

The Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Board meeting – where does the power lie?

Description

Apologies for the belated blog on the last Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Board Meeting ([see here for papers](#)) which took place on Monday 18th March – and, no, this isn't an April Fool!

As predicted ([see here](#)) the agenda was far too long and by 1.30pm, when I had to leave and the Board adjourned for lunch, the meeting had only got to item 8 out of 24. It was well behind schedule.

Unfortunately as a result I am not able to report on the discussion on the camping development strategy, what was decided on in the afternoon session. Nor on whether the Board might have discussed how to process the Flamingo Land Planning Application under Any Other Business. Since the only other observer left before me and in the absence of any News Release, it's unlikely any other member of the public will know what was decided either. I am afraid the public will have to wait until the minute appears along with the papers for the next meeting sometime in June.

Sorting out governance basics

This was the third meeting in a row where the organisation of the meeting itself has been unsatisfactory ([see here](#)) and ([here](#)). The trouble at this meeting was in part caused by the decision last year to have just 3 Board Meetings a year. At the same time – and this is a positive step in the right direction – the Board is now discussing far more issues in public. This resulted in an overlong agenda.

The solution is quite simple, increase the number of meetings and not just to three a year but six or more.

Board

2019 meetings

- 18 March – 10am, John Muir Suite, Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park Authority, Road, Balloch, G83 8EG
- 17 June
- 9 December

Although only two more meetings are scheduled for this year, a member of staff let slip that an item would be going to the September meeting of the Board. So why is that not public and has the Board reversed their previous decision?

Equally importantly the Board needs to put in place arrangements so that the public can see what happens/is decided at Board Meetings. Waiting three months for a minute – or six between June and December – is just not good enough. So why doesn't the LLTNPA follow the example of Highland Council and webcast ALL its Board Meetings. That would at a stroke solve the current issues of meetings going on all day and the public being left in limbo while the Board go off for lunch. It would be good for democracy, with the public being able to view agenda items relevant to them in their own time and enable people to share clips of issues relevant to them.

That of course is precisely why the old regime would never have countenanced meetings being recorded. However, from the discussion I witnessed, a number of Board Members and staff would have emerged with credit and indeed might be further empowered by greater openness.

Will conservation at long last be put first?

For me, the stand out contribution at the meeting was from Chris Spry, a new Board Member, who introduced the Wild Park paper. This was presented as simply a “refresh” of the existing plan. It actually marks a radical change in direction. Chris – whom I don't know – in just three minutes outlined the case for the National Park acting like a National Park. He said conservation of the natural environment was central to everything the Park does and to everyone who visits, lives or work there. He even explicitly referred to the statutory objectives of the National Park and pointed out where these are in conflict conservation must always come first. Wonderful stuff which he clearly believes in.

He was followed by Simon Jones, Director of Conservation, who seemed free – for the first time – to talk honestly about conservation issues. So there he was, telling the Board that they might be surprised to learn that many of the protected areas in the National Park are NOT in good condition. Indeed some are in a worse state than elsewhere in the country. The most important reason for this, he explained, is overgrazing by sheep and deer. At long last the LLTNPA being open about issues

which the Cairngorms National Park Authority has discussed for years.

He was followed by David McCone who welcomed the shift of focus of the National Park back onto wildlife – the nearest anyone got to saying that the LLTNPA has not acted as a National Park for a long long time – and asked an excellent question, “how wild are we going”? Unfortunately that was not answered. This was a missed opportunity for the Board to discuss what they might do to support the beavers that are migrating into part of the area. David then asked about the poor water quality in Loch Lomond and in the consequent discussion it emerged that the proposed upgrade of the A82 is likely to make this even worse by altering the natural shoreline. Proof that the Board should have been discussing the A82 upgrade long ago and not waiting till later in the year to comment on Transport Plans final plans ([see here](#)). By then it will be too late to change anything.

Ronnie Erskine then put his finger on one of the two key issues the Park faces in delivering the ideas set out in Wild Park, a lack of resources devoted to conservation. His answer, was that the LLTNPA needed to prioritise the objectives in the plan. Unfortunately no-one suggested that the Park could stop wasting the large resources devoted to the camping byelaws and instead allocate say half of this to conservation. This could be done without any redundancies as many of the Park’s Countryside Rangers have a great deal of conservation expertise. Many, I am sure, would prefer to be spending their time on this rather than policing campers.

The other key issue in delivering Wild Park was mentioned by Nicola Colquhoun, the member of staff leading on this. Landowners and, more specifically, the question of will they co-operate? The answer of course is most won’t and Simon Jones comments earlier on deer numbers confirm this. 30 years of voluntary mechanisms to control Red Deer numbers have failed so why should this change now?.

While the debate on conservation at the meeting was a big step forward, the challenge now for the Park is to devote more resources to conservation and to tackle the landowners who in the main are just not interested.

Involvement of Board Members in LLTNPA business

While there has been no Board Paper on roles of Board Members, it is clear from the meeting that there have been fundamental changes in how the Board operates in the last six months. Just 18 months ago Board Members had almost unanimously suggested to James Stuart, the convener, that the Board be reduced in size as there was nothing for them to do. At this meeting almost every item was introduced by a Board Member and it was evident that several had been working with staff to develop papers. That is a huge step forward and a return to how the Board used to operate.

The only trouble is that the public have NO way of either contacting Board Members – except for Councillors whose emails can be found on their Local Authority websites – or finding out what they are involved in.

So, to take one example, Heather Reid – who was once known to many people as “Heather the weather” – was asked to introduce the work that the Park has been doing with Young People. (James Stuart had used his power as Convener under Standing Order 26 to ask two Young People to participate in the meeting). It turned out she had been to a Residential weekend with Young People at Rowardennan and been doing other work with the Youth Committee. Great stuff but how do other

Young People who might be interested know this? How would the Community Councils, which often discuss youth issues, know there is someone on the Board whom they could approach? In the Cairngorms National Park you can find out all the working groups that Board Members are involved in and contact them directly – its about time the LLTNPA did the same.

Were they to do so, it would become clearer about other areas where LLTNPA members need to get involved. Besides the Local Access Forum lead, how about a camping champion, for example, who make it their business to make links with the people who camp in the National Park?

Serious problems remain

In my post issued before the LLTNPA Board Meeting I argued that Board Members need to take back control. While there were welcome signs at the meeting that they are speaking out more, there was also plenty of evidence that so far they do not appreciate the extent of the failures of the last ten years.

One of the problems newer Board Members face is they had not been given an honest account of what has been happening. There were two examples from the discussion on the operational plan and the budget. Cllr Ellen Morton, asked whether the LLTNPA could not more closely with Councils to make better use of scarce resource in the management of toilets, car parks and litter. Good question, but clearly no-one had told her that Board Members have been asking for this for at least three years. One might have thought this would have been the FIRST thing discussed with new Councillors when they were appointed to the Board.

Sarah Drummond, a Scottish Government appointee, asked whether it was realistic to put in place new mechanisms for collecting car parking charges by the end of Quarter 3. She was given assurances to this effect but no-one told her the tender for Automated Number Plate recognition systems went out two years ago or nothing had happened since then. That might just have led to a few more searching questions.

Another challenge Board Members face is that many key decisions are taken without their knowledge. There were two example in the morning session relating to staff posts/complement. The first came from Billy Ronald who asked a question about how the Park was proposing to deal with litter. He appeared completely unaware that a £40k a year Litter Prevention Manager post had been created and that someone had been appointed. Now, some of this may have come from not reading papers thoroughly. The more fundamental point, as parkswatch has argued, is that key staffing decisions are made by the Chief Executive not the Board. This is something Board Members need to ask about just like the public. There was another example of this when Gordon Watson, in response to a question from Heather Reid about how the Park would deliver their estates investment programme when the Capital Projects Manager was not being replaced, replied that it had decided been decided to outsource the functions. Just who apart from Gordon Watson decided this is unclear. In my view it should have been the Board. What staff the Park employs is fundamental to what it does.

Arguably the most important area of all where the Board need to take back control is budgets. At the meeting there were some very pertinent critical comments on the budget for next year but by the end of the discussion on the Operational Plan and the budget there had not been a single substantive change

to anything the Chief Executive Gordon Watson had proposed. Ronnie Erskine put his finger on one fundamental issue when he said that resources are a means, not an end. He questioned why in the Operational Plan for the year 2018-19 the single most important priority was raising more money. Surely, he asked, this was not an outcome and the National Park should be putting outcomes first? Exactly.

David McCone then expressed concerns about the piecemeal approach to raising income and asked where a strategic paper on charging would be coming to the Board. James Stuart batted this away saying that if charging had strategic implications, then a paper would come to the Board. What we have at present is a charging free for all with Argyll and Bute Council trying to charge walkers £9 a day at Arrochar, LLTNPA staff devising a completely separate charging system while Forestry Commission Scotland does something else. If that doesn't warrant a strategic paper I am not sure what would – I hope Board Members will come back and demand it.

The most astounding illustration of staff making strategic decisions without reference to the Board came at the end of the discussion on the budget. The budget included “£202k *Scottish Government advised pay/progression award*”. The discussion on this was initiated by Martin Earl who rightly highlighted that the funding awarded by the Scottish Government did not reflect their guidance on pay.

It then emerged, in response to a question from Councillor Morton, that there had been no discussion with the Trade Union about the proposed pay award. A fair conclusion would be that the whole budget was built on thin air! Senior Management's explanation for this is that they are confident that as they have “good relations” with the Trade Union, staff will accept whatever is put to them. What a way to operate!

It also emerged that the Scottish Government Guidance on pay to public authorities this year had recommended a 3% rise for those on less than £36k and up to 2% for those above. It was not explained in either the Board paper or at the meeting whether the cost of the pay award included the FULL 2% increase for the senior management team. That should have been decided by the Board but was never presented to them as an option.

Where next?

While all the critical debate that I witnessed in the morning is a welcome change for the better, the fundamental issue which the Board needs to tackle before they can achieve anything else is how to take back control and stop their Chief Executive running the Park like a personal fiefdom.

Category

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Tags

1. conservation
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