

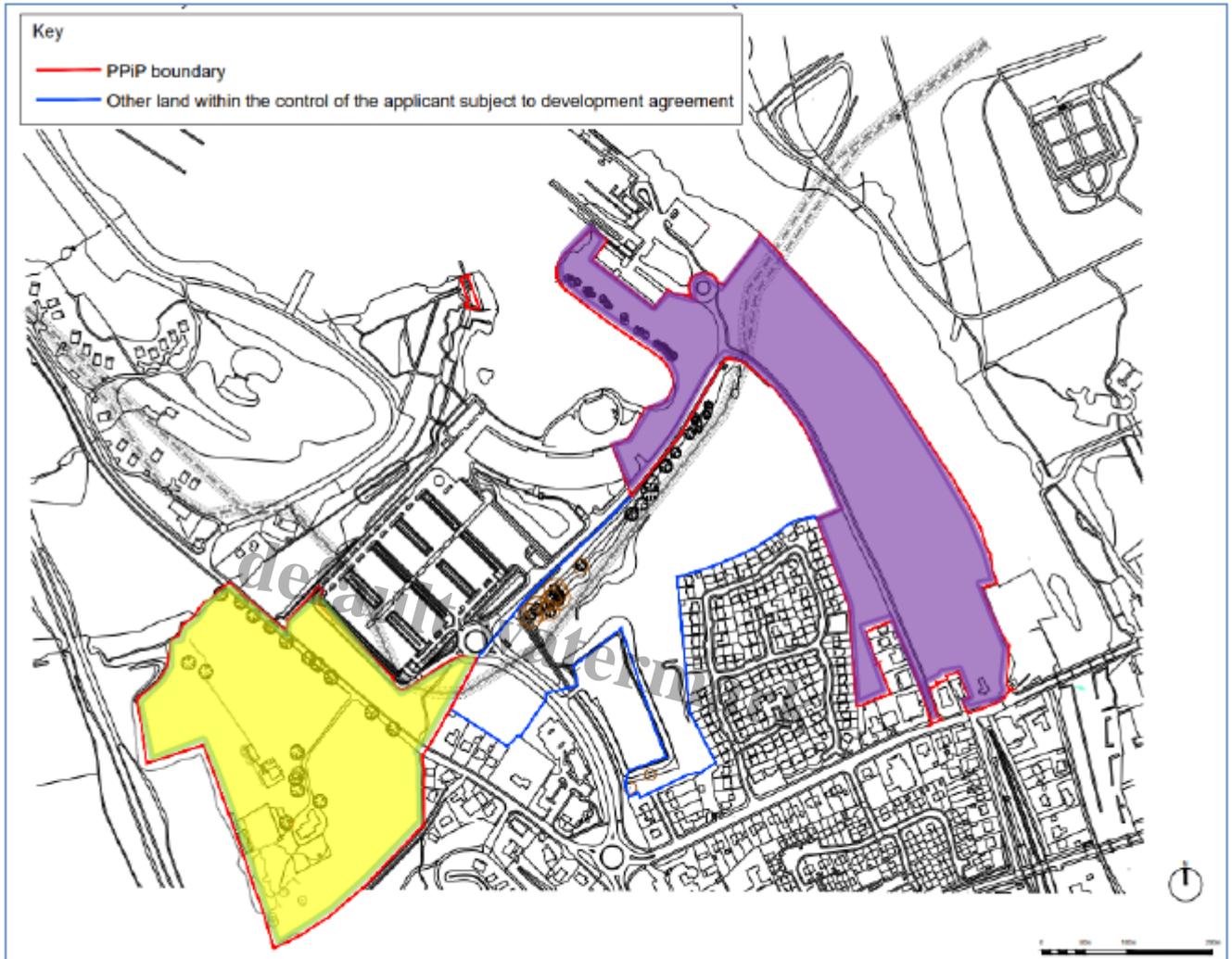
## Planning democracy, the local place plan for Balloch and the forthcoming decision on Flamingo Land

### Description

“The community-led **Local Place Planning** process for **Balloch, Haldane, and Jamestown** is now underway, and we want you to be part of it. This is a chance for local residents, families, and businesses to come together and help **shape how our community develops** in the years ahead. Your input will cover everything from the spaces we use every day to the opportunities we want to see created.” (West Dunbartonshire Council [see here](#)).

Local Place Plan drop-in consultation events have been organised for this afternoon, Friday 28th November and Saturday 29th November in Balloch ([see here](#)) and an online survey is due to open on 1st December. The elephant in the room is Flamingo Land:

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**Figure 1 - Location Plan showing West Riverside and Woodbank areas of the application site**

The land at Balloch included in Flamingo Land's planning application: the Riverside Site in purple; Woodbank House in yellow; a small area on the western tip of Drumkinnon Bay.

The 'Lomond Banks' planning application covers most of the undeveloped land at Balloch. Added to which Scottish Enterprise has promised to sell Flamingo Land Drumkinnon Woods, the area outlined in blue, if planning consent is granted. If, therefore, Ivan McKee, the Scottish Government minister responsible for planning, approves the Flamingo Land planning application, there will be very little scope for the local place plan to determine anything which happens in Balloch. If, on the other hand, Ivan McKee refuses the application this would be a massive opportunity for the local community to develop an alternative plan to Flamingo Land.

Given this fact, it is extraordinary that there is no mention of the Flamingo Land planning application on the Balloch and Haldane Local Place Plan website or in any of the information about the consultation. That could be explained by the consultation being partly funded by West Dunbartonshire Council, who failed to object to the Flamingo Land application, and the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park

Authority (LLTNPA). The latter, as I recently explained ([see here](#) and [here](#)), have been sitting on the fence since Ivan McKee decided to call in the application.

Both planning authorities, if challenged, would probably try and justify this omission from the consultation by saying it is for the whole of Balloch and Haldane and not just for the western side of the River Leven. The risk, however, is that ignoring the elephant in the room creates confusion about the scope of the consultation and how to respond. Should people, when making comments, assume Flamingo Land will get the go ahead or should they not?

In my view in these circumstances local people should take the advice published on the place plan website at face value:

*“The Scottish Government says that Local Place Plans offer the opportunity for a community-led, collaborative approach to creating great local places effectively empowering communities to play a proactive role in defining the future of their places” (Circular 1/2022, paragraph 3).*

This advice means all parties at Balloch should start with a blank slate, ignore Flamingo Land's proposals and come up with new proposals that are designed to benefit the local community and the wider public rather than private interests. Doing so, more than anything else, would throw down the gauntlet to Ivan McKee. It would also support the aspiration expressed in the November newsletter of the Loch Lomond South Community Development Trust ([see here](#)):

*“As you are undoubtedly aware, to create an alternative that suits everyone, we hope to action an asset transfer of the land and buildings Lomond Banks [i.e Flamingo Land] had earmarked for development into community ownership”.*

It appears the local community council and development trust have been caught in a double bind. They want to develop an alternative to Flamingo Land but to do this required support from the LLTNPA and West Dunbartonshire Council. It has taken them a lot of time and effort to get to the position. However, having accepted that financial support, it is very difficult for these local community organisations to criticise either planning authority. Hence the elephant in the room.

## Planning democracy and Flamingo Land

By happy coincidence, Planning Democracy, the organisation campaigning for a democratic planning system in Scotland launched its new manifesto yesterday ([see here](#)). The way the Flamingo Land planning application has been promoted and managed by the LLTNPA at Balloch (eg [see here](#) and [here](#)) provides a perfect illustration of the need for a radical overhaul of Scotland's planning system as being called for by Planning Democracy. Their manifesto ([see here](#)) is organised into six parts: strengthening democracy, protecting nature, ending the housing crisis, protecting rights, planning for wider system change and open and honest planning.

The failure to mention the elephant in the room in the Balloch Local Place Plan consultation epitomises the lack of openness and honesty in the planning system. The section on “strengthening democracy” is particularly relevant to the local place plan consultation which has now started at Balloch as I hope these extracts illustrate:

## The Challenge:

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### A Democratic Deficit in Planning

Across Scotland, communities are feeling increasingly powerless as planning decisions reshape their neighbourhoods without meaningful involvement or regard for existing communities. From large-scale housing developments that strain local infrastructure to industrial projects that harm the environment, people are being sidelined from decisions that directly affect their lives. A survey of 228 community councillors by Planning Democracy confirms what many already know: communities feel they have very little influence over planning processes.

While developers and businesses benefit from access, resources, and established relationships with officials, local residents are expected to navigate a complex, under-resourced system with minimal support. Without real reform, planning in Scotland will continue to serve the interests of the powerful, while ordinary people are left on the margins.

The 2019 Planning Act promised to give a voice to communities to influence the future development of their local area through Local Place Plans, allowing them to focus on their needs and aspirations at an early stage of the planning process. However, while Local Place Plans offer an opportunity for community input, they carry little weight in the planning system and require a lot of voluntary effort. In contrast, the more powerful Local Development Plans—which have a statutory basis—remain largely inaccessible to meaningful public influence.

Is that not the perfect description of the current situation at Balloch, Ivan McKee hiding in his office failing to reveal his hand for Balloch while the local community are sidelined from the real decision

#### **Engagement is Still Superficial**

More than 50 years after the Skeffington Report called for meaningful public participation, the system rarely moves beyond informing or consulting. Communities are not truly involved, and certainly not empowered to shape decisions.

#### **Lack of Resources and Support for Communities**

Planning authorities often lack the capacity or political will to work collaboratively. Meanwhile, Community Councils rely on volunteers with no training, limited time, and no access to expert advice, despite their statutory role.

In Balloch

engagement has been worse than superficial, it has been dishonest. The LLTNPA conducted the charrette, the fancy name for the consultation with the local community in 2016, without telling consultees that behind the scenes they had sat on the interview panel and secretly appointed Flamingo Land as preferred developer for the site ([see here](#))? More recently, the LLTNPA conducted the Pierhead Action Plan consultation without telling anyone they had agreed with Scottish Enterprise it should be kept as a car park ([see here](#))? When local board member, Sid Perrie, tried to expose that

the response to the LLTNPA as I will show was to lodge a second complaint against him with the Ethical Standards Commission.

This section of the Planning Democracy manifesto ends with a call for a radical overhaul of not just planning, but local government:

### **A5. Empower Local Communities Through Democratic Municipalism**

With reference to the ongoing review of local governance – Democracy Matters - we call for the Scottish Government to introduce a system of democratic municipalism, bringing the state closer to communities, through a more localised system of Government. We want local authorities to be less remote and distant from communities relying less on community voluntarism, instead working more closely with citizens to give them an active role in shaping their towns, cities, and neighbourhoods. In recognition that such a transformation of Scotland's local governance is a long term ambition, in the first instance and as a first step, we call upon the Scottish Government to incorporate the European Charter of Local Self-Government into Scots Law.

I commend the whole manifesto, it is only 22 pages in total, and avoids most of the planning jargon used by the Scottish Government and planning authorities which is so disempowering. Were its recommendations to be implemented in my view Flamingo Land could never have happened.

### **Category**

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

### **Tags**

1. flamingo land
2. LLTNPA
3. Local communities
4. planning
5. Scottish Government

### **Date Created**

November 28, 2025

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