

The new Scottish Government appointees to our National Park Boards

Description

Following the election of local representatives to the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority earlier this year ([see here](#)), the end of last week saw the announcement of the new Scottish Government appointees to our National Park Boards. The appointments appear to have attracted little publicity so this post points readers to information about the appointees, takes a look at the appointments process and explains why the new Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority Board members specifically need to consider their role before doing anything else.

Information on the new Scottish Government appointees

The purpose of this post is not to comment on the appropriateness or otherwise of any of the individual appointments. Our two National Park Authorities have copied short biographies from the Scottish Government into their own news releases: for the Cairngorms ([see here](#)) and Loch Lomond and Trossachs ([see here](#)). As individuals I believe they will need to be judged by the contributions they make to our National Parks achieving their statutory objectives – and aspirations of the public -rather than their past record.

The Scottish Government appointments website provides some further information about the background of the individuals. None of the appointees has apparently taken part in any “political activity” – which means “party political” in this context – over the last five years. This may be a conscious attempt not to try and change the “political balance” of the elected representatives on the Board. Only two of the appointees hold other Board appointments and in one case this is unremunerated – a reflection perhaps of the Scottish Government’s commitment to get new people onto Boards and to end the practice of certain people holding a handful of appointments or moving from one Board to the next when an appointment is up. Whether people have done work for either the National Parks or the Scottish Government itself is not declared.

While not wishing to comment on individuals, it’s worth making a couple of comments on the composition of the Boards as a whole. For each National Park Authority, three of the appointments are women, two men, in line with the Scottish Government’s commitment to attain gender equality on public Boards (the majority of elected representatives are men). Two of the appointments to the Cairngorms National Park Board have a background in farming/landed estates compared to one outdoor recreationist and there appears to be just one appointee with strong conservation interests. It will be interesting to see whether other Board Members, elected ones as well as appointees, are able to advocate for recreational and conservation interests.

Three of the appointees have backgrounds in communication/learning, one of whom has expertise in cultural heritage and one in science. Interpretation of both cultural and natural heritage is something that has reached nowhere near its true potential in our National Parks so there are real opportunities

for these Board Members to make a unique contribution.

The appointments process – the filling of vacancies

The Scottish Government appointees start their 4 year terms on the 1st November. The LLTNPA spin machine again exceeded itself when it quoted James Stuart, their convener, as saying *“I look forward to working with them over the next four years to continue making Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park a great place to live, work and visit.”* He was appointed back in February 2015 for four years so is due to retire in 2019 but maybe he has already been told that he will be re-appointed? What’s more his terms as convener is only three years and is due up in 18 months. I doubt James Stuart really said this – the spin machine just forgot how the democratic arrangements work.

There are more serious problems, outwith the control of our National Parks, with the way Scottish Government officials have operated the appointments process. The retiring Scottish Government nominees did so on 1st October and officials have known this would happen for four years. Yet they still could not arrange the appointments process so the vacancies were filled timeously. What’s worse, ever since Linda Mackay the previous convener of the LLTNPA and a Scottish Government nominee retired at the end of February 2017, her position has been left vacant. It was never the intention of the Scottish Parliament to create Board positions and leave them vacant.

The impression given is that posts have been left vacant simply because its easier for the civil service to appoint Scottish Government nominees in one go. Now, there are arguments for this practice. It creates a clean break and could for example make it easier for our National Parks change course but there are also arguments against. For example that a large influx of new Board Members means few understand how the National Parks work and as a result are totally dependent on – or should I say at the mercy of? – staff.. The new Minister, Mairi Gougeon, should be engaging with the Boards on these questions but whatever she decides she should make it clear to her civil servants that all vacancies should be filled timeously.

The role of LLTNPA Board Members

The first thing that the new LLTNPA members need to do is consider what role they should have. This would be a strange thing to say about any normal Non-Departmental Public Board but the LLTNPA is not normal. 16 months ago ([see here](#)) LLTNPA members voted, without dissent, to write to the Scottish Government suggesting their numbers be reduced as they had not enough to do.

Not much has changed since – indeed the number of Board Meetings has reduced further – and some of those people still “serve” as Board Members. So, the first question for all new LLTNPA appointees should be about how the current role of Board Members needs to change so they can make a useful contribution.

They could do worse than learn from the CNPA whose Board Members play a far more public role than LLTNPA Board Members and lead many aspects of the National Park’s work ([see here](#)). Such an

approach used to happen in the LLTNPA until when Fiona Logan was Chief Executive, Board involvement started to be limited to governance matters (and secret meetings on how to get camping byelaws put into place).

To help make this happen the new Board Members should insist on two simple changes in governance, again following the example of the CNPA. The first is that each Board Member should be given a National Park email (Jane.blogs@lochlomond-trossachs.org) and this be made public alongside the information about them on the LLTNPA website. The Councillor nominees on the Board all have local authority email addresses and can be contacted by that route which makes the situation even more ridiculous. The problem is that there are certain senior staff who would prefer Board Members not to be contacted by the public because of the questions they might then face.

The second is that the current LLTNPA practice of automatically paying Board Members for three days work a month should cease. The CNPA approved a paper earlier this year requiring Board Members to declare the time they contributed to Board business and, where this was less than three days, to reduce fees accordingly. Adopting this in the LLTNPA would not just be the right thing to do, it would also concentrate the minds of Board Members on what they could and should be doing.

And after that?

Over the next few weeks Parkswatch intends to take a look at the bigger challenges – they are not lacking! – which face Board Members and which will determine whether their terms of office are ultimately judged a success or not.

Category

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2. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

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