

The corona crisis â?? time to open up decision making in our National Parks

Description

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YOUR VIEWS

Webcasting of CNPA meetings is overdue

THERE can be no question that right now, times are difficult for us all.

Many will be apprehensive, many even frightened, and the whole country has found every day life totally disrupted.

Amongst all this, there are heroes working for us all - the incredible efforts at massive personal risk, of our NHS staff at every level; the continuing efforts of those in all of the emergency services; of those whose task it is to keep our food chains going from supplier to supermarket; and the growing army of volunteers across communities everywhere.

There are so many who deserve our grateful thanks for their efforts to keep us safe.

But underneath all of this, now subsumed below the radar, there are many smaller things, many "less important" things going on, continuing to function.

These include all the day-to-day functions of local authorities and of our national park.

At this time, it is understandable to find that decisions have been taken to cancel committee meetings of the Highland Council and that the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) has held some meetings by video conferencing.

But the democratic deficit that these measures represent could also be an opportunity to seriously and permanently challenge the way our democracies at local level work, and how open and transparent they

are to the public.

For years, Highland Council has webcast its strategic and planning meetings. Over those same years, the CNPA has consistently refused to do so whenever the prospect has come up for discussion.

It may be the park board members are concerned that one of their number might land themselves in hot water by speaking out of turn?

Or possibly that they might worry about shrinking back into the shell to avoid the risk?

But in practice, although that does happen from time to time in councils, people soon adapt to considering and choosing their words carefully which is no bad thing.

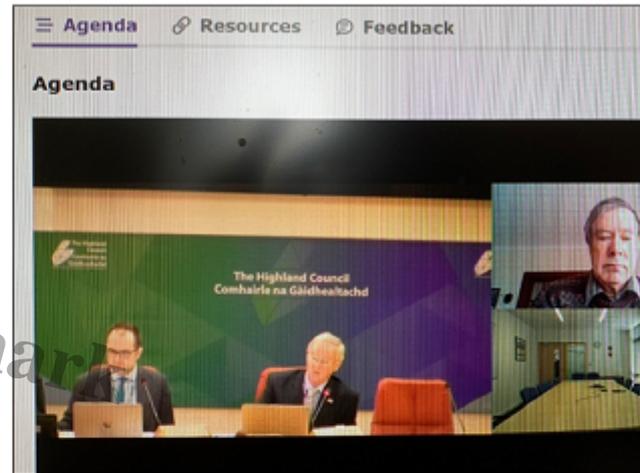
In this day and age, there really is no excuse for not webcasting meetings.

Our national park is the largest in Britain, there are many long drives from one end to another and even the trip from Grantown to Ballater involves a horrible bit of single-track road at the Aberdeenshire end.

Travel to meetings is difficult enough for members and a positive disincentive for the public.

Meanwhile, although the CNPA can successfully arrange video conferencing, The Highland Council still struggles with the extreme remoteness of some locations and video conferencing that excludes no member is difficult.

But now, above all, is surely the time for the technologies to come together. Highland Council can consider how to hook in everyone,



Highland Council has been webcasting meetings for years.

then simply webcast the central feed, showing chairperson and speaker.

For the CNPA, though, it is time to bite the bullet; to take foot out of mouth and hit the gas pedal.

Webcasting is long overdue - and since video conferencing is already a reality, transmitting a webcast video feed is a relatively simple technical problem to solve.

These measures are not expensive. But they do subtly change the way meetings work, and require a strong chairperson and well-managed speaking protocol.

They dramatically reduce travel expenses and as such are fundamentally the "green" approach; absolutely the right way for the park authority.

But now, and into the future, they enhance public involvement in our democracy and, especially

in the CNPA's case, greatly improve reputation.

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We have to be in
together, says M

A SPECIAL thanks is due to frontline workers and the "frontline" staff working in shops, groceries and supermarkets without whom this health emergency would be very much more of a crisis.

It is difficult in communities like ours built on centuries of interaction and friendship suddenly change and some unintentional mistakes were made, but we must all try to stick to the rules to help us. It is worth the dry and cra

Sales of newspapers have plummeted during the corona crisis risking yet more jobs. The Strathy has done a brilliant job of holding public authorities like the Cairngorms National Park Authority and HIE to account so if live in the local area, please keep supporting it and local newsagents

This letter from David Fallows about the need for the Cairngorms National Park Authority to webcast Board Meetings speaks for itself. Itâ??s something I have been calling for for both our National Parks

ever since the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority unlawfully held 13 Board Meetings in secret to decide their camping byelaws. David's intervention is particularly welcome because he is a former Board Member of the CNPA.

Its worth noting, however, the context for David's letter. The NPA website ([see here](#)) states *CNPA staff have ceased all site visits and field work*. In effect this deems work which is aimed at protecting the natural environment as *non-essential* during the crisis. But at the same time its business as usual when it comes to supporting businesses through the planning system:

CNPA Planning Service

The CNPA planning service will continue to operate during the Covid-19 outbreak. Our website will be normal with access to Planning Committee agendas, papers and minutes as well as normal public detail on planning applications. However, the precautions needed to reduce the impact of Covid-19 mean that some parts of the planning service will operate differently:

CNPA offices and planning staff

The CNPA offices are closed and staff will not meet applicants or members of the public. CNPA planning can be contacted by phone and email.

CNPA Planning Committee

Planning Committee meetings will be by video and teleconference between members. The meetings will be open to the public. The CNPA is investigating ways of providing a video stream of the meeting that will operate by our meeting in May 2020.

The Planning Committee will continue to consider requests from applicants, supporters and objectors to the Planning Committee meeting. In the short term this can either be done by providing a video recording to be played to the committee or by a Powerpoint presentation and/or statement to be read to the committee by a CNPA officer. The CNPA is investigating ways of allowing people to present directly to the committee via a video link but that will not be possible in the short term.

The Planning Committee will not undertake site visits while the Covid-19 restrictions are in place. Instead the committee will be based on the information supplied with an application and presented to the committee in the form of representations and other presentations.

The only changes that the CNPA have made to the planning system is that site visits won't be conducted - many people would see these as *essential* to enable Board Members to understand the impact of planning applications fully and meetings will no longer be conducted in public but by video conference. If that is the case its even more essential that ALL these meetings are webcast.

What is essential work?

As an addendum, its worth noting the unnecessary problems that are being created by government's advice on who should be working during the corona crisis. This is centred on what is essential or not, rather than what is safe. What's deemed essential has varied between the UK and Scottish governments and been decided differently from organisation to organisation across the UK. Here are a couple of examples from our National Parks.

While the CNPA is continuing with the planning system as normal, i.e classed it as essential, the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority says its NOT processing new planning applications because written notices can't be safely put up on lampposts. So, processing new planning applications has been deemed essential in one National Park but not the other.

The CNPA, as I quoted above, has stopped its staff undertaking field surveys in the great outdoors, while Nicola Sturgeon has clarified that window cleaners can go on cleaning windows as usual. I am sure both are safe, but if anything field surveys are even safer, so why is one essential and the other not? The consequences for the people involved are serious. Many of the people who depend on field surveys for their employment, and some of whom live in our National Parks, are now, completely unnecessarily, out of work. Unlike CNPA employees, those who are self-employed have been left without any income and are having to wait to get money, either through Universal Credit or for the payments the UK government has promised to the self-employed that are due to be paid in June.

Surely our governments and public authorities could be managing this crisis a lot better than they are. All the more reason why all their decision-making needs to broadcast to us all as David Fallows stated in his letter.

Category

1. Cairngorms
2. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. CNPA
2. Governance
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