

The LLTNPA – the democratic deficit widens

Description

Our National Parks Authorities are two small cogs in the much wider structures which govern life in Scotland and subject to similar pressures and influences as other such organisations, whether austerity or the ever increasing trend towards centralisation of government in Scotland. Many of the comments made by speakers at the “Act as if we own the place” seminar at the weekend ([see here](#)) could have been about our National Parks and epitomise what has been going wrong:

“The state of local democracy in Scotland? Short story – not good.” (Andy Wightman MSP)

“We have a history of rampant municipal corruption.” (Andy Wightman MSP)

“The collapse of democracy in Scotland is the collapse of small town democracy.” (Lesley Riddoch)

“The formal and informal systems operate in parallel universes. The formal system is large, funded, anonymous and unlovely.”

“We need a ‘new municipalism’, participative as well as representative, relational as well as transactional.” (Neil McInroy)

The democratic deficit in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority has, in my view, been significantly worse than that in the Cairngorms National Park Authority in the last few years with the nadir being the 13 secret Board Meetings that developed the camping byelaws. When James Stuart replaced Linda McKay as convener of the LLTNPA just over a year ago that provided an opportunity for change and, after he agreed to meet with me and fellow access campaigners, I had hopes his election might mark a turning point in how the Park operated. Based on the evidence of the last Board Meeting and Freedom of Information responses, I think any attempts at real change have now run into the sand.

Initially the LLTNPA under James Stuart’s convenership appeared to have ended the practice of holding a business meeting before every Board Meeting (these in effect appear to have taken decisions in private before an “open” meeting was held for show in the afternoon) and reduced the number of secret meetings. At the last LLTNPA Board Meeting, however, ([see here – item 8](#)) a new governance structure was approved without any significant debate which REDUCES the number of meeting which will take place in public. Instead of FOUR public Board Meetings a year:

There will be 3 Board meetings (March, June and December) with full standard agendas. There will be two further Board days focussed on strategy and Board development.

Subsequent correspondence with James Stuart has established that:

In responding to your second point, I can confirm that the Board meetings continue to be public meetings.....I do not envisage that the strategy meetings will be public meetings, however this will depend upon the agenda/business at that meeting.

This I believe is a major step backwards and incidentally I found it incredible that not a single Board Member asked about whether these meetings were to be in public or not. Perhaps they already knew? FOI response [EIR 2018-003 Appendix A](#). shows that the LLTNPA Board had met to discuss governance at three secret Board Business sessions since James Stuart had taken over. I am not against internal meetings on issues such as governance but the paper that was then presented to the open public Board Meeting did not contain even a summary of the discussions or the implications of the changes. That in my view is unacceptable.

The decision to reduce the number of main Board Meetings is also, in governance terms, totally incoherent. The same governance item contained new terms of reference for the Audit Committee [Board_20180312_Agenda-Item-8_2-and-Appendix-1_Terms-of-Reference-Audit-Risk-Committee](#) which stated that:

3.2. The Committee will report to the Board verbally each quarter, and with a written annual report, summarising its conclusions from the work it has done during the year. The Board remains responsible and accountable for the financial, organisational and business performance of the Park Authority.

So, how can the Audit Committee report four times a year to the main Board if there are now only three public meetings? Amazingly, not a single member of the Board or Audit Committee thought to ask how the links between the Board and its sub-groups would work if the number of public meetings were reduced.

Its worse than that though. Without any comment or explanation the number of Planning and Access sub-committee meetings have been reduced from 12 to 8 ([see here for meeting dates](#)). Parkswatch has continually raised concerns about the Planning and Access Committee's delegation of decisions on developments such as hill tracks which have massive landscape impacts to staff (unlike in the CNPA) and its failure to ensure proper monitoring of restoration and enforcement takes place. The implications of the Board Governance papers is that the LLTNPA have decided to do nothing to bring planning back under more democratic control.

At the same time while the publication of the meeting dates of the Delivery Group and Chairs Group is a small step forward for transparency, there are no proposals to publish papers and minutes for these groups. The CNPA has a finance and delivery group and all its papers and minutes are on the public record ([see here for example](#)). There is no justification for the LLTNPA being any different – unfortunately the review of governance appears to have done nothing to address basic failures in accountability and transparency and indeed appears to have handed even more power to unaccountable senior staff members. I don't think that is a coincidence. Its fits with the trend in Scottish Government to centralise power through unelected officials and, besides the fewer public meetings, the one real change to governance approved in the papers was to bring the terms of reference of the Audit and Risk Committee more in line with the Scottish Government.

So how can we increase democracy and accountability in our National Parks?

“We have three values for local democracy. Free and open elections. Citizen involvement and debate, both person to person and via critical media. Trustful and transparent decision making.” (

Mette Gundersen – Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities – at the “Act As If We Own the Place seminar)

We need to challenge the democratic deficit in both our National Parks – accepting that the LLTNPA is far worse than the CNPA – and for those who live in and care about our National Parks to start “to act as if we own the place”. There is no one right way to improve our National Parks but we should focus of changing what is clearly wrong. The lack of public meetings – and the failure for example to broadcast these meeting to the public so they can see what is being done in our name – is one of the first things which need to change.

Category

1. Cairngorms
2. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. CNPA
2. Freedom of Information
3. Governance
4. LLTNPA
5. planning

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