

The LLTNPA Board – the democratic deficit continues

Description

The Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority Board meeting on 10th December was a complete contrast to the September “stand-up” meeting with its threadbare agenda ([see here](#)). This time the agenda was packed ([see here](#)) but the meeting was as poorly organised as the last.

Time for National Park Board Meetings to be broadcast

The main trouble was caused by the scheduling, the responsibility of the Convener and Chief Executive, with sessions timetabled for specific times including a 1 hour 15 minute lunch break. It turned out that it needed to be this long to allow Board Members to be taken out to a local hotel for their Xmas lunch .

The first session started at 10am and was meant to take an hour and a half but was all over in 30 minutes. The Convener, James Stuart, then announced that the Board would adjourn for coffee till 11.45. I went over to him to express concern that the public present – there were four of us – had only been in the meeting 30 minutes and were now being asked to wait a further 1 hour 15 minutes and this was a waste of our time. The Convener responded that a member of the public might turn up wanting to listen to a scheduled session. Fair enough, so I then suggested that if the LLTNPA wanted to schedule discussions for fixed times – this was the first time it had done so – it should start to webcast meetings. At least then the public could fast forward through the intervals and lunch breaks

I am not sure how that went down! We were left without even the offer of a glass of water while the Board went out for refreshments. A great opportunity for them to storm and form but useless for the hapless public, who were left in the meeting room under the supervision of the minute taker, a nice woman but powerless to offer a cup of tea. We wondered whether any Board Member asked themselves whether this is really the way to treat members of the public who want to observe their discussion? In truth, the organisation of the meeting was outwith their control but it felt like a punishment for having dared to turn up and scrutinise what is going on.

As a tactic, it worked a treat. After the extensive breaks by 4.15pm, when a number of us needed to leave, the Board had only just finished item 10 (out of 15 substantive items on the agenda. I therefore missed the discussion on the Cononish Goldmine, a verbal report from the Delivery Group which, so we had been told in the morning, had been developing plans to address litter and other items of interest. How much of the discussion will be recorded in the draft minute which will be out in March remains to be seen.

LLTNPA staff were clearly concerned the report on the camping byelaws might attract some public interest because they had arranged for one of their dedicated police officers to be present, the first time this has happened since the meeting that approved the byelaws. In the event, however, no-one

else turned up all day.

This farce, which was not the responsibility of ordinary Board Members, could have been avoided had the long agenda incorporated a degree of flexibility. Reports scheduled for the afternoon session, like finance and the operational progress report, could have easily been taken earlier in the day without risk of complaint. Another option would just be to webcast the whole meeting so people could tune into the items that interested them.

By chance, later in the week, I was sent a video link ([see here](#)) to a discussion at Gwynedd Council about how a Planning Application from Natural Retreats had been handled which shows how things could be done. Activists had contacted Parkswatch as a result of the coverage we had given to how Natural Retreats had managed Cairn Gorm. At Plas Pistyll, on the North Wales Coast, the Council's Planning Committee had approved one set of plans submitted by Natural Retreats and these had then turned into something very different as a result of officers agreeing a number of "Non-material variations". After concerns had been pressed by a local Councillor, the matter was referred to the Gwynedd Communities Scrutiny Committee. You can see all 1 hour 50 minutes of the debate yourself.

Click on item 7 in the Link and, unless you understand Welsh, on the English tab. Not only is the whole meeting translated, but when you click on the item all the Committee Papers appear so you can read them while following the debate. Its really worth a look, you can dip in and out. The contrast with the LLTNPA is striking: real debate, challenge to officers and divergent views.

We have the same of course in Scotland and not just in the Scottish Parliament. Highland Council has been webcasting for some time and Glasgow City Council now does so. The shambles last week strengthens the arguments that both our National Parks should webcast their meetings. Board Meetings without anyone present, might as well be meeting in secret as the LLTNPA did 13 times while developing the camping byelaws. Webcasting by contrast is good for democracy as Board Members know they can be held to account for what they say or don't say and what they decide. It makes it far easier for people to observe meetings and the parts of them in which they have an interest. Awareness that extracts from meetings could be shared on social media would concentrate minds. Unfortunately, these are the very reasons why the LLTNPA is unlikely to do this voluntarily.

Time perhaps for the Scottish Government to insist all meetings are recorded – Ministers and civil servants could then see how Board Members were doing rather than taking this on trust.

Accountability of Board Members

Unless it was brought up under Any Other Business, there was no public discussion about the role of Board Members ([see here](#)) or more specifically the suggestions that all LLTNPA Board Members should have an email and should only be paid for work done, both of which happen at the Cairngorms National Park Authority. Instead roles had been allocated.

Elections to vacant posts

One reason the first session had been scheduled for an hour and a half was to allow elections to Committees to take place. The Board Paper indicated that there had been “exceptional interest” in the Delivery Group with 13 expressions of interest in 6-8 places and Local Access Forum with 6 expressions of interest in one place. That was a good sign, with new Board Members appearing keen to earn their 3 Days fees a month. The choices of Board Members had however all been whittled back by the time the Board Paper was published with Committee Membership being divvied out. There was still however the prospect of two contested elections, for the Planning Committee Chair and Member of the Local Access Forum. I was looking forward to the speeches but, by the time of the meeting, neither post was contested.

James Stuart still asked the candidates for the posts of chair and vice chair of the Planning and Audit Committees, the Delivery Group and the Local Access Forum to speak. Without a contest, their heart was not really in it and it was all over in half an hour.

The fundamental problem, that the LLTNPA Board Members do not have enough to do, was not discussed. Six out of twelve Planning Committees last year were cancelled due to lack of business – just what did the Members on those Committees do to make up that time? In the CNPA by contrast, far fewer decisions are devolved and Board Members are encouraged to do other things so really do earn their fees.

A hiatus in Governance

The first substantive paper was on Board Standing Orders:

“The Standing Orders specify that the Governance Manager shall be the Proper Officer for the Board. Duties include ensuring that the public shall have appropriate access to meetings and documents of the Board, overseeing the election of Members and presiding over the process of electing a Convener and Depute Convener of the Board. The Governance Manager post is currently vacant and the Standing Orders require an amendment to allow the Chief Executive to appoint other officers to perform this role.”

This is the second Governance Manager the LLTNPA has lost in a year. No-one thought to ask why but then most Board Members probably don't even realise there is a history of serious governance issues in the LLTNPA over the last few years. Perhaps, if the item had come later on the agenda someone from the Board would have picked up one role of the Governance Manager is *“ensuring the public shall have appropriate access to meetings”*. At least this time the papers had been published two weeks beforehand, a welcome record.

In a separate post on the Your Park update report to Ministers, I will consider how what Board Members weren't told was more important than what they were told, slewed the whole debate and prevented any real proper scrutiny of what has been going on. Ultimately this is a governance issue. The new Board would be wise to involve themselves directly in the appointment of the new Governance Manager and ensure its someone who is able and willing to challenge the current modus operandi of the Park: selective use of information, secrecy and spin.

Category

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Tags

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