

What is the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority Board for?

Description

10.	Board members agreed as a matter of urgency the Chief Executive and Convener open discussions with the Minister to reduce Board size and suspend the appointment of the Local authority nominees and Scottish Government appointment until the Minister receives a formal proposal from the Board. (GW/JS)	Scott confir prima requi of Co the n chan appro Parlia intent chan legisl Comm opera enha Boar
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Extract from paper on "Matters Arising" for Board Meeting 18th September, the decision as recorded

An extraordinary discussion took place at the end of the June Board meeting of the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority in which Councillor James Robb, one of several councillors who will be leaving the Board this Autumn ([see here](#)), proposed that the number of Board Members should be cut. The reason for the proposal basically was that he felt there was very little for Board members to do, consequently the Board could operate with far fewer members and cutting numbers would save

money.

There followed a very open discussion â?? which would never have taken place in public under the aegis of the previous convener Linda McKay (all credit to new convener James Stuart) â?? in which basically Board numbers agreed with the proposal (it was clear during the discussion that Cllr Robb had discussed the proposal with some of the other councillors on the Board). Hence the decision of the meeting, recorded in the minute, to approach the Minister and ask for a suspension of new appointments until numbers on the Board could be reviewed.

Unsurprisingly the proposal has been rejected by the Scottish Government. Our National Park legislation requires the Board to be composed of three types of members, those appointed by Ministers, those nominated by local authorities and directly elected members and the numbers of the three categories of Board Member to balance. While reducing numbers of councillors and Ministerial nominees on the Board would be relatively simple, reducing the number of directly elected members would require electoral boundaries to be completely withdrawn, a complex business. Also, I suspect the Scottish Government wants to avoid opening up the possibility of any debate in the Scottish Parliament about new or existing National Parks which would be created if the existing legislation was to be amended.

While I welcomed the open discussion and the honesty of Board Members â?? its not many people who voluntarily vote to make the posts they are leaving redundant â?? what was depressing was that not a single Board Member made a case for keeping Board Members, based not just on what they do at present but on what they could and should be doing. It appeared from the discussion that Board Members feel they serve no useful purpose.

Now I can understand why that might have happened. First, when Mike Cantlay was chair and Fiona Logan was Chief Executive, Board Members were firmly told they were not to get involved in operational matters. So Board Members who knew about footpaths, were told not to support staff on this and those that knew about conservation were told to keep clear of that while those simply with an interest in their area were also told to keep at arms length. The reason for having Board Members with expertise or democratically elected and nominated Board Members disappeared.

Second, to keep Board Members occupied, Mike Cantlay and Fiona Logan then introduced the practice of monthly briefing sessions and seminars as a way for Board Members to earn their Â£200 a day. These meetings, rather than helping Board Members to speak freely, actually became a way of controlling them and under the next convener Linda McKay were turned into secret decision making forums which among other things developed the camping byelaws. The National Park Board became increasingly autocratic and the result has been Board Members have been left unable to see a role for

themselves.

What is very sad though is that Board Members have become so neutered that even under the new more open regime of James Stuart they cannot see a useful role for themselves. I believe there are plenty of opportunities for the Board both to start showing leadership and also to start putting proper governance arrangements in place. I think this should be based around a number of areas of activity:

1. Board Members should know what is happening on the ground and being done in their name. This means them getting out to see everything from the hydro tracks that are destroying the National Park landscape to the inappropriate areas designated as "camping permit zones". This would enable them to make informed inputs into policy development and to scrutinise papers properly. The current Board is totally failing to do this, is disconnected from what is happening on the ground and as a result cannot do its job properly.
2. Elected Board Members, both councillors and those directly elected, should be engaging with the local communities they serve and helping to articulate community concerns and aspirations. That they are failing to do so I think was epitomised by the case of former Councillor Fergus Wood, who was resoundly defeated in the last election, in no small part because he had pressed ahead with a proposal for a campsite without consulting local people. The same elected representatives for Strathard totally failed to listen to the concerns of the local community about the size of the Loch Chon campsite. When push comes to shove, the democratically elected representatives have always listened to their Chief Executive before the communities they serve. The large democratic deficit in the National Park needs to be closed and that will take time and effort.
3. Board Members should be engaging with national recreational and conservation interests - the people with expertise in the Park's statutory objectives to promote public enjoyment and conservation. Had they been doing so I don't think we would have ended up with the camping byelaws or the land management practices which still dominate much of the National Park and are destroying its conservation value (whether intensive forestry with clearfell or overgrazing by sheep and deer). Again, this will take time and effort.
4. Board Members should be taking a leadership role to ensure effective partnership working with other public sector organisations. I find it amazing that Councillor Members, having called a year ago for more effective working with local authorities to address litter (noted again in the minutes as an issue) do not appear to have done anything to assist with this process. They appear to have no idea of how to do this and to have lost sight of the reason they form a third of the membership is to ensure effective joint work with their councils. If the structures aren't there, it's their job to create them and they need to start doing so. However, the issue of effective co-ordination goes far beyond local authorities. The Board needs to have members meeting and networked with other public authorities such as the Forestry Commission, SNH and SEPA and to have links with delivery organisations like Sustrans and Transport Scotland. If they started doing so, the National Park might have a chance of delivering a partnership plan which made a real difference, instead of each sector just carrying on as it is managing what is left of ever decreasing public sector budgets.

It will be interesting to see if the Board Meeting next week has any discussion in public about creating a meaningful role for Board Members. It appear from the fact that senior staff have marked this matter arising as "Closed" that they don't want this to happen.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. Forestry Commission Scotland
2. Governance
3. LLTNPA
4. Scottish Government
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