

## The Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park's response to Covid 19

### Description

With half the country in panic mode, I was pleased I took a break from my book and attended the scheduled Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority Board meeting on Monday ([see here](#)). What the tattered remnants of the meeting showed is that this is a Public Authority only interested in itself and its narrow self-interest interests.

While there was some discussion of how coronavirus might impact on the LLTNPA itself, there was NO discussion of the wider implications. Not a single Board Member or senior member of staff asked, for example, how the corona crisis might impact on the people living and working in the National Park, let alone what the LLTNPA could and should be doing to mitigate the impacts. The message, for all tourism businesses in the National Park that are now on the brink of collapse and to the public who enjoy visiting, is that this a Public Authority which simply doesn't care and is incapable of taking appropriate action.

This post explains my justification for these claims.

### Impact of coronavirus on the Board Meeting

The Board Meeting, with 22 agenda items, had been scheduled to last all day. However, last week someone with coronavirus was found to have been in the LLTNPA HQ in Balloch and the whole building was closed on Friday for a deep clean. That sounds good until you realise that medical advice is that Covid 19 can survive on hard surfaces up to three days ([see here for example](#)) and simply by shutting the building over the weekend the LLTNPA could have addressed any risk. Still perceptions of staff, if not visitors, are important as we will see.

As usual, the public were only allowed into the meeting room after the Board were fully assembled. In this case we were further delayed while an off the record "briefing" took place and then reasonably enough asked to use hand gel. While Board Members were carefully spaced at least 2 metres apart, however, there were just 5 chairs for the public crammed into a tight row at the the back of the room. Had there been more than three of us, we would have physically been touching. I suspect this was unconscious, not deliberate, but those unconscious frames of reference, in which people with power put their own narrow self-interests first, helps cast light on the subsequent non-discussion.

The Convener, James Stuart, never explained why the meeting was moved out of the Balloch HQ into St Kessog's Church Hall or why it was rescheduled to 1pm. If that was to reduce risk to staff, fair enough. Had the LLTNPA started to webcast its meetings, it could have reduced the risk to the public too. However, since promising to webcast the September Board Meeting on the Flamingo Land Planning Application, the LLTNPA has done nothing further to make its meetings more accessible to the public.

James Stuart also didn't explain why he decided to defer 12 out of the 22 agenda items and leave just two substantive items on the agenda. He said that the outstanding papers could be dealt with by other means before adding that he appreciated the LLTNPA had a duty to take decisions in the open. Perhaps coronavirus will now force the LLTNPA to webcast meetings like other public authorities? The impression I got was the only reason why the meeting was being held was so the Board could rubber stamp the 3 Year Review Report to Scottish Ministers on the Camping byelaws which legally the LLTNPA were required to deliver to Ministers before 1st March ([see here](#)).

## **Coronavirus, the countryside and wider rural economy**

While the science is evolving very rapidly, health data to date suggests most people of working age are at very low risk of coming to harm from coronavirus (0.2% death rate among those aged 10-40). However, it appears that if repeatedly exposed to the virus before having a chance to build up antibodies, younger people can become very sick. That helps explain why health staff are at such risk compared to the rest of the population ([see here for example](#)). This has serious implications for the health service and how we respond generally to coronavirus – its sensible to avoid unnecessary close contact as was arranged for Board Members attending the meeting – but also has specific implications for the countryside and the rural economy which currently is facing economic collapse.

If this assessment of the risks is anywhere right, visiting the Scottish countryside, whether in our National Parks or out, is one of the lowest risk activities you can do. With the entertainment industry, from sport to the arts, shut down about the one activity people can do safely and according to official government advice is to go out into the countryside and participate in outdoor recreation. Going for a walk or paddle with friends (or even in an organised group), staying in self-catering accommodation or camping, going into a village shop (typically operated by just one or two people) should be some of the safest things that people who are not part of vulnerable at risk groups can do. The risk of being exposed to the virus on multiple occasions within a short period is minimal.

The Scottish Government Chief Medical Officer, Dr Catherine Calderwood, has observed, that if we close schools there is a high risk that we may even increase rates of transmission because of the difficulty in keep children indoors for months and they may end up being cared for by vulnerable elderly grandparents. In this context it seems crazy that Glasgow City Council has just cancelled all school outings. Far more rational than cooping children up in classrooms or back at home, would be to take them out into the countryside. Nature schools and Outdoor Education should be coming to the fore ([see here](#)). The update paper on the Outdoor Recreation Plan ([see here](#)), which would have provided an ideal opportunity to discuss all this, was unfortunately one of the papers which were deferred.

In the current panic about coronavirus, if we are to keep people visiting the countryside, they need to feel safe and know that appropriate measures are being put in place to protect both visitors and residents in the countryside. This means for example that if booking accommodation, people know its been properly cleaned – like the LLTNPA's HQ!. Instead of considering these issues, Board minds were concentrated on what might happen if the Scottish Government needed to re-allocate money to deal with the crisis. The only reference to tourism and the coronavirus at the Board Meeting was from Gordon Watson, the LLTNPA Chief Executive, who stated that as a result of the virus it was likely the amount of income the Park raised from car parking charges in the countryside would reduce. The fear was this could affect LLTNPA budgets. Further evidence that the people who run this so-called National Park are primarily concerned about themselves..

What the Board should have discussed is how tourist infrastructure in the National Park should be managed in order to give people confidence that visiting the countryside is not just safe but a great option in the current circumstances. An obvious start would be for the National Park to ensure ALL the facilities it operates made a positive contribution to this aim. For example, it could have prioritised opening ALL its toilets immediately and ensuring these were regularly cleaned so that people who wanted to do so could wash their hands. Instead, the LLTNPA is at present busy trying to increase the charges it levies on people who want to go to the toilet.....hence Gordon Watson's comments about loss of income. Taking a longer term view, the coronavirus highlights the stupidity of the Scottish Government and our Public Authorities in allowing facilities like public toilets to be closed. They should have been central to public health, indeed that's why they were created by the Victorians in the first place, but have been closed for sake of saving a few pence.

Unfortunately, the rural economy is now facing collapse just as it did with Foot and Mouth in 2001 because there is no leadership and as a result people are abandoning the countryside in droves. With holidays abroad out of the question – and rightly so because aeroplanes have been one of the main means by which coronavirus has been spread round the world – its an ideal time for our National Park Authorities to be encouraging people to take their holidays in the National Park and the wider countryside in Scotland. For people travelling by car, the risks of booking a holiday in self-catering accommodation and buying food and fuel while on holiday are likely to be minimal and no more than staying at home, perhaps less so. Hotels are more complex but with a little imagination it should be possible to feed residents outwith the normal dining areas etc etc. And people might be encouraged to return to public transport if appropriate measures were in place – for example capacity on buses being limited so that no-one has to sit next to another person.

The LLTNPA had a huge opportunity on Monday to show some leadership and initiate an emergency work programme to address all these issues – informed by a dialogue with the Scottish Government and health – and missed it completely. Having used tourism businesses to justify the camping byelaws, it has abandoned those businesses completely at their point of greatest need.

## **Coronavirus and the camping byelaws**

I will consider the 3 Year Review report more fully in another post but it shows that having forced campers into a few permit areas, in those areas impacts on vegetation have gone up as has the amount of faecal waste and litter levels. That's as Parkwatch predicted and what happens when you remove people's right to choose where to camp as set out in the Scottish Outdoor Access Code.

Instead of impacts being dispersed, they are now CONCENTRATED. Predictably, no-one on the LLTNPA Board thought to consider the implications for how the population might stay fit and healthy during the coronavirus emergency.

By forcing campers into certain limited areas, the LLTNPA are increasing the risk of coronavirus transmission at a time when they should be encouraging as many people out into the countryside as possible for their health. With people avoiding accommodation from hotels to mountain huts out of fear, wild camping offers a safe alternative for people to get out of their house but ONLY if campers are able to disperse.

A responsible Board showing true leadership would have suspended the camping byelaws immediately. This would also have reduced the risk to its own Ranger force who now spend most of their time travelling around looking at permits forcing them into close proximity with others.

## **Why is the Board so ineffectual?**

The meeting showed that the LLTNPA Board are increasingly relinquishing all power to senior staff, including basic decisions about how staff and financial resources are allocated.

The one Board Member who appears concerned about this is Danny Gibson, one of the Stirling Council nominees to the Board and a Labour Party Councillor. He asked if the budgetary information in the Operational Plan gave Board Members an appropriate level of detail:

## Draft 2020/21 Annual Operational Plan and Budget

### Appendix 2 - Draft Budget Summary 2020/21

Draft Budget 2020/21 £'000	2020/21 Budget		
	Capital	Revenue	Total
Grant in Aid	1,160	6,678	7,838
Ring-fenced Peatland Grant In Aid	0	0	0
Income	0	874	874
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>1,160</b>	<b>7,552</b>	<b>8,712</b>
Operating Salaries	0	5,432	5,432
Other Operating Costs	0	1,837	1,837
Activity Costs (inc capitalised salaries)	1,160	315	1,475
<b>Total Expenditure</b>	<b>1,160</b>	<b>7,584</b>	<b>8,744</b>
<b>UNDER/(OVER) BUDGET</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>(32)</b>	<b>(32)</b>

***Note: Operating salaries figure is shown net of £150k savings and £175k capitalised salaries***

Cllr Gibson's question was spot on. We get more budgetary information at my local residents association which has an annual budget of £5k! Reading this its impossible to know how much is being spent on what, for example how much continues to be wasted in camping byelaw enforcement, or what resources might be available to help local tourism businesses survive the coronavirus.

Unfortunately, no other Board Member supported Cllr Gibson and James Stuart, the Convener, responded by saying quite explicitly he believed these high level figures were quite sufficient. This is a Convener in thrall to his Chief Executive and who doesn't want his Board to make informed decisions.

Similarly, during the discussion on the operational plan, Gordon Watson stated that his senior staff team are managing staff vacancies and decide what ones should be filled etc; in other words staff are determining the Park's priorities, not the Board. Even in the poorest performing local authorities, councillors have some say over the workforce, but not in the LLTNPA.

Again not a Board Member questioned this, but Cllr Gibson used AOB to raise another key issue when he asked what involvement Board Members have in determining how vacant premises are let? This was very apt, given the LLTNPA appalling record in managing its own premises, the latest evidence for which was provided in the update on the 2019/20 operational plan (another of the substantive agenda items that was deferred):

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# Annual Operational Plan (AOP) 2019/20

## Progress Report – 17 February 2020

Complete	On Track	Behind Schedule	At Risk	Cancelled/Postponed
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### Section 2: Detailed activities

AOP Activity	NPPP / 5-Year Plan Priority	AOP Measurement of Success
1. We will identify ways to supplement our core funding to help sustain and improve the services we deliver in the National Park	5-YP Priority 6: Fundraising	- Deliver agreed preferred option for our vacant building, landholding and responsibilities in Luss;
		- Maximise the generation of toilet income in 2 (Luss and Balmaha) of our 8 public toilet facilities following upgrades to charging mechanisms;
		- Tender to secure a tenant for the Inveruglas/Tarbet following completion of the RTIF work;
		- Secure the lease of Balmaha Car Park and regularise the land tenure at Milarrochy Bay in order to support an automated car park charging system;
		- Introduce automated car park charging systems in Tarbet, Inveruglas and Milarrochy;

Out of three vacant properties where leases need to be put in place or the properties need to be managed inhouse, arrangements for two have been deferred to next year and one is behind schedule. That is an appalling mismanagement of resources. Mr Watson in response waffled and claimed that Board Members are involved in some of the larger value leases – he cited the lease of the former National Park visitor centre at Balloch – when it really comes down to whether he wants to involve

Board Members or not. Any other organisation would have clear procedures in place to determine this. There is now a stench of corruption around how the LLTNPA allocates its land and resources for use by the private sector (for example around what agreement the Park has made with Flamingo Land about the land it owns at Balloch) ([see here](#))

Despite Cllr Gibson's efforts, nothing was changed. The role of the LLTNPA Board is now just to rubber stamp whatever is put before them. Unlike the Cairngorms National Park Authority, there is NEVER any split vote on any subject, all decisions are unanimous and recommendations from staff are always approved.

Its not surprising that given this operational environment, the attendance of some Board Members is atrocious. Murray Lyle, a Tory Councillor, nominated by Perth and Kinross has now missed three of the last four Board meetings as has Diane Doherty, SNP Councillor for West Dunbartonshire. Sarah Drummond, founder of Snook, has missed the last two meetings – perhaps that is because Snook's work increasingly appears to be in London rather than Scotland?

At the start of the meeting James Stuart let it slip that a replacement had been nominated for Barbara Morgan, a Tory Councillor from Argyll and Bute, who had last attended the Board in June. That was the first I had heard she resigned. A quick check found that this was reported on the Argyll and Bute Council website back in September. The LLTNPA had Board Meetings in both October and December, and yet there was no mention of Barbara Morgan's resignation, at either meeting and it was not recorded in the minutes.

When a Public Authority Board cannot even account properly for who sits on it, something is very badly wrong. Unfortunately, that has serious consequences for all those who visit, live and work in the National Park, as the LLTNPA's non-response to the coronavirus shows.

## Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

## Tags

1. access rights
2. camping
3. Camping bye laws
4. Governance
5. Tourism
6. visitor management

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