

The Loch Lomond and Trossachs Board Meeting – some rays of hope among the spin

Description

I have now been observing Board Meetings for 18 months and the one on Monday was twice as long as usual (the shortest has been over in 45 minutes), all because there was some debate in public. A welcome development even if the meeting again demonstrated much of what is wrong about how the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority is run.

The meeting started with the Governance and Legal Manager reading out a statement quoting sub-clause of this and clause x of that to justify why item 17 on the agenda, on Vacant Assets, was being held in private. The statement will no doubt be quoted at length in the minute to demonstrate the transparency and superb governance of the LLTNPA. No reference was made of course to the secret Board Briefing session which had taken place that morning or how many other such secret meetings had taken place since the last Board but since these are never minuted, we will never know whether it was legally justified to hold them in secret. The Park seems incapable of grasping that the concerns of transparency campaigners, like myself, is not that the Board discusses the occasional item in private – I've been on a Board, I know its necessary on occasion, even if I often think the outcomes of such meetings could often be made public at a later date – but the majority of this Board's business takes place in private, including the dozen or so meetings that developed the camping byelaw proposals.

As I expected, there was then not a single mention of the Owen McKee case in the discussion of the annual accounts – the LLTNPA is indeed trying to airbrush the glaring failures in how it handled Owen McKee's trading in shares from its history. Why the Board might get away with this was eloquently explained by Lindsay Morrison, the convener of the Audit Committee, later in the meeting when he said that Audit Scotland had never once highlighted to him any issues of concern about the governance of the LLTNPA. This is the same Audit Scotland who have confirmed in writing to me both that they were never informed by the LLTNPA about the Owen McKee case and also that they would have been expected to have been told. While in my professional life I worked with staff from Audit Scotland and had nothing but respect for them, in this case it appears that the lead auditors have failed in their professional duties and the Annual Report is not worth the paper it is written on. I didn't have much sympathy therefore when it was revealed in the meeting that the Scottish Government has decided that Audit Scotland will be replaced as external auditors of the Park. Whether Grant Thornton, a private firm, will be any better remains to be seen but just to get them going here is a list of the serious governance issues concerning LLTNPA which I raised with Audit Scotland and which they apparently failed to discuss with Lindsay Morrison [Letter to Kevin Boyle151221](#)

The Board failed to question other aspects of the annual report, which is full of photos and very little

content, and formally approved it. Some of the spin is enough to make you laugh or cry:

- From the Forward, entitled “Welcome” – whoever welcomed people to a document rather than a place? – Linda McKay, the convener, and Gordon Watson, the Chief Executive “Our Your Park initiative to enhance the camping experience on our most heavily used lochshores took a significant step forward with the approval of the camping management byelaws by Dr Aileen McLeod, Minister.....” The use of “our” and “your” almost says it all but the claim that banning campers is the best way to enhance camping is Orwellian newspeak at its best.
- Then there is this photo to illustrate the work that has been done on the West Highland Way between Rowardennan and Rowchoish

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It left me wondering whether any Board Member has walked the West Highland Way or knows where the boundary of the National Park is.

Linda McKay, the convener, then raised (under the section of the annual accounts where the LLTNPA reports on gender equality) concerns that the Park's Board is predominantly composed of men. Councillor George Freeman challenged her on this, pointing out that most of the Board were democratically elected (unlike Linda McKay) and ultimately it was up to the electorate to take these decisions. Unfortunately, he did not have the temerity to point out that it was this same Linda McKay who sat on the interview panel which selected the most recent Government appointee to the LLTNPA, one Major James Stuart, and that she was the one member of the Board who actually had any power to change this. The quiet effrontery of Linda McKay never ceases to amaze me but then she was playing to the national politicians. What Linda McKay did not say was that though the senior management is presented as balanced within the Annual Accounts, within that team the men have the best paid and the women the lowest paid jobs. She of course has had the chance to influence the structure of that team more than anyone else. Hypocrisy and more spin!

The meeting then started to improve. First there was a report on progress on the Park's camping management proposals which I will deal with in another post. There were no decisions taken and still too much secrecy but reporting on progress in public was still a step forward.

The discussion on litter though was a revelation, a view shared by Peter Jack of the Loch Lomond Association who has been attending Board Meetings with me for the last 18 months. It would be nice to think that some of the debate was spurred by [my post](#) two days ago but Board Members made a number of points that added significantly to that analysis:

- Cllr George Freeman set the context of litter being a national problem, that roadside verges and that of the A82 in particular, were a disgrace and pointed out that Transport Scotland have a major role to play here as they manage trunk roads in Scotland. Spot on!
- Cllr Freeman also asked if the Fixed Penalty Notices for fly tipping which the Park was about to implement would cover landowners (a clear acknowledgement that landowners are a major source of the problems). They will not, but Gordon Watson I think it was stated that the Park could report these cases to Local Authorities who could take action. No-one asked about the obvious failures of the Park to do this
- Cllr Fergus Wood though expressed great disappointment at the lack of progress with Councils about litter collection facilities which had been talked about for years – and which have been highlighted on Parkswatch. Several other Board Members strongly agreed with this. Cllr Wood pointed out that he had never been asked to liaise with his Council to help sort this since he had been on the Board – amazing as this is why I thought Councillors were on the Board but good for Cllr Wood for raising this as a concern – and also that as bin lorries pass all the popular stopping off places in the Park anyway it should not be difficult for the Councils to install litter bins and uplift the litter. Spot on again!
- Someone then had the temerity to suggest the LLTNPA should maybe suggest to the Scottish Government that throwing litter out of cars should become a Road Traffic Offence. I thought this was a great idea but it was quietly deflected by the Convener.
- Colin Bayes, the one Scottish Government appointed Board Member who avoids Government speak (outcomes, governance, missions etc) then reminded the Board that lack of toilets and litter facilities are the two concerns that have been consistently raised in the LLTNPA's visitor surveys.
- David McKenzie raised the issue of litter at the head of Loch Long (again featured on parkswatch) and pointed out that after one storm half of the 3500 items of rubbish collected by the local community originated in adequate sewerage facilities along the loch (tampons etc). Part of the answer therefore should be to engage with Scottish Water. Spot on!
- David McKeown, the local rep for Luss, then asked if the Park rather than just talking about this did something, took the bull by the horns and started to pick up litter. He made the very interesting suggestion that funds be diverted from education to pay for litter collection and justified this because he had done litter picks and found that where places are clean, litter is far less likely to be dropped. While greeted initially with amazed laughter, he kept going and then Colin Bayes came in to support him saying all the research shows there is less litter in clean places. Unfortunately, no-one suggested one way to reconcile education with litter picking would be to allow the LLTNPA's very own Ranger service to remove litter rather than simply leave it at the side of the road.
- Councillor Martin Earl raised questions about how new technology, such as remote cameras, could be used to prevent flytipping in the worst spots (an obvious solution to the huge fly tip on Loch Long at the old torpedo station)

- Various members asked about how Fixed Penalty Notices for littering would be enforced and were strongly supportive of the educative rather than punitive approach.

Four things struck me about this discussion:

- All the ideas and the debate came from Councillors and locally elected representatives, not the Scottish Government nominees.
- That the implications of the discussion are that camping byelaws are not the answer to anything (the answers are about education, infrastructure and targetted enforcement directed to people who do not respond to an educative approach). The question is when will the obviously knowledgeable Board Members who are able to think critically realise this and say enough is enough, there are far better and more effective ways to deal with irresponsible campers/litterers?
- It did not lead to a single new decision. I was left unclear at the end of the discussion what if anything would happen apart from staff being asked to go back to Councils and try harder to work with them (which is very difficult when as Cllr Freeman pointed out West Dunbartonshire Council is facing £11m of cuts this year and next). Linda McKay resisted a couple of suggestions that the LLTNPA should write to the Government suggesting what they could change – which to my mind is exactly what our National Parks should be doing. Acting as advocates for the changes needed in the way our countryside is managed.
- That part of the reason for the Park's inability to address litter issues is that there is no proper budget for this and without budgets, nothing happens.

The final revelation in the meeting was that the secret Board Briefing session that morning had been about risk. The camping byelaw proposals were identified on the Park's risk management register as the single greatest risk facing the LLTNPA so this was almost certainly an indication that yet more secret Board discussions are taking place on camping. It probably explains too why there was so much less discussion at the meeting on litter than on the Your Park proposals (which should be the subject of my next LLTNPA post).

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. Camping bye laws
2. Governance
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