat than the new planting proposal to the north of the existing plantation. Whilst in time, new native woodland would provide a biodiversity benefit; this will take many decades or longer to provide the same quality of habitat that is being proposed for removal to accommodate the dwellings in the Woodbank house field. If the number of dwellings in this location were reduced or reconfigured then potentially more of the LEPO woodland could be saved. There is also the additional factor of the impact of wildlife on all of the woodland plots as they become more populated with people that the additional disturbance and noise could reduce the biodiversity of these areas regardless.

The loss of the succession woodland at the pier head to accommodate the building is extensive. This is also a very well used visitor area as are both the beaches in front of the proposed hotel area.

Economic risk to local businesses and the local area

After noting the Flamingo Land development is likely to have an impact on local businesses in Balloch, Alexandria and Dumbarton, the WDC response requests that the LLTNPA assesses this against the policies in National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4). This is passing the buck. Alexandria and Dumbarton lie outside the National Park and it is WDC, not the LLTNPA, that is primarily responsible for economic development in Balloch apart from tourism.

WDC's main reason for not objecting to the Flamingo Development appears to be that they believe it might help local businesses and particularly Lomond Shores:

"The economic benefits of the proposal with regard to new jobs created within the development, and increased local expenditure from visitors to the site are recognised which would benefit local businesses and traders and specifically would assist the ongoing viability of Lomond Shores".

This is asserted without any attempt at an independent assessment of the economic impacts of the proposed development. Perhaps WDC no longer have any staff capable of doing this? Potential negative economic impacts are completely ignored, for example, on local bed and breakfast and other tourism businesses. You cannot agree the equivalent of a large new supermarket without there being a significant impact on the equivalent of all the small local shops and their suppliers.

The most important point that WDC has failed to consider is the scale of the proposed development and the likely impacts of a monopoly provider. The proposed development is far too large and rather than complementing local businesses threatens to overwhelm and undermine them and not just those in West Dunbartonshire. Why would anyone travel out to Cameron House, for example, for a low paid job if there is one closer at hand in Balloch? Why too is a development of this size needed to save Loch Lomond Shores? In fact, might not Flamingo Land use its control of a large part of Balloch to undercut the businesses at Lomond Shores with a view to taking over it over too?

Why too has WDC completely failed to consider these and other related questions? Are the majority of their councillors now so in hock to development interests that they are incapable of considering the needs of the local community? .

Affordable housing

There is still no affordable housing included in the development and officers omitted to mention this in their committee report. This is pertinent to the planning application because of the question of where Flamingo Land will house staff if they fail to recruit them locally? The more important point here, however, is that Flamingo Land wants to plonk its proposals on the local community with very little consideration of their needs, whether that is for housing, services or green space. WDC, as the local body elected to represent the needs and views of local people, has failed to consult the local community about this as the Balloch and Haldane Community Council has pointed out and as a result effectively backed development interests.

The quality of the development

The only mention of the quality of the development in the WDC response is that from their Biodiversity Officer who notes that the quality of any new woodland will take years to match the quality of that which will be removed!

WDC's limited view of its role.

While WDC's Committee report is unfit for purpose, having failed to explain or justify its change in position, the actual response raises some good points about NPF4 and its own planning policies, particularly in relation to climate change. For example:

"Heat and cooling

The Council has recently approved a draft Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategy which identifies a Heat Network Strategic Zone in Alexandria. In line with Policy 19, consideration should be given to the opportunity of the proposed development site benefitting from or contributing to a sustainable heat network. There would be good opportunities to take forward innovative projects in terms of heat and energy."

The problem is that instead of saying that in order to reduce carbon emissions any development by Flamingo Land should be conditional on a heating system that does not use fossil fuels, WDC's response talks vaguely about "opportunities". Such an approach by public authorities helps explain why Scotland has so lamentably failed to reduce our carbon emissions: no-one has been prepared to draw a line and tell developers that developments won't be consented unless they really are sustainable whether that is in relation to heating, car use, green space or anything else.

The question now is whether the LLTNPA will make the many fine sounding policies in NPF4 and its own Local Development Plan stick or whether it will follow the example of WDC, pay lip service to those policies but then ignore them when it comes to determining the Flamingo Land planning application.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. climate change
2. flamingo land
3. LLTNPA
4. planning
5. Tourism

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