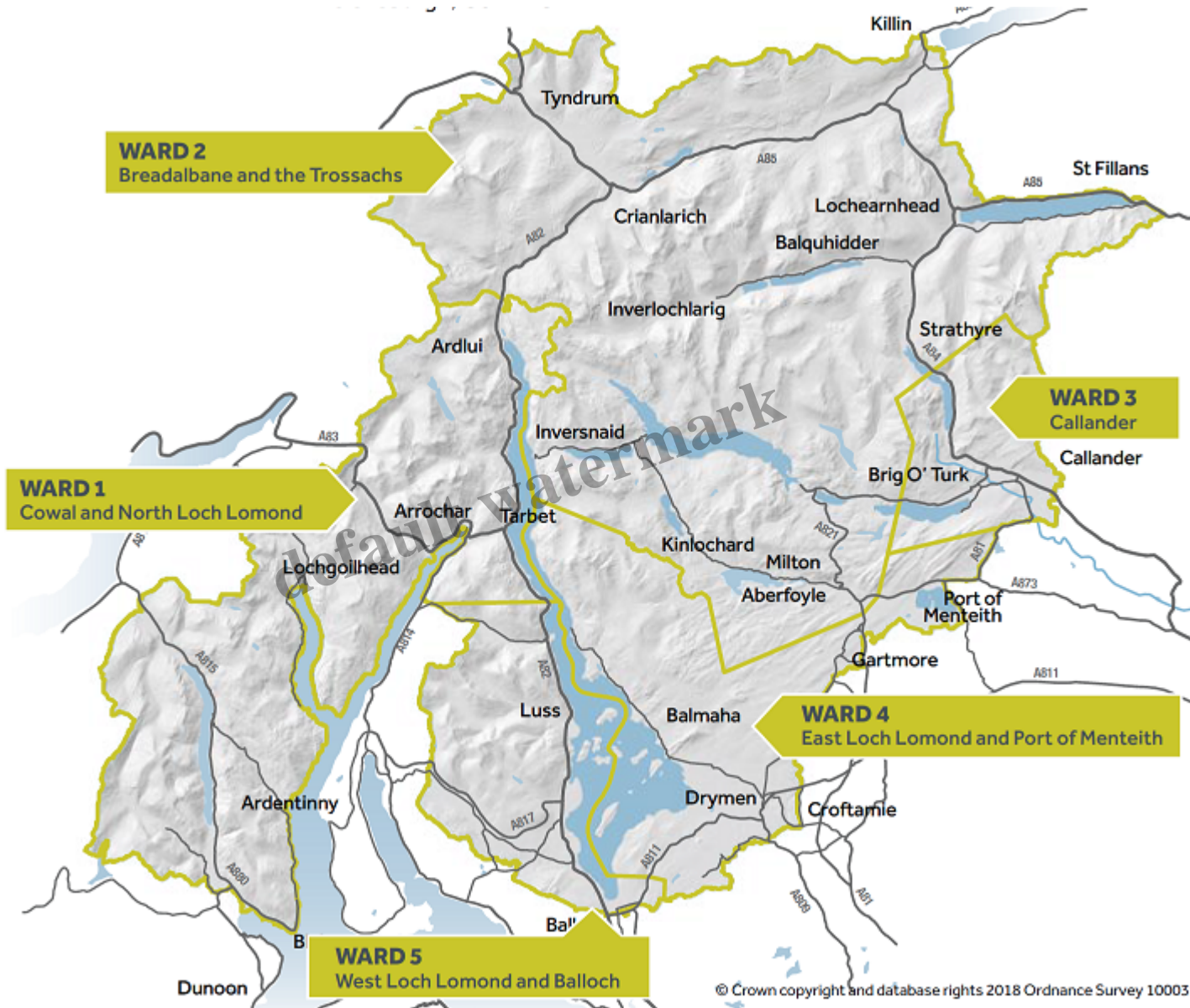# The Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park local member elections

Description

Yesterday nominations opened for elections to the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority Board, the only scheduled local elections for Scotland this year. (The next Cairngorms National Park Authority direct elections will be in 2019). One third of the board of each of our National Park Authorities is made up of members directly elected by residents of the National Park. Any adult can stand, whether a resident of the National Park or not, but need to be nominated by 10 residents of the ward in which they intend to stand. Nominations close on 31st May and the results of the election, which are decided by postal ballot, will be counted and announced on Thursday 5th July. This post takes a look at how this important element of democracy in our National Parks is working at present

and what could be done to make our National Parks more democratic.

The role of locally elected LLTNPA members

There was nothing on the agenda of the last LLTNPA Board Meeting about these elections, though the local member for Callender, David Warnock, did state at the end of the meeting he was not intending to stand again. This lack of ANY strategic discussion was strange given the extraordinary unscheduled discussion at the Board Meeting last June (see here) in which Board Members asked the new Convener, James Stuart, to write to the Minister suggesting the size of the Board be reduced because there was not enough work for Board Members to do. One might have thought therefore there would have been some public discussion before the election papers went out indicating Board Members would be paid for three days work a month (at just under £200 a day). Given that public main Board Meeting are now to be reduced to three a year, there are some legitimate questions about how elected Board Members will spend the other 33 days they will be paid for each year (see here). Maybe this will be answered once the results of the governance review currently being undertaken by the LLTNPA become public?

While following the Board Meeting, the LLTNPA has been promoting the elections locally (see here) – which is welcome – its hard to see how much interest in the elections will be stimulated when the role of Board Members remains so unclear. Further lack of clarity about the specific role of directly elected members is evident in the election information:

"It is important to us that our Board membership reflects Scottish society. We welcome candidates that would contribute to the diversity of our Board."

That sounds ok till you consider that the electorate of c18,000 people who live in the National Park are a small section of Scottish Society and cannot be representative of Scotland as a whole. While residents of the five wards in the National Park have a right to nominate someone from outside their area to represent them – and I personally would welcome it if any local community nominated someone say who worked in the National Park but could not afford to live there – I do not believe that the primary role of directly elected members can be to be representative of wider society.   Their role, and the reason they make up a third of the National Park Board, is to represent local interests. It is for example pretty unrealistic – not to say undemocratic – to expect local residents to elect someone who represents say immigrant or Black and Ethnic Minority Communities in Scotland.   So, while I welcome the statement from James Stuart on the Park's election page that:

"It is important to us that our Board membership reflects not only our local communities but the country as a whole, to ensure that people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds are represented.

as the Board Convener, it is, I believe, really his job to try and ensure that when the Scottish Government appointees stand down later this year, they are replaced (he will be on the interviewpanel) by people who are more representative of Scottish Society and address any gaps that resultfrom the exercise of local democracy.   I look forward to him persuading Scottish Ministers that theyneed to appoint someone to represent the working class communities from the Clyde conurbation whohave been most affected by the camping ban!

The muddle, though, about directly elected members goes even deeper and is found at the heart of our National Park legislation. This, on the one hand states that locally elected representatives are appointed by Ministers, *"Five members of the Authority are to be appointed as local members",* but on the other:

(1) In a contested election, when the result of the poll has been ascertained, the returning officer shall forthwith–

(a) declare to be elected the candidate to whom the majority of votes has been given;

Elected or appointed?   There to represent and be accountable to the community who elected them or accountable to Scottish Government Ministers with all that implies?

The weakness of locally elected Board members

Unfortunately in the past locally elected Board Members have been sidelined – and I have this on good authority from several independent sources – treated as second class and voting fodder to endorse what is proposed by the Scottish Government nominees. They have had very little influence over what happens and the appointment of an elected member as vice-convener appears to have been purely tokenistic.   The key roles on the National Park Board are all filled by Scottish Government appointments (Convener – James Stuart; Planning Convener – Petra Biberbach; Audit – Lindsay Morrison; and the semi-formal Delivery Group – Colin Baynes). Quite a contrast to the Cairngorms National Park Authority where the Convener is a local councillor, chair of planning a locally elected member etc.   All this helps explain why last June the locally elected members supported the Councillors who suggested there were too many people on the Board and in effect voted for their own abolition.

Without any effective power, its not surprising that interest in the National Park elections in the past has been low.   The turnout for the last elections election results 2014 was:

Ward 1 29.76%

Ward 2 38.26%

Ward 3 39.55%

Ward 4 41.03%

Ward 5 28.37%

This compares with a turnout last year at local government elections of 46.9%. There is a clear

difference in turnout between the more affluent eastern part of the National Park and the poorer west where only candidates stood in each of Wards 1 and 2.   I think this is an indication that people do not stand or vote because they do not see the point – a problem for democracy in the National Park which I would be surprised if James Stuart's exhortations to people to get involved changes.

What is needed are meaningful elections where important issues are debated and the electorate is given a real choice. Unfortunately, the electoral system in our National Parks limits the ability of candidates to stand on issues. While candidates can issue a statement which is included with voting papers when they are sent out to the electorate, election expenses are limited to £100 (unchanged since our National Park was created).   This might just about get you 1 x A4 leaflet to put through every house door (average 3400 constituents) but won't pay for the petrol costs of delivering them – and remember the Park covers some remote rural communities or hiring village halls for public meetings. The contrast on expenditure rules for local government elections where each candidate can spend £740 plus 6p per person on electoral role is striking.   These rules apply not just to Scotland but to parish councils in England, many of which cover areas with a smaller population than the National Park wards. Its as though our National Park electoral system has been set up to stifle all debate which might encourage people to stand or get involved.

Issues for local communities in the National Park

There are plenty of major local issues within the National Park on which local communities would benefit from having a much stronger voice, for example:

Ward 1 – the dead hand of the Forestry Commission and the adverse impact of industrial forestry in Cowal on both local employment and the natural environment

Ward 2 – the failure of the National Park Authority to provide adequate housing for all the jobs promised by the Cononish goldmine or to develop other more sustainable sources of employment

Ward 3 – local tourism and housing infrastructure

Ward 4 – the failure of the National Park since it was created to provide proper tourism infrastructure at Balmaha and along the east shore of Loch Lomond as reflected in the chaos there last weekend

Ward 5 – the Riverside/Flamingo Land development at Balloch

Any of these issues could, if openly debated in the local elections, inspire interest, increase levels of turnout and strengthen the position of those subsequently elected. The challenge is how to make this happen.

Unfortunately, there is evidence to suggest that this is the last thing the current regime at the National Park want.   There were indications on social media that local community groups expected the Flamingo Land planning application for the Riverside and Woodside sites at Balloch was to be submitted a couple of weeks ago. Nothing has appeared.   Had it done so I suspect it might have inspired both proponents and opponents of the proposed development to stand and resulted in a proper public discussion of the issues with the risk being the target in the National Park Plan, for the

site to be developed, would be reversed.   My bet now – and I would love to be proved wrong – is we won't see the Flamingo Land Planning application or any other controversial issues aired until early June after nominations for the elections close.

NB Postscript Since writing this I have been pointed to Iconic Leisure Developments website which on 5th May issued a statement saying that an application for Planning Permission In Principle was submitted to the LLTNPA on 4th May and once it appeared on the LLTNPA website they would publish it too. Heads of Planning Scotland guidance on the Validation of Planning Applications says this:

The validation of applications is a critical stage in the planning process to ensure a submitted application is legally valid and complies with the legislation. It is the first stage in assessing an application and the applicant wants it dealt with quickly and consistently. This part of the process should take place within five working days of receiving the application.

That deadline has been missed but its a complex application and there is still lots of time for the LLTNPA to validate it before the closing date for election nominations.

Category

1. Cairngorms
2. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. flamingo land
2. Governance
3. Local communities
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5. Scottish Government

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