

Outdoor education & a community watersports hub in Balloch as an alternative to Flamingo Land

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EXCLUSIVE

Tory MSP bids to give pupils 'life-changing' outdoor education



The Scottish Conservatives' Liz Smith
Picture: Getty

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I want to ensure that the outdoor education opportunities that I was fortunate enough to enjoy will be there for generations to come

Sunday Herald 25th August

The importance of outdoor education, the contribution this could make to people's physical and mental health, safety (eg reducing drowning accidents) and understanding/enjoyment of the countryside, has been regularly discussed in Scotland for 50 years or more but since its heyday in the 1980s provision has steadily decreased. The failure of the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority

(LLTNPA) to do anything to reverse this trend has been raised fairly frequently on parkswatch (eg [see here](#)) and in my view is part of a much wider failure to value outdoor recreation. That was epitomised by the way the LLTNPA scrapped their Outdoor Recreation Plan and then failed to incorporate its draft provisions, as they had promised, in the National Park Partnership Plan ([see here](#)).

It is therefore, in my view, extremely welcome that the Scottish Tories are now trying to put outdoor recreation back on the political agenda by proposing what is effectively a legal right for all secondary pupils to attend a residential outdoor centre for a week:

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By Kathleen Nutt

ALL pupils in Scotland's secondary schools would receive a potentially "life-changing" residential week of outdoor education under proposals to be debated in Holyrood later this year.

Conservative MSP Liz Smith introduced her Bill ahead of recess in June with the legislation expected to be examined and voted on by the Scottish Parliament's Education Bill by December.

Ms Smith, who is the Scottish Conservative's finance spokeswoman and a former teacher, said that residential outdoor education "when young people can be away for a week in an environment very far removed from their own, can be life-changing".

She added: "I want to ensure that the outdoor education opportunities I was fortunate enough to enjoy will still be there for generations to come.

"Adventurous, new experiences in the outdoors develop young people with a lifelong connection and concern for the natural environment, self-esteem, self-reliance, confidence, resilience, and an understanding of how to deal with new challenges and manage risk.

"It also helps young people to know what it means to be part of a team; to learn leadership skills and the importance of valuing friendship."

In introducing her Bill she cited a decline in the number of

impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the physical and mental wellbeing of young people.

Under her Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill, all pupils aged 12 to 16 in state and grant-aided schools will have the chance to experience at least four nights and five days of residential outdoor education during their school career. The Bill does not include pupils at fee-paying schools.

The Bill would seek to make it a statutory obligation for funding to be provided for the experience at a specialist residential facility such as an outdoor centre, youth hostel, camp, or sailing boat.

Hill walking

ACTIVITIES could involve hill-walking, climbing, kayaking, raft-building, learning about nature and the outdoors, and could include curricular subjects such as biology and geography.

Currently, schools do not have to provide residential outdoor education. Some schools do provide it for pupils, but many do not, especially for children and young people in deprived areas where costs can be a burden. The cost of these trips can mean schools cannot provide them.

The Bill's financial memorandum estimates that the policy would cost around £20 million to £32m a year based on between 55,000 and 65,000 pupils doing the courses each

The article continues to discuss how a trust might work

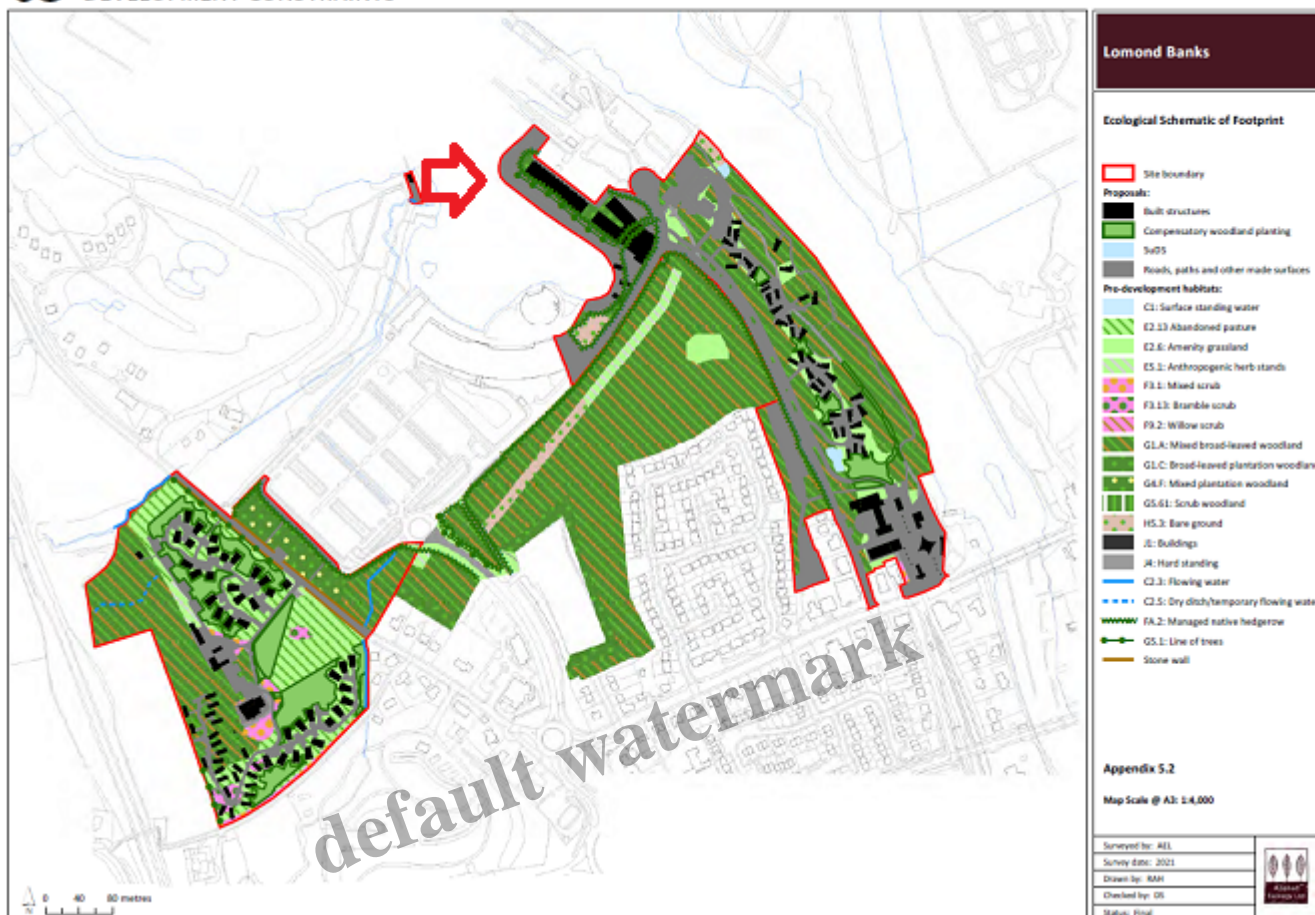
The idea of a “right” to outdoor education is not a new one. The former Strathclyde Regional Council aimed to provide children with not just one, but two weeks in the outdoor residential centres it operated, one at primary and one at secondary level. One would hope that any bill introduced by the Tories would contain provisions that would enable the amount of outdoor educational provision to be increased in future.

In 2019 the Glover Review recommended every school-age child in England should be able to experience nights away in England’s National Parks. That was yet another policy proposal accepted by the UK Government which was never properly implemented due to an alleged lack of resources. Liz Smith’s proposal for a “public trust model” in Scotland is in my view unlikely to address the problem. It would be far simpler to give local authorities the necessary resources: the £500m of public money being wasted on Shared Rural Network programme ([see here](#)) could, according to the Tories’ figures, have funded their proposals for over 15 years, creating permanent jobs in rural areas in the process.

Despite my reservations about the Scottish Tories’ proposals, the most important thing is they are calling for action to reverse the long decline in residential outdoor education provision. That needs to be supported. It also, I believe, helps illustrate why the proposed Flamingo Land development at Balloch so wrong.

The potential for a community water sports centre at Balloch

03 PROJECT DEVELOPMENT DEVELOPMENT CONSTRAINTS



Most of the land at the pierhead (unshaded top centre) is owned or managed by the LLTNPA and West Dunbartonshire Council but Scottish Enterprise has committed to sell Flamingo Land a strip of land along the shore of Drumkinnon bay (red arrow) where they are proposing to build an aparthotel and leisure complex (shown in black). Map from Design Statement

Yesterday the South Loch Lomond Community Development Trust (SLLCDT), set up by the Balloch and Haldane Community Council, to promote the interests of the local community was registered as a company at Companies House ([see here](#)). This is a significant step which potentially opens the door to alternatives to the development being proposed by Flamingo Land ([see here](#)).

One of the ideas now being considered by the SLLCDT is an outdoor watersports centre and associated facilities at the pierhead, instead of the aparti-hotel and indoor leisure complex being proposed by Flamingo Land.

There is a very long tradition – which should have been treated as part of the cultural heritage of the National Park – of local people from the Balloch area accessing Loch Lomond for recreational purposes. For example, when the only indoor swimming pool in the West Dunbartonshire area was Brockbaths (now the site of the Meadow Centre in Dumbarton) children learned to swim in Drumkinnon Bay. There is also a long history of boating, some of which was linked to another important local tradition, that of camping on the islands and around the shores of Loch Lomond.

Since the creation of the LLTNPA, which was set up to promote both outdoor recreation and the cultural heritage, accessing Loch Lomond has become harder, not easier. For example, the right of way across the River Leven by Balloch bridge, which people used to launch boats for free, has been blocked off without protest from the LLTNPA, forcing people to pay to use their facility at the Duncan Mills slipway. And camping around most of the shores of Loch Lomond is now illegal for seven months of the year due to the camping byelaws.

On top of which Loch Lomond has no public harbour, no moorings for visitors and there is not even provision for people boating from other parts of the loch to come ashore at Balloch for a meal.

The potential for addressing many of these issues by turning the pierhead area into a watersports hub for all appears to me very strong. The scandal is that neither Scottish Enterprise nor the LLTNPA have done anything to such a possibility, let alone engage with the local community on this. Instead they combined as partners in 2015 to market much of the remaining land owned by Scottish Enterprise at Balloch to sell to private interests, with LLTNPA staff indicating they were also prepared in principle to offer up the land the Park owned at the Pierhead too ([see here](#)).

Flamingo Land's proposed development at the pierhead, if granted planning permission, would destroy the potential for an outdoor watersports centre for ever. Fiona Robertson, speaking on behalf of Flamingo Land, has been keen to conceal that possibility and was quoted in the Herald on 17th August as claiming:

"Another ask we have had is that there has been a long-held aspiration to have some kind of community watersports hub at Loch Lomond. What Lomond Banks [the brand name for Flamingo Land at Balloch] have been discussing is that within their pierhead facility they would work with these clubs to allocate space"!

This is complete nonsense. The proposed hotel and leisure complex, as is evident from the map above, is squeezed into a narrow strip of land above the shore on Drumkinnon Bay. There is no room for a watersports hub on the site and the suggestion that space might be allocated for clubs – what space, what clubs? – is derisory.

The major planning issue all of this raises is that although there is other land at the pierhead, mostly managed by the LLTNPA, that space is required to provide access to the Maid of the Loch (disabled parking) and to the Duncan Mills slipway. The site that Scottish Enterprise has committed to sell to Flamingo Land should planning permission be granted on 16th September is therefore the main space left for a watersports facility (with clever design etc some extra space could no doubt be created on the LLTNPA's land).

Could a watersports hub include outdoor education provision?

Were the Tories outdoor education bill to become law West Dunbartonshire Council and other local authorities in Scotland would need access to new outdoor education provision. Residential outdoor provision in Balloch might not make much sense for WDC as it's a small council and one of the points of such provision is to enable children to have experiences away from home. That would not, however,

be the case for other local authorities in the Clyde area and such provision would help create jobs using the watersports skills of people living around Loch Lomond. WDC could still use such a facility at Balloch to provide day provision to school pupils in their area and activities for children and young people over the holiday periods.

WDC is, however, as far as I am aware still paying a company controlled by David Mouldsdales £65k a year (and contractually committed to doing so until 2035) to rent the abandoned McGregor's Landing building at Ardlui ([see here](#)). With extra resources WDC might be able to re-open that centre for residential purposes, though having had their fingers burned once they might be wise not to do so again. The links between private development interests around Loch Lomond pose an even bigger challenge: Andy Miller, who used to work for Flamingo Land, moved on to work with David Mouldsdales and is now working as sales manager for Argyll Holidays which has been buying up chalet parks in the National Park. Between them these companies control much of the land around Loch Lomond and, if the Riverside Site is sold to Flamingo Land, there will be almost no public land left on which to build new outdoor education provision.

The risk is the private sector will be able to hold the public sector to ransom making the Tories proposed residential outdoor education provision unaffordable.

By contrast with the proposed Flamingo Land development the buildings required for a watersports hub would be far smaller and more in keeping with the landscape. Such buildings could be designed to facilitate and support access by the public to the water (whether for swimming, paddleboarding, boating etc) instead of blocking it. But they could also be designed to include residential outdoor education for schools, drawing money into the area, an income stream that could be used to help finance a community alternative to Flamingo Land.

Ideas, the visitor experience and the needs of local communities

This post has been written with the intention of showing that there could be an alternative to Flamingo Land at Balloch given the political will.

There is a huge reservoir of knowledge about Loch Lomond, how it has been used in the past, the problems created by the National Park and about watersports in general in the Balloch area. In my view it is that knowledge that needs to be harnessed and empowered through the new Community Development Trust to come up with proposals for Balloch that meet the needs of both the local community and visitors. That needn't necessarily be a watersports hub although such an idea would be far more sympathetic to the aims of the National Park – it would be a visitor experience worthy of the name, one that was linked to the natural qualities of the loch – and the aspirations of the local community.

However, in my view for local aspirations to be realised it will need support from both the Scottish Government and other public authorities. Whether its through a new right to outdoor education or some completely different income stream, there needs to be financial support from the public sector. The idea that local communities to do things alone without money is mostly a myth. What that means is instead of standing back and leaving it to other to deal with the Flamingo Land debacle, the Scottish

Government needs to step him and commit real support to community alternatives.

If you live in the Balloch and Haldane Community Council area and want to join the Community Development Trust you can do so [here](#) while if you want to make a donation to support the work of the trust you can do so [here](#).

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

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