

More than a public inconvenience – the National Park’s mis-management of visitor infrastructure on east Loch Lomond

Description



Two compacting bins outside Balmaha Visitor Centre on east Loch Lomond 2nd December with Conic Hill behind.

In January 2020 the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) announced ([see here](#)) it had secured £135k in funding from Visit Scotland’s Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund to modernise the toilet facilities and install smart bins at its Visitor Centre in Balmaha:

“We know that the provision of things like high quality toilets and bins can make a real difference to a visitor’s experience. We are pleased to be investing in our facilities to ensure they are sustainable for the long term and continue to match the standard expected of Scotland’s first National Park.” (Gordon Watson CEO).

In June 2020 Mary Jack explained ([see here](#)) how the LLTNPA appeared to be using the £135k from Visit Scotland to generate revenue for itself by hiking the charges for using the toilets.

I arrived at Balmaha on Monday to find the toilets closed and to be “welcomed” by these signs on the door of the Visitor Centre:



It seems that the £135k grant had not been spent as intended. At the March 2020 meeting of the LLTNPA Board senior management had reported on the Visit Scotland grant and how it was being spent:

Annual Operational Plan (AOP) 2019/20

Progress Report – 17 February 2020

Complete	On Track	Behind Schedule	At Risk	Cancelled/Postponed
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Priority	YTD progress	Rating
G. Estate & Tourism Infrastructure Development & facilities (toilets, car parks, services)	Public toilets at Tarbet and Inveruglas refurbished and 24-hour access provided, Inveruglas car park resurfaced and motorhome disposal point at Tarbet installed. Improvements to public toilets at Luss completed. <u>Public toilet refurbishment and 24-hour access provision at Balmaha underway and due to be completed by end March 2020.</u>	On track

This was a two-fold lie. By the time of the board meeting LLTNPA management knew – just as with the Tarbet car park upgrade ([see here](#)) – that work on the Balmaha Visitor Centre was NOT on track.



The barricaded Visitor Centre 16th September 2020

The work actually took six months, not six weeks, to complete and was finished sometime in October 2020:

Annual Operational Plan (AOP) 2019/20

Update on carry-over items – November 2020

This report updates on items from the 2019/20 Annual Operational Plan that were both (a) not completed in 2020, and (b) are not captured by the 2020/21 Annual Operational Plan.

AOP item	Current status
Estate & Tourism Infrastructure Development & facilities (toilets, car parks, services)	Final delivery of the RTIF works to upgrade car parks in October 2020 (delayed from March 2020 due to COVID-19)

More importantly the adaptations to enable “24 hour access provision” to the toilets never happened. The real agenda, as Mary Jack showed, was to “*Maximise the generation of toilet income in 2 (Luss and Balmaha) of our 8 public toilet facilities following upgrades to charging mechanisms*”.

Four years later that has clearly failed and the Balmaha Visitor Centre is now only open at the weekend during the winter. Instead of being available for the 168 hours in the week, raking in income to pay for their upkeep, the toilets are now open for just 13 of those hours. The November edition of News from the National Park ([see here](#)) suggests this is part of a wider closure of public toilets and restriction of toilet opening hours during the winter:

“There have been changes to some facilities winter opening. Inveruglas toilets are now closed for maintenance. Firkin Point and Rowardennan toilets are also closed. Milarrochy Bay toilets remain open when they would usually be closed during the winter months. [Balmaha Visitor Centre](#) is now open on Saturday and Sunday only.”

The newsletter made no attempt to explain or justify the closure the LLTNPA’s facilities at Firkin Point, Rowardennan and Balmaha but clearly charging has not worked.



There were about 20 further vehicles to the left, by the start of the path up Conic Hill. Note the Rabbie's tours minibus at the far side of the car park and the bus stop to the right of that. Photo taken 14.10 2nd December

There were around 50 vehicles in the Balmaha car park when we left, say about 100 people. Most of these are likely to have wanted to go to the toilet on arrival – Balmaha is an hour's drive from the centre of Glasgow – and/or on departure. The LLTNPA's response to this lack of provision is to direct people a further 1.8m up the road to Milarrochy which is being kept open this winter, albeit with restricted opening hours:



That is highly inconvenient for people who arrive by car at Balmaha and adds to the National Park's carbon footprint but it is completely hopeless for those arriving by bus as there is no public transport to Milarrochy.

Moreover, for the dozens of people who walk up Ben Lomond on fine days in winter unless they call in at Milarrochy they will never know it is the only toilet that is open on the east shore of Loch Lomond. The opening hours of 9am-4pm are of limited use anyway on short winter days when the safe thing to do is to set out at dawn and many will only return after dark.



Map from the STID of May 2022

This is not just a public inconvenience, it undermines the LLTNPA's own stated intentions, as set out in the Strategic Tourism Infrastructure Development (STID) study for east Loch Lomond ([see here](#)), that it wishes to discourage visitors from taking their cars beyond Balmaha and along the narrow road to Rowardennan:

"Balmaha will be a Primary Hub with

- *Park and ride type car parking and services*
- *A shuttle bus starting point*
- *Motor home facilities*
- *Cycle infrastructure*
- *Improved connections (pier, ferry, parking, visitor centre, Conic Hill)*
- *Improved Public Transport connection"*

The LLTNPA's failure to use existing visitor infrastructure



The management failure is not just about toilet provision. After walking over and round Conic Hill to look at the pathwork and prior to dropping in at Milarrochy we went to Cashel. The toilets there were also closed, hardly a surprise after the Cashel Forest/Royal Scottish Forestry's Society to sell off a conservation project funded by public money for an unknown purpose ([see here](#)). But its another building, like the Balmaha Visitor Centre which was funded through the public purse for public benefit and now lies unused.

Now imagine that the LLTNPA Ranger Service, which, according to the Park's latest newsletter, *"switches focus to supporting wider National Park priorities"* during the winter months while continuing *"education and outreach work"*, was using the Cashel Visitor Centre for school groups to experience the wonderful east Loch Lomond oak woods and their associated wildlife during the week:



Part of the Oak Wood walk at Cashel. What were the RSFS thinking when they decided to try and sell these woods on the open market?

That would have helped bring in both visitors and income to Cashel . Instead, unsupported and unpromoted by the LLTNPA, on a really beautiful afternoon there was just one other person there. When we asked her what she thought the National Park could be doing on east Loch Lomond her response was “Don’t get me started”!

Similarly, there are major opportunities for the LLTNPA Ranger Service to use the Visitor Centre at Balmaha for educational purposes. For example, one of the best geological walks in Scotland starts from the car park ([see here](#)). Instead, however, of basing its Ranger Services out in the field in Visitor Centres helping the public get more out of their visits to the National Park the LLTNPA has them based at home or at the National Park HQ in Balloch. As a consequences the toilets associated with the Visitor Centres at Balmaha and Cashel are shut.

All plans and no action

The LLTNPA has produced a plethora of plans for east Loch Lomond and Balmaha over the last fifteen years which mention toilet provision. None have made any difference. Examples include:

1) The east Loch Lomond Visitor Management Plan 2010

6.6 Public Toilet Provision

- Investigate options for improving and rationalising toilet provision at Balmaha, to ensure the provision of one quality provision.
- Continue to provide public toilets at Milarrochy and Rowardennan, during summer season with flexible opening options during winter months.
- Consider options for commercial use of public space within Rowardennan toilet block, new tenant to provide added value to the visitor experience.
- Public toilet provision to be developed at Salloch Bay as part of overall site improvements.

2) The east Loch Lomond Visitor Management Plan 2014-19

This represented a step backwards:

Local authorities have historically provided public toilets within towns and villages. At present there are public toilets provided by FCS at Salloch and the NPA at Milarrochy, Rowardennan and at the National Park Centre at Balmaha during opening hours. Stirling Council also runs a comfort partnership scheme with local businesses to provide public access to their toilet facilities; this provision is also available in Balmaha.

Public toilet provision is one of the key issues for visitors and is the number one issue coming from the National Park Visitor Survey. [My emphasis] It is important that well used countryside sites have high quality public toilet provision; but a way has to be found at those sites to pay for the long term cleaning and maintenance.

Despite stating public toilet was the number one issue for visitors, no commitments were made.

3) The Buchanan Community Action Plan 2015-20 [\(see here\)](#)

A year later, in an about turn, a commitment was made to the local community to improve access to the toilets in the Visitor Centre:

ACTION POINT

Improved Visitor Amenities

- ➔ Improve access to public toilets within Balmaha.
- ➔ Improve quality of picnic areas throughout the community.
- ➔ Work with neighbouring communities to ensure health care provision for the area is maintained.

4) The National Park Partnership Plan 2018-23:

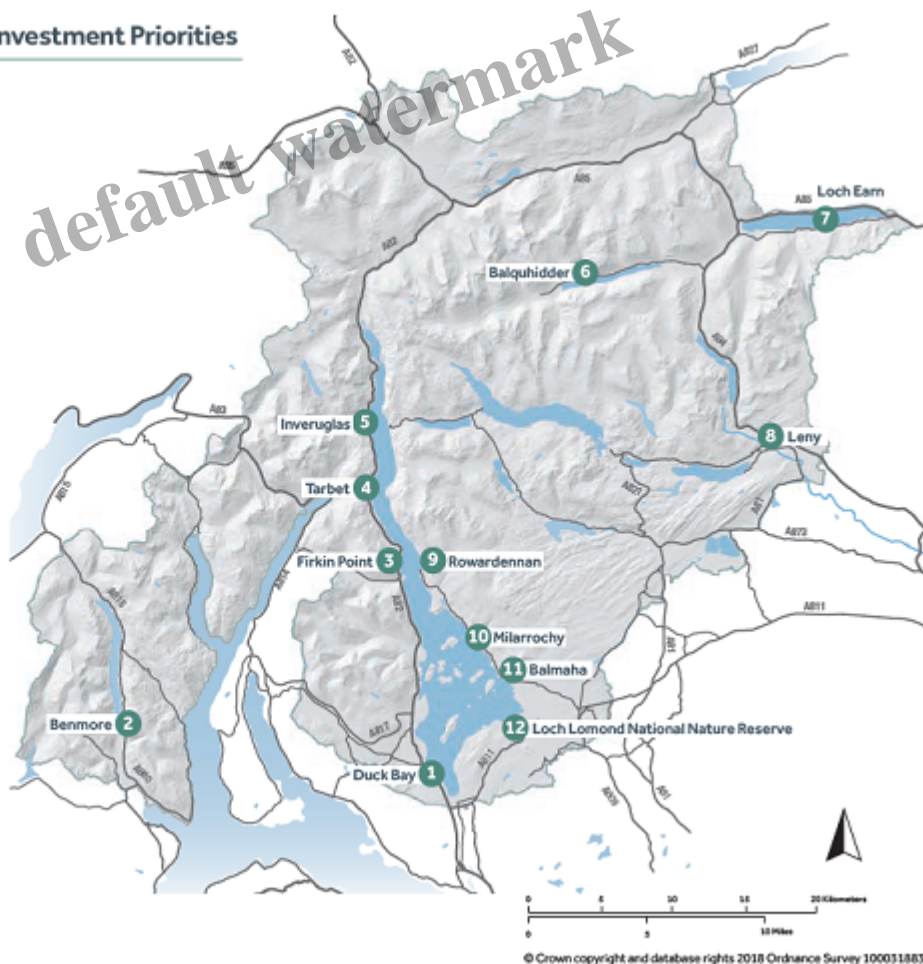
Map 7 Visitor Infrastructure Investment Priorities

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Key

	Paths		Camping
	Visitor facilities		Toilets
	Parking		Commercial Opportunities
	Motorhomes		Loch Access

1		✓	✓	✓		✓		
2	✓	✓	✓			✓		
3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
4		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
7				✓	✓	✓		✓
8	✓	✓	✓					
9	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
10	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
11	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
12	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓



Visitor Experience

Outcome 8: Visitor Management

Priority 8.1

Priority 8.2

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Note that Rowardennan, Milarrochy and Balmaha were all identified as priorities for improved toilet

provision.

5) The joint response Visitor Management Plan 2022 (developed as a result of Covid):

Toilets, Camping and the Duncan Mills Memorial Slipway

6.5.6. All partner **public toilets** will be opened and with COVID-19 restrictions easing there will be less temporary toilets provided but this will be kept under review. Some temporary provision will be provided at locations including Duck Bay and Arrochar funded by partners, communities, businesses and landowners. Where possible, 2 toilet access will be made available. The National Park Authority will investigate measures to keep the Balmaha toilets open when the visitor centre does not operate. The Friends of Loch Lomond are expanding and improving the toilet facilities at Trossachs Pier.

6) East Loch Lomond Strategic Tourism Infrastructure Development (STID) Framework May 2022

Principles for Development:

- Develop Balmaha as a hub for arrival / use of shuttle bus / park and ride / active travel
- Promote as Loch Lomond East arrival point (i.e. supporting limited onward and westward travel by private transport)

Key Elements:

- Due to the complexity and sensitivity of the location a masterplan approach is required to develop a long term Place led vision for transport and visitor infrastructure which is sensitive to residents and local business needs. TE
- Bus shelter and public transport information (Variable Message Signage) to support sustainable travel
- Cycle storage / parking, coordination with cycle route projects
- Parking improvements: EV, Variable Message Signage, motor home facilities
- Place improvements
 - Importance of bus shelter & shuttle bus infrastructure emphasised via quality, location, landscape setting
 - Connected village centre and remote ferry pier
 - Strengthened access to boat hire & marina
 - Improved play facilities (e.g. renovation and new natural play)
- Sense of arrival: signage, place making etc
- Enhanced toilets: increased numbers, opening outwith visitor centre hours
- Link to Inchailloch
- Trail improvements with more paths made accessible to all

Almost 15 years of plans and the LLTNPA is no further forward when it comes to toilet provision on east Loch Lomond. In fact, the situation appears to have got worse, not better, with the toilets at Cashel and Salloch no longer available to the general public and with just one toilet being available

on weekdays in the winter months.

Moreover, yet more plans will apparently be needed before anything meaningful happen. A masterplan is being developed for Rowardennan, arising out of the STID plan, and when money and time allows another is to be developed for Balmaha. The cost of all of this in payments to consultants, staff time and the time of the public, who are continually asked to engage on plans that lead nowhere, is considerable. The LLTNPA needs to stop creating new plans until their staff have delivered on the existing ones.

Indeed, the LLTNPA would have achieved considerably more if instead of all these plans they had continued to base their Ranger Service locally, given them the power to take the initiative and promote full use of the existing infrastructure and employed a couple of people to assist the Rangers to undertake practical visitor management tasks: things like maintaining the toilets, clearing up litter (there was a fair amount around the Conic Hill path) and undertaking minor footpath repairs.

While the costs of producing all these plans escalates, the LLTNPA's existing operations are highly inefficient. On Monday I saw a Ranger van, which must have been driven out from Park HQ in Balloch, and at Milarrochy a van from Pristine Cleaning Services (I think I have got the name right). The marginal cost of a van travelling out to the east shore of Loch Lomond to clean one toilet block must be considerable.

Even if the financial costs of keeping existing infrastructure open during the winter was slightly more than closing most of it, the value for the public pound would be far greater. It would not only end the public inconvenience but the systematic discrimination caused by the closure of the toilets. Men like myself who know "How to Shit in the Woods" – its the title of a book – may not be put off by having to do so but for many people this is simply not an option. While preaching equality of opportunity and expressing concern about certain groups being unrepresented among visitors to the National Park, the LLTNPA are actually making it far harder for older people, women and ethnic minorities to do so.

What needs to happen

In September 2020 I addressed the LLTNPA Board about the urgent need to improve winter provision for visitors on east Loch Lomond as a result of the Covid pandemic ([see here](#)). Board Members listened attentively, asked some intelligent questions but then changed nothing. As a result I concluded that "it is predictable that the visitor management chaos and wasted opportunities in places like east Loch Lomond will continue".

It say something about the National Park that either most Board Members don't visit places like Balmaha or, if they do, just accept what is being done in their names. What is the locally elected member for east Loch Lomond and Mentieth, David Mackie, who owns the Drymen bakery and deli just down the road and who is involved in the Drymen Community Development Trust ([see here](#)) doing about this? Perhaps he just goes home when he needs to go to the toilet? Or what about Stirling Councillor, Martin Earl, who represent Stirling Council on the board and lives far enough away that he might appreciate a toilet?

And then there are the six board members selected by Scottish Ministers who are meant to represent

the national interest: [Dr Heather Reid \(Convener\)](#), [Claire Chapman \(Chair of Planning and Access Committee\)](#), [Dr Sarah Drummond \(Chair of Futures Group\)](#), [Ronnie Erskine \(Chair of Audit and Risk Committee\)](#), [Professor Christopher Spray \(Countryside Trust Rep\)](#) and [Colin Lee?](#) How many of them get around the National Park on a regular basis and see what is happening on the ground? Do any of those that do visit not wonder how visitors and local communities are being served? Do any of those who prefer to sit at their desks look through past plans and not appreciate that there is an endless cycle of words without action? Have any of them considered how the lack of toilet provision discriminates against certain groups?

One of the primary arguments being used by the Galloway National Park Association in favour of the proposed National Park there is that it would bring in more money to support rural tourism. The record of the LLTNPA over the last 15 years contradicts that. They have failed to make proper use of their own facilities, many of which they inherited from local authorities in the area. Where “improvements” have taken place they have invested very little of their own money, relying on other organisations to provide funding: the National Heritage Lottery Fund for footpath work in the mountains; NatureScot for the Green Recovery Better Places funding and Visit Scotland for the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund. A local authority could as well do that.

Part of the explanation for the LLTNPA’s reliance on external funding lies in their having wasted so much public money on implementing and enforcing the camping byelaws. They have had little money for anything else and the result has been that its staff spend lots of their time chasing campers or grant funding rather than actually doing things which would benefit the public.

There is no reason in principle that a National Park in Galloway couldn’t be different but unless Scottish Ministers acknowledge the many failings of the LLTNPA, as evidenced for example by the plethora of plans and lack of action on east Loch Lomond, we are likely to end up with more of the same. That is why Scottish Ministers need to review our existing National Park before creating any new ones. As part of that they should commission an independent cost-benefit analysis of the camping byelaws, which started out on east Loch Lomond and are due to be reviewed next year .

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. LLTNPA
2. Local communities
3. planning
4. Scottish Government
5. Tourism
6. visitor infrastructure
7. visitor management

Date Created

December 4, 2024

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