

The Ledard farm campsite planning application and conflicts of interest within the National Park

Description



Ledard Farm, owned by Councillor Fergus Wood, situated by the start of the popular southern approach to the National Park (Ledard burn to left)

At the beginning of March Councillor Fergus Wood, owner of Ledard Farm and a member of the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority, submitted a planning application to develop a small

camp and chalet park on the shore of Loch Ard. Some of the documents associated with the application were published on the LLTNPA website in the second half of March ([see here](#)). While there is a need for more campsites in the National Park and there are several positive aspects to this application, it does raise a number of serious questions about the relationship between Board Members personal interests and the public interest and how this is being managed by the LLTNPA. This posts explores the issues.

The positives



The proposed campsite will be accessed off layby (right of photo) and be located by line of trees which are growing by the Ledard burn

On entering the Trossachs West “Camping Management” zone, what is striking is that most of north shore of Loch Ard is uncampable – though not in the mind of Park officials who are so divorced from reality that they believe people can camp on rocks and in water, About the only good place for camping on the north shore is in the fields in front of Ledard Farm which are owned by Cllr Wood.



Most of the north shore of Loch Ard is uncampable and was hardly ever used for camping – it did not become a camping ban being extended to cover this area though, more evidence of irrationality of the LLTNPA.

Cllr Wood, unlike other Board Members, is obviously not against camping. Indeed, the proposed campsite will be in full sight of his house. What is more the LLTNPA, who claim they have been trying to persuade private landowners to develop new camping provision within the National Park, have had almost no success in doing so. Cllr Wood, therefore, by submitting this application is setting an example to other landowners. He is clearly not part of the NIMBY brigade – the contrast between what he appears to want to happen on Loch Ard and the exclusion of campers from the area around Loch Venachar House, the residence of the former convener Linda McKay, is striking ([see here](#)).



The Trossachs West management zone runs from Loch Ard to Loch Arklet and contains only two official places to camp and no campervan provision

What is also the case, if you accept the logic of the camping byelaws and the LLTNPA's attempt to ban camping under access rights from the lochshores, is that Cllr Wood's proposal addresses a serious shortfall of places to camp in the Trossachs West "camping management zone". Apart from the con at Loch Chon – where the LLTNPA has made no provision for campervans – the only other place people are allowed to camp (campervans can stop off as long as its on what counts at the verge of a road) is the permit area on the southern side of Loch Ard (which according to someone who visited and commented on parkswatch was not fit for use on 1st March). Under the logic of the camping ban therefore, and I expect the LLTNPA to make this argument in their evaluation of the planning application, the proposed site helps reduce a shortfall of places to camp in Strathard.



In landscape terms there are questions about developing a campsite here – its a more open site than the site plan (above) illustrates suggests – and yet another chalet development would appear

inappropriate. However, the use of the word “chalets” appears misleading if the photos on the plan illustrate what is intended (camping pods would be a more appropriate term) and there are, in planning terms, a number of positive aspects to this development. First, Cllr Wood has included accommodation for a site manager in the reception building, a contrast to the tourist developers in Balmaha who have failed to provide sufficient staff accommodation ([see here](#)). This is also something the LLTNPA made no provision for at Loch Chon, their 26 place campsite just up the road. Second, the planning application states the proposed toilets will be available for public use – a boon for walkers setting up Ben Venue – and a positive step to addressing the lack of public toilets in the Park – the number one issue that came up on visitor surveys until the LLTPNA stopped asking about this. It would be good if the toilets could be open all year, unlike the LLTNPA’s own facilities.

Cllr Wood also set an example to other Board Members when, at the Board Meetings in both October and December 2016, he declared an interest “as a result of a potential future planning application” (the one that is now being considered by the LLTNPA) and then left the meeting for the “Your Park” items. This was the first time I had heard a Board Member declare an interest and then decide they should *not* take part in discussion. Cllr Wood’s actions contrast with those of his former convener, Linda McKay, and Board Members Martin Earl and Owen McKee, who not only failed to declare they owned property in a management zone at the meeting in April 2015, which approved the camping byelaws (Cllr Wood was not present at that meeting) but appear never once to have left a meeting. What is highly ironic is that the one Board Member who has shown himself NOT to be a NIMBY has excluded himself from meetings but other Board Members who live in the camping management zones have contributed to the LLTNPA narrative on campers (irresponsible louts who always leave a mess) which has fed NIMBYIST views and never once recognised this as a conflict of interest. In my view, Cllr Wood’s action rather shows up the corruption at the heart of how the camping byelaws were developed.

Private interests and the public interest

Although Cllr Wood appears to be well ahead of most of his fellow members on the LLTNPA Board in being open about his interests, the planning application provides a number of reasons for the public to be concerned.

17. Planning Service Employee/Elected Member

Are you / the applicant / the applicant's spouse or partner
elected member of the planning authority?

Or, are you / the applicant / the applicant's spouse or part
service or elected member of the planning authority?

If you have answered yes please provide details:

not applicable

Extract from planning application for Ledard farm campsite as it (still) appeared 10th April

First, the application clearly does NOT state Cllr Wood is a Board Member. Now I am sure this is just a mistake, but the whole point about including this section on all planning applications is to ensure transparency. Board Members should be checking what is submitted in their name – it appears Cllr Wood has failed to do this and what's more LLTNPA staff have failed to pick up the error in the ten days it took for them to publish the form. Board Members have had endless training in declaration of interest over the last year and still neither they nor Park officials appear to be able to get even the basics right. I am afraid its yet more evidence about basic failures in governance at the heart of the LLTNPA.

Second, and I believe significant, the application shows that that LLTNPA staff provided pre-application advice to Cllr Wood back in September 2015.

6. Pre-Application Discussion

Have you received any advice from the planning authority in

If yes, please provide details about the advice below:

In what format was the advice given? Mee

Have you agreed or are you discussing a Processing Agreement

Please provide a description of the advice you were given and

Name: Date:

Guidance with regard to submission of formal p

This raises two questions.

First transparency. There is no information on the LLTNPA planning portal about what advice was given to Cllr Wood prior to this application (despite the reference number) but its not unreasonable to suppose the current application reflects advice from Park officials and they are therefore likely to recommend to the Planning Committee (all applications by Board Members have to be decided by the Committee rather than officials) that the application be approved. Its in the public interest therefore that all communications from Cllr Wood or his agent and the LLTNPA's responses should be publicly available to ensure Cllr Wood, as a Board Member, was not being favoured in an way. Related to

this, any consideration of the application also needs to state clearly whether there has been any discussion between the LLTNPA and Cllr Wood about financing the costs of this proposed development, whether this Cllr Wood was asking for financial assistance from the LLTNPA or conversely if the LLTNPA put any money on the table.

Second, the date of the pre-application advice, September 2015, tells us Cllr Wood has been considering this application for sometime. While the two public Board Meetings which considered the camping byelaws pre-date that, in 2016 there were no less than six secret Board Meetings, four of which considered the byelaws and camping development plan. As a result of an FOI request I have ascertained that the LLTNPA did ask for declarations of interest at these meetings ([see here for example](#)) BUT, because the LLTNPA claims no minutes are taken of these meetings, its not possible to tell either who attended or if they declared an interest. This is wrong. It also betrays the double think behind how the LLTNPA operates, on the one hand they claim these secret Board Meetings don't take decisions but then at the same time they ask Board Members to declare interests at those meetings. There is no way of the public knowing therefore if Cllr Wood took part in the secret Board discussions about campsite plans about which he had an interest or not. This should be a matter of public record. It would show either that Cllr Wood did the right thing from the start, and did not take part in these discussions, or else that his departure from public meetings was for show and that behind the scenes he had been contributing to discussions which impacted on his private interest. There is therefore a serious issue here about the public interest, which while in this case is about Cllr Wood, is actually much wider than that, its about all Board Members and how the LLTNPA Board should operate.

The reason why its important to know about Cllr Wood's involvement in Board discussions about the camping byelaws is they have an obvious impact on the financial viability of his proposed campsite. Demand for the campsite will be influenced by where people can camp nearby and, while the planning proposal can be seen as a way of meeting a shortfall in provision locally, the converse to this is the way the West Trossachs Camping Management zone has been designed means that, if approved, people will in effect be channelled by the LLTNPA into Cllr Wood's campsite. This is most clearly seen in the case of campervans, where there is NOT one permit place for campervans in the whole of Strathard. This means that any campervanner who did not know their rights would be likely to end up using one of the four motorhome places proposed for the Ledard Farm campsite, benefitting Cllr Wood.

Again, to give credit to Cllr Wood, he recognised this in respect of the planning application the LLTNPA made to itself for the Loch Chon campsite last year:

FW declared an interest as a landowner within a camping management zone in respect of item 4 North Car Park off B829 Loch Chon as he has an interest in loch shore campsite provision on his land. FW advised that he would leave the meeting for Agenda Item 4

While the minute shows Fergus Wood left the meeting, it also shows not a single other Board Member questioned the lack of motorhome provision at Loch Chon. This I find very strange: the effect will be to channel motorhomes to Cllr Wood's campsite if his planning application is approved. It seems to me that in order for the LLTNPA and its staff to avoid any suspicion of collusion in favour of Cllr Wood – and I am not suggesting he has had any part in this, indeed being pro-access the decision at Loch Chon might have been better had he remained at the meeting! – the LLTNPA need to open up the Loch Chon campsite to campervans.

The conflict of interest issues are even broader than this and concern Board Members contributing to the development of policies which have a direct impact on their own interests. Whatever stage he decided he needed to leave meetings, Cllr Wood would appear to have taken part in policy developments that will facilitate his proposed campsite at Ledard Farm. This is not just about the camping byelaws, although if he took any part in the development of the idea of camping management zones (before considering whether he should develop a campsite) that could be seen to have contributed to his private interests. Its also about the development of the Park Development Plan which was approved last year. In that plan, planning applications for developments in the countryside will be considered in certain circumstances, one of which is if they contribute to the National Park Partnership Plan – which includes new camping infrastructure. I somehow doubt Cllr Wood excluded himself from every Board discussion which has resulted in the current policy position of the LLTNPA which will be used to determine this planning application and which might benefit him.

Does this matter? While I am sure Cllr Wood would claim at the time of those discussions he had no idea that he was going to propose a camping development at Ledard Farm, once he did start to think about this, it seems to me that a conflict of interest was created and the question then should have been not just about whether Cllr Wood would absent himself from specific discussions, but whether he should have continued to take part in more general policy development which impacted on his interests.

In a Public Authority with a different ethos, other Board Members might well have started asking questions and Cllr Wood might have, for example, stepped down from the Planning Committee. This is the second major planning application Cllr Wood has made to the LLTNPA – the first was in 2013 for the Ledard hydro scheme. Again, while he took no part in the meeting which determined that application, Cllr Wood had, as a planning committee member, been involved in developing LLTNPA policy and practice around hydro schemes. Its possible to see this either as Cllr Wood setting a good example, doing himself what the LLTNPA was asking others to do, or as a conflict of interest.

In my view, its fine for Board Members to start practicing what they preach but, in any case where they might then benefit from this financially – in other words their business interests are clearly impacted on by the decisions being taken by the National Park Authority – the only way they can remain squeaky clean is to step down. While I respect Cllr Wood for his lack of NIMBYISM and preparedness to

welcome visitors who may not spend lots of money, his business interests appear so entwined with what the National Park is doing that I don't believe his current position is tenable.

With the local elections coming up, there is an opportunity for Cllr Wood to stand down voluntarily and for Stirling Council to replace Cllr Wood as one of their two nominees on the LLTNPA Board. The much bigger issue however is how do establish a National Park Board which has a clear moral compass and sound governance.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. access rights
2. camping
3. Camping bye laws
4. Development Plan
5. Freedom of Information
6. Governance
7. LLTNPA
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Author

nickkempe