

The post truth world of the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park

Description



Sign in centre of Balmaha (see below). Park Rangers have passed this sign on an almost daily basis for years but no-one from the LLTNPA ever thought to challenge it

I have now had responses to two of the issues I took up with the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park after the appearance of Gordon Watson, their Chief Executive, on the Out of Doors programme on National Parks early in the New Year and which I covered in a post at the time ([see here](#)).

The first issue, I took up with Gordon Watson directly by email. Here is my question and the LLTNPA reply, which they have dealt with – as is their way – as an Environmental Information Response:

“On the Out of Doors programme broadcast on Saturday when Mark Stephen put it to you that there are lots of no signs, first you disputed this and then you said *“some signs are put up by landowners that shouldn’t be there”*. Can you please advise me first where these signs are, second what the LLTNPA has been doing about them as access authority and third whether your Planning and Access Committee is fully aware of the signs you referred to?”

The Park Authority’s CEO has confirmed that the reference he made to signage in the course of the ‘Out of Doors’ programme broadcast was a general point he was making about signage issues, he was not referring to any specific sign. Accordingly I have to advise under R10(4)(a) of the EIRs that there is no relevant information held.

So, in respect to Mr Watson’s claim that “some signs are put up by landowners” it turns out that he had no specific sign in mind and indeed, what’s even more telling, the LLTNPA holds no information about “No” signs put up by landowners. In other words Mr Watson’s statement was completely made up – it bore no relation at all to the truth. Funnily enough I could have told Mr Watson of one sign on east Loch Lomond (see above). I don’t think though that this sign contradicts the general point made by Mark Stephen and Ewan McIlraith, that the first things that hits the visitor on east Loch Lomond are the “No” signs and most of them are put there by or with the agreement of the National Park Authority – a point Gordon Watson was trying to deny.

I took the second issue up with Linda McKay, the LLTNPA convener (the letter is pasted below), because one of the duties of the LLTNPA Board is to hold its Chief Executive to account and that, to my mind, should include ensuring any public statements he makes bears some resemblance to the truth. His claim that *“measures we are taking are purely about heavily used areas”* was clearly utter rubbish.

Instead of apologising for this – and in the heat of an interview it is very difficult to get your words right – I received [COMP 2017-008 Complaint Response](#) reply from the Park’s Governance Manager (who no longer signs her letters so I am unclear if this really was sent by Ms Amanda Aikman or not). Here is an extract from my response which is now being dealt with as a stage 2 complaint about Mr Watson:

“it is completely irrelevant that Mr Watson was not speaking in detail about “levels of usage”. What he said was that the “measures we are taking are purely about managing heavily used areas”. “Purely” is a very strong word. If Mr Watson had said “mainly about” I would have had no complaint but he said “purely” which is not true. I stated to Linda McKay in my letter that I appreciated words could slip out in interviews and suggested that if the words were not intended, if Mr Watson apologised I would not pursue a complaint. Since the LLTNPA has chosen to deal with this as a complaint, I can only assume Mr Watson is not prepared to

apologise, although I note in your response there is no indication of whether you have actually asked Mr Watson whether he believes his statement was correct or not. I can therefore only assume that Mr Watson is standing by a statement which is clearly false."

I have little faith that the LLTNPA will investigate this properly because under their procedures complaints about the Chief Executive are investigated by a fellow Director – in other words someone whom Mr Watson directly line manages. This is wrong. There are very few people brave enough to find against their boss. In my view it should be Board Members who investigate complaints against the National Park Chief Executives as part of their role of holding the post-holder to account. That will never happen while Linda McKay is convener but needs to change once James Stuart becomes convener in March.

Previously where the LLTNPA has failed to uphold my complaints, I have been unable to take them to the Scottish Public Service Ombudsman because in order to do this you need to have suffered a personal injustice or hardship (e.g the public authority has caused you some harm). What is shocking is that if you complain on matters of principle or governance to the National Park you have no redress. However, and the point of outlining my complaint in public in this post, is its my reputation as a commentator on National Parks that is now at stake. The camping byelaws are not purely about heavily managed areas as Mr Watson himself wrote in a paper for the secret Board Briefing session on 16th June 2014 ([see here](#)) released after the intervention of the Information Commissioner:

4.4 Proposed Areas for a Byelaw Proposal

Briefings to Members have focussed on the local negative pressures currently occur and where there is a need to think about more expansive that;

- a. Potential displacement is addressed and
- b. The camping management zones are at risk of confusing visitors with too many and multiple signage.

So, if whoever has been allocated to investigate my complaint fails to do so properly and to take account evidence such as this, I will take this complaint to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman on the grounds that I have suffered “personal injustice”. If they still maintain such a complaint is outwith their remit, I think that adds to the case that the law needs to change. The public need to have some way to hold Chief Executives of Public Authorities to account when their Boards fail to do so.

Addendum – email to LLTNPA convener

Dear Ms McKay,

You may be aware that Gordon Watson was on the Out of Doors programme on Saturday and while in my view he made a number of misleading statements, one was clearly wrong:

“measures we are taking are purely about heavily used areas”.

He said this in the first part of the programme in which he was featured (which starts after 7 minutes 53 seconds).

The reason this statement is not true is that:

a) the camping byelaws clearly cover areas which are not “heavily used” . Data held by the Park’s disproves this including the maps that were presented to the secret Board Meetings in September and October 2013 ([see here](#)) and Ranger records which have been made public as a result of Freedom of Information requests (which show very low numbers of people camping at Loch Arklet for example). Mr Watson, as Chief Executive, is fully aware of this – as is the Park Board which has clearly stated that the reasons why the byelaws cover some areas is not that they are heavily used but because of anticipated displacement (the justification used for Loch Arklet for example). He has therefore deliberately misled the public.

b) if the measures the LLTNPA were taking was purely about heavily used areas, the LLTNPA would not now be building a campsite at Loch Chon, which is inaccessible and currently where very few people camp

c) if the measures the LLTNPA were taking were about heavy use, as Mr Watson's statement implies, then the Park would be allowing some use to continue. You are of course doing that in some areas, including the four permits that will be allowed on the lochshore by your own house, but there is not provision for a single permit along the shores of west Loch Lomond (which was not in any case one of the most heavily used areas) which again shows that the byelaws are not "purely about heavily used areas".

I am aware that interviews can be difficult and its easy to say things that might not be right and therefore if the National Park is prepared to issue a statement apologising for Mr Watson's misleading statement that would satisfy me otherwise I would like to pursue this as a formal complaint. As I have previously stated to you I believe there are serious deficiencies in the Park's complaints procedure in that complaints against the Chief Executive are investigated by people managed by him which cannot be right and again ask that if you proceed to investigate this as a complaint, rather than issue a public apology, that this is conducted by Board Members.

Yours Sincerely,

Nick Kempe

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. access rights
2. complaints
3. Freedom of Information
4. Governance
5. LLTNPA

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