

Who is telling the truth about LLTNPA involvement in Flamingo Land – Gordon Watson or Sid Perrie?

Description

Last weekend the Sunday Mail ran an article ([see here](#)) on the Standards Commission Hearing ([see here](#)) which declared Sid Perrie, the locally elected member for Balloch, guilty of bullying for sending six emails raising concerns about conflicts of interest in the handling of the Flamingo Land Planning application. As a consequence the Standards Commission has suspended Sid Perrie from the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) Board for six months.

The article, in which I was quoted, ended with a long and revealing quote from Gordon Watson, Chief Executive Officer, of the LLTNPA. According to Mr Watson, the LLTNPA handling of the Flamingo Land Application was completely above board and therefore, by implication, Sid Perrie was completely wrong to try and raise concerns and deserved to be suspended.

Mr Watson's quote started by, stating LLTNPA planning staff had twice recommended rejecting Flamingo Land, as if this proved they had taken a neutral and objective approach to the planning application. What this failed to mention was:

- the numerous actions that planning staff had taken to smooth the way for the proposed Flamingo Land development before then, ([see here](#)) and ([here](#));
- the consequences for the reputation of the National Park Authority if had it approved the planning application in the face of 150,000 objections from the public;
- the fact that the reasons LLTNPA staff gave for refusing the application were very weak ([see here](#)), which made it easy for the Scottish Government Reporter to uphold Flamingo Land's appeal ([see here](#));
- the failure of LLTNPA staff to do anything to strengthen the reasons for objecting since the appeal was called in by Scottish Ministers ([see here](#))

Mr Watson, then moved on to deny that the LLTNPA was in any way compromised by its handling of the Flamingo Land application:

“We once again strenuously refute any allegations that there has been anything inappropriate about our handling of this planning process, including accusations of there being a conflict of interest which we categorically reject.”

“In 2015 Scottish Enterprise invited the Park Authority's then Head of Visitor Experience to be involved in the process of reviewing the submissions for the West Riverside site, which is allocated for tourism uses in the Local Development Plan. This involvement was in a purely advisory capacity in relation to tourism considerations only, and without prejudice to any consideration of planning issues.

“The final decision regarding a preferred developer was for Scottish Enterprise as the landowner to make alone. The National Park Authority had no formal role in their decision to appoint Flamingo Land as preferred bidder.

Mr Watson has been repeating versions of these claims since 2016, when the LLTNPA issued a statement on the recent announcement regarding West Riverside in Balloch (see here):

Scottish Enterprise recently appointed Flamingo Land Limited as the preferred developer of their 20 hectare site at West Riverside, Balloch, in Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park.

Scottish Enterprise kept the National Park Authority's tourism team informed at each stage of the marketing of the site and the process of selection of their preferred developer.

An expanded version of these claims was repeated in another media statement in September 2021 (see here)

"The decision to appoint Flamingoland as preferred bidder for the West Riverside site was made by Scottish Enterprise alone. While a former member of the National Park Authority's tourism team did provide informal tourism advice to Scottish Enterprise before their decision, no member of the planning team or any member of the National Park Board was involved in their selection and there was no conflict of interest.

Both versions of events are contradicted by the evidence which I described at length in the Flamingo Story (1) and (2) (links above). These included the following statements from Scottish Enterprise (SE) in response to Freedom of Information Requests:

1) Achievement of SE design objectives. Were these just set by SE or did the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority have an input?

Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) endorsed the 'SE Design Principles' set out in the scoring document and were fully engaged in developing the marketing strategy as well as being part of the process to award Flamingo Land preferred developer status at West Riverside.

The design principles were set out fully within the original marketing brochure (extract below) and both this and the scoring document were endorsed by the LLTNPA.

Extract FOI response Scottish Enterprise 10/1/17

Far from just offering tourism advice, SE stated the LLTNPA had endorsed the Design Principles (a planning rather than a tourism function) set out in the scoring document and both this and the scoring document were endorsed by the LLTNPA. An earlier FOI response also showed that far from acting in an advisory capacity, the LLTNPA was involved in scoring the submissions:

From: [Redacted]
Sent: [Redacted] @scotent.co.uk>
To: 27 July 2015 10:04
Subject: Mairi Bell
 West Riverside - Scoring of Proposals

Hi Mairi,

[Redacted] has asked me to drop you a note to check your availability for scoring/reviewing West Riverside submissions week commencing 10th August? We plan to book a full day for this but depending on submissions we receive a full day may not be required.

I will circulate a scoring criteria and matrices in due course.

If you have any queries just let me know.

Best Regards,

[Redacted]
 Project Manager
 Business Infrastructure
 SCOTTISH ENTERPRISE

Direct line: [Redacted]
 Email: [Redacted]@scotent.co.uk

SE even provided me with a copy of the scoring matrix, approved by the LLTNPA, which covered price as well as quality:

	A	B	C	D	E	F
1						
2	PROCUREMENT	Contract Ref:			Title:	West Riverside Dev
3						
4			Price	Quality	Price Score	Quality Score
5	Redacted under regulation 10(5)(e)	Tender 1	0.00	220.00	#DIV/0!	60.27
6	Redacted under regulation 10(5)(e)	Tender 2	0.00	0.00	#DIV/0!	0.00
7	Redacted under regulation 10(5)(e)	Tender 3	0.00	355.00	#DIV/0!	97.26
8	Flamingo Land Ltd	Tender 4	0.00	365.00	#DIV/0!	100.00
9	Redacted under regulation 10(5)(e)	Tender 5	0.00	155.00	#DIV/0!	42.47
10						

Following his claims in September 2021 that "no member of the planning team or member of the board was involved in their (Flamingo Land's) selection", Mr Watson's statement to the Sunday Mail appears to suggest that the planning team's involvement was restricted to "free confidential pre-application advice,":

Separately, the planning service offers free confidential pre-application advice to anyone who is considering submitting a planning application, such advice is always without prejudice to the consideration of a subsequent formal application. This approach is entirely commonplace across Scotland and aims to help inform a developer's own decision to proceed with a planning application.

Mr Watson did not explain what advice was actually offered or how this fitted with other evidence provided through FOI requests. This shows that shortly after the LLTNPA's Mairi Bell had sat on the interview panel which scored the Flamingo Land application, she and Stuart who appears to be Stuart Means head of planning met with SE. Unfortunately, no minute appears to have been taken of the meeting, despite the comprehensive agenda:

Agenda

West Riverside Meeting

Wednesday 30th September 2015 at 2.00pm

Scottish Enterprise Offices, Atrium Court, 50 Waterloo St, Glasgow G2 6HQ

- 1. Introductions**
- 2. Proposal Overview**
- 3. Planning**
- 4. Timescales/Milestones**
- 5. Construction Costs**
- 6. Land Price**
- 7. Abnormal Costs**
- 8. Gateway Centre/LLTNPA**
- 9. Maid of the Loch/Watersports Club/Abellio Scotrail**
- 10. Any other business**

Why Mr Mearns, if it was he, and Mairi Bell would both need to attend the one meeting if their involvement was quite separate, as Mr Watson claims, and both consider matters far beyond planning and tourism has still never explained by the LLTNPA. (I did email Heather Reid requesting she to speak to Mr Mearns and ask him to confirm whether he was at this meeting an easy thing for

her to do it but she never responded). The evidence therefore strongly suggests that the LLTNPA's planners were actively involved in the selection of Flamingo Land as preferred developers for the Riverside Site and not just limited to an advisory role.

I will not repeat all the other evidence here but suffice to say that it is impossible to reconcile the contradictions between SE's and Mr Watson's version of events and as a consequence one of them is not telling the truth. I attempted in 2021 and 2023 to get the Conveners of the LLTNPA Board to investigate the claims that had been made in the two media statements quoted above by submitting formal complaints. It would have been easy enough for either James Stuart or his successor as Convener, Heather Reid, to check with their counterparts at SE and establish who was telling the truth. Instead, both Conveners handed responsibility for investigating my complaints to staff managed by Mr Watson. The outcome was never in doubt, as this one sentence response to my second complaint shows:

I am satisfied with the accuracy of the statement attributed to the Chief Executive on the LLTNPA website to which you have referred and see no justification for its removal.

The LLTNPA Board therefore has never made any attempt to explain or resolve the contradictions between the claims of its Chief Executive and the documentation provided by SE but instead appears to have decided to brazen it out.

No-one on the LLTNPA Board challenged this until Sid Perrie was elected in 2021 to represent the people of Balloch and the surrounding area. His attempts to establish the truth, as documented in a series of emails which I have seen, were continually rebuffed. The questions he tried to raise in the six emails before the special planning meeting on the Flamingo Land planning application in September 2024, have now resulted in him being suspended from the LLTNPA Board for six months by the Standards Commission. Those questions have still never been publicly answered.

Mr Watson comments to the Sunday Mail on Mr Perrie's case at the end of his quote are revealing:

We welcome the decision from the Standards Commission for Scotland Public Hearing which found that Sid Perrie had breached multiple sections of the National Park Authority's Code of Conduct and has been suspended for six months as a result. The National Park Authority will continue, as we always have done, to ensure all National Park Authority Board Members are held to the highest standards of public office and comply fully with our established Code of Conduct.

Mr Watson is clearly delighted Mr Perrie is now off his back. With no-one else with power prepared to question his claims and I include MSPs in that his position must now feel more secure than it has for a long time. Mr Watson's statement also helps confirm that LLTNPA senior management are now, like officials elsewhere, using the Code of Conduct in Public Life to control board members and councillors and avoid being held to account ([see here](#)).

In Mr Perrie's case, the Code of Conduct has been used to silence him while Mr Watson continues to make totally unsubstantiated claims to the media. There is nothing ethical about the LLTNPA, the Standards Commission or their decision.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. flamingo land
2. Governance
3. LLTNPA
4. planning

Date Created

February 20, 2026

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