

Friends Give Qualified Support to Former Torpedo Factory Site Planning Application

Thursday 11 January, 2024

The Friends of Loch Lomond and The Trossachs is a long established conservation charity which endeavours to provide for the protection, preservation and promotion of the special qualities of the National Park.

Situated opposite the village of Arrochar, the proposed development overlooks the head of Loch Long, a sea loch whose steep sides are largely clothed in commercial coniferous plantations. Behind the site, the conifer forest rises 300 metres to the lip of the hanging valley separating the craggy slopes of Beinn Narnain and Ben Arthur (The Cobbler). With summits at 884 and 926metres, these two mountains provide a spectacular scenic backdrop to the site. Although not a "Munro", The Cobbler is one of the finest mountains in the Southern Highlands and is justifiably very popular with the mountaineering and hillwalking fraternity.

The site has a history of use as a torpedo testing range dating back over a hundred years and a substantial steel and concrete jetty and some smaller mooring facilities still exist, but much of the area is scarred by the foundations and debris of demolished buildings. This state of dereliction is made still worse by the abundant evidence of many years of fly tipping.

Situated as it is, close to the very heart of the National Park, this is a prominent site which is crying out for remediation. John Urquhart, Chair of the Friends said "Realistically there is no likelihood that the authorities or charities such as ours will ever have the resources to address its many problems and a commercial solution seems to us to be the only practicable way forward. A number of developers have shown a passing interest over the years, but no one so far seems to have been able to assemble the necessary finance and this suggests to us that there could be a role for national and/or local government agencies to assist in some way, perhaps with some of the clear up costs to "kick start" the development process. This has often been the case with brownfield sites elsewhere in Scotland and should be given serious consideration here.

The mixed development proposals are relatively low key and appropriate for this site. We particularly like the plans to recognise the potential of the existing berthing. Given the prominence and quality of its scenic location at the heart of the country's premier National Park, we would be expecting developers and planners to be agreeing on high quality design, using materials and finishes reflecting the status of the location. The site's war time heritage should not be forgotten and we would be looking for this to be referenced prominently within the scheme.

In addition, we believe that businesses which benefit from the valuable natural capital of an environment have a duty to contribute towards maintaining and even enhancing that value. We therefore say that planning permission for such developments should be conditional on businesses contributing regularly to a "Community Natural Capital Benefit Fund" which would be applied first and foremost to help provide for the preservation, promotion, understanding and appreciation of that natural capital, thereby benefiting nature, customers, visitors, communities and businesses. The legal basis of this arrangement should be agreed with appropriate delivery bodies in advance of the granting of permission.

Examples of where "Community Natural Capital Benefit Funds" might be applied include tackling invasive Rhododendron Ponticum which threaten remnants of rare Atlantic oakwood "rainforest" along the shores of Loch long, tackling marine litter which gathers at the head of the loch, maintaining eroding footpaths, and improving and maintaining inadequate visitor management facilities.

Subject to these caveats, we have no objection in principle to the application.

Indeed we would go further and suggest that the development should be given as fair a wind as possible as it has great potential to finally address a "planning sore" which has been allowed to fester for far too long. Over the long term, handled wisely, it will add value to the area's wider natural capital as well as helping to build Arrochar and Tarbet's undoubted adventure tourism hub potential thereby providing much needed economic support to these fragile rural communities".

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Friends of Loch Lomond and The Trossachs

T. 07496 433134

E. [jennifer.plunkett@lochlomond-trossach...](mailto:jennifer.plunkett@lochlomond-trossachs.org)

W. <https://www.lochlomondtrossachs.org.uk>

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