

Democracy, greenwash and signs of revolt in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority

Description



Screenshot from the “introductions” at the start of the meeting

On Monday I watched, or tried to watch, the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority Board meeting online ([see here for papers](#)) . The “lifesize” video link kept cutting out so I had to log back in ten or so times. It appeared from disappearing Board Member and vice-convenor Willie Nisbet that I was not the only person to have the problem. Unfortunately, it is still not possible to check what was said or decided in the missing bits because the LLTNPA still does not make recordings of meetings available afterwards.

This contrasts with the Cairngorms National Park Authority whom, I am pleased to report, has now done what Parkswatch has advocated and made a recording of the meeting available on their website:

Board Meeting

27th November, 2020

Via Lifesize Video Conferencing

[Watch a recording of the meeting here](#)

Recordings will be kept for a maximum of one week from the date of the meeting.

The

CNPA recording was, contrary to the statement at the bottom, still available today ([see here](#)). There is no reason why they shouldn't leave it there, at least until their next Board Meeting when the formal minute will be approved.

Despite the first part of the LLTNPA meeting being devoted to Standing Orders and matters of governance, not a single member of their Board used the opportunity to suggest that recordings of their meetings should be made available public. While LLTNPA Convener, James Stuart, welcomed video conferencing as a means to enable more people to observe the Board and introduced the discussion on the governance papers by stating "*we should always take the opportunity to improve governance*", he doesn't want the process to go too far. He and his Chief Executive are probably only too aware of the 70 plus who watched the Hunter Foundation planning debacle ([see here](#)). The consequences for the National Park Authority if links to that decision-making travesty had been circulated across the world would have been serious.

As it was only 7-8 people were recorded on the screen as viewing the latest debacle. This is not surprising. While Board Members get paid £200 for attending, members of the public are still expected to take a day off for the privilege of observing them. They don't want people to zoom through and only watch the important bits.

The new shambles

Since meetings started being held online and broadcast live, the possibility of Board Members being viewed has, however, had a transformative effect. Some of this has been positive. Two locally elected members, Willie Nisbet and Billy Ronald, who hitherto had said almost nothing, have in the last nine months become quite vocal (and said some good things). The operation of the Board though has become even more convoluted.

When it was possible to attend Board Meetings in person, no-one apart from the top table were introduced and name plates were not visible from the area where the public sat. Now the first 10-15 minutes of meetings are taken up with introductions, when the names of all those in the frame and who speak are clearly displayed (as in the screenshot above). Maybe this was all done for David McCowan who bizarrely appeared as 789520 and at the end of the meeting pointed out to Diane Docherty that she had mistyped her name as Docterty?!

In the past, almost all decisions were, after being proposed and seconded, made on the nod. The Convener would ask if anyone was unhappy with a recommendation and if not it was taken as agreed.

There is nothing wrong with that. But now at the end of each item or paper, the Convener goes round each Board Member individually to ask if they agree. The process is painful and is now applied even where items are simply there for noting. An endless roll call which by my calculation wasted about an hour of the meeting. It is hardly surprising that what the CNPA Board decides in two hours, arguably with more debate, takes the LLTNPA half a day.

To make matters even worse, this method of decision making has been enshrined by a new paragraph in the revised Standing Orders:

“58. Where an officer’s recommendation is moved and seconded and no competent amendment has been tabled, this motion (the officer’s recommendation) will become the decision of the Board and therefore no show of hands is required. The Convener may, however invite Members to indicate their support for the motion by way of a show of hands and in which case the Proper Officer will announce the terms of the motion and take the vote by a show of hands unless the meeting is being held under Standing Order 25 [i.e online] and in which case Members will indicate their voting intentions by verbal confirmation.”

Not a single member of the Board questioned this change. It is worth asking why? I cannot believe that all believe this is good use of their time.

Reduced transparency and accountability

The main discussion on governance was about replacing the Delivery Group, intended to oversee the implementation of significant projects, with a “Futures Group”. Unlike the CNPA, whose Finance and Delivery Group operates in public ([see here](#)), that of the LLTNPA has always operated in secret and is not even mentioned on the Board’s list of Groups and Committees ([see here](#)).

Unfortunately, the governance of the new Futures Group – intended to take a look ahead (not a bad idea) – is even more opaque. Its terms of reference state that because it is not statutory, it won’t meet in public, “*meetings will not be minuted*” and it “*will receive presentations and run facilitated discussion sessions rather than have agendas and reports*”. In other words there is no way for a member of the public to find out what is happening without resorting to endless Freedom of Information requests.

Board Members asked if the Futures Group might be an opportunity to involve “partners” in discussion. The Chief Executive Gordon Watson agreed but said so far no-one had been approached. In the CNPA there are groups on nature, tourism and the uplands which involve Board Members and named outside interests, all of which publish agendas, reports and minutes. So why doesn’t the LLTNPA do this? Not a single Board Member raised questions about the lack of transparency but instead voted to entrench secrecy in their Standing Orders.

Already Board Members cannot meet unless the Chief Executive or their chosen representative is in attendance at the meeting, giving Gordon Watson almost complete control over board business. The revised Standing Orders hand even more power to officers:

“Where the officer’s recommendation has been moved and seconded, any amendment to this motion from a Member must be competent and based on relevant grounds. When required, a Proper Officer, an appropriate Officer, or the Chief Executive or their deputy will provide advice to the Convener on the competency of any motion or amendment moved by a Member. The Convener’s ruling on the competency of any motion or amendment will be final.”

It is surely up to the Board to decide what is relevant? But, apparently unaware of what they were doing, Board Members handed over power to decide what is and what is not relevant to officers and the Convener.

That some Board Members at least are uneasy about what is going on was shown by Ronnie Erskine who, after his disappointing performance on the planning committee (see link above), was back to form. He asked whether it might be an idea to let Board Members express an interest in serving on a Committee, with the implication that the Chief Executive and Convener at present decides who sits on what. Unfortunately, he received no support and got nowhere.

Other modifications to the Standing Orders gave more power to Committee Conveners. The opportunity for the Board to take back some control over planning decisions was missed. Apart from “national developments”, all decisions about whether planning applications should be referred to the Planning Committee are at the discretion of the Committee Convener “*in consultation with the Director of Planning and Rural Development*”. What a contrast to the CNPA which considers ALL planning applications called in by the National Park Authority with no discretion involved.

While the procedure which meant that decisions about whether to hear a deputation to the Board could only be taken at the meeting was very clumsy, after my small win for democracy ([see here](#)) decisions about whether to hear a deputation have now been transferred to the Convener “*in consultation with the Chief Executive*”. Yet more centralisation of power.

Greenwash

The second half of the morning was taken up with the Climate and Nature Emergencies.

The LLTNPA has now produced a “Mission zero route map” and from Gordon Watson’s foreword, it appears that the Chief Executive has now woken from his slumber:

“The impacts of the global climate emergency are already being felt here in the National Park and it is clear that they are already affecting our landscapes, nature, businesses and communities.”

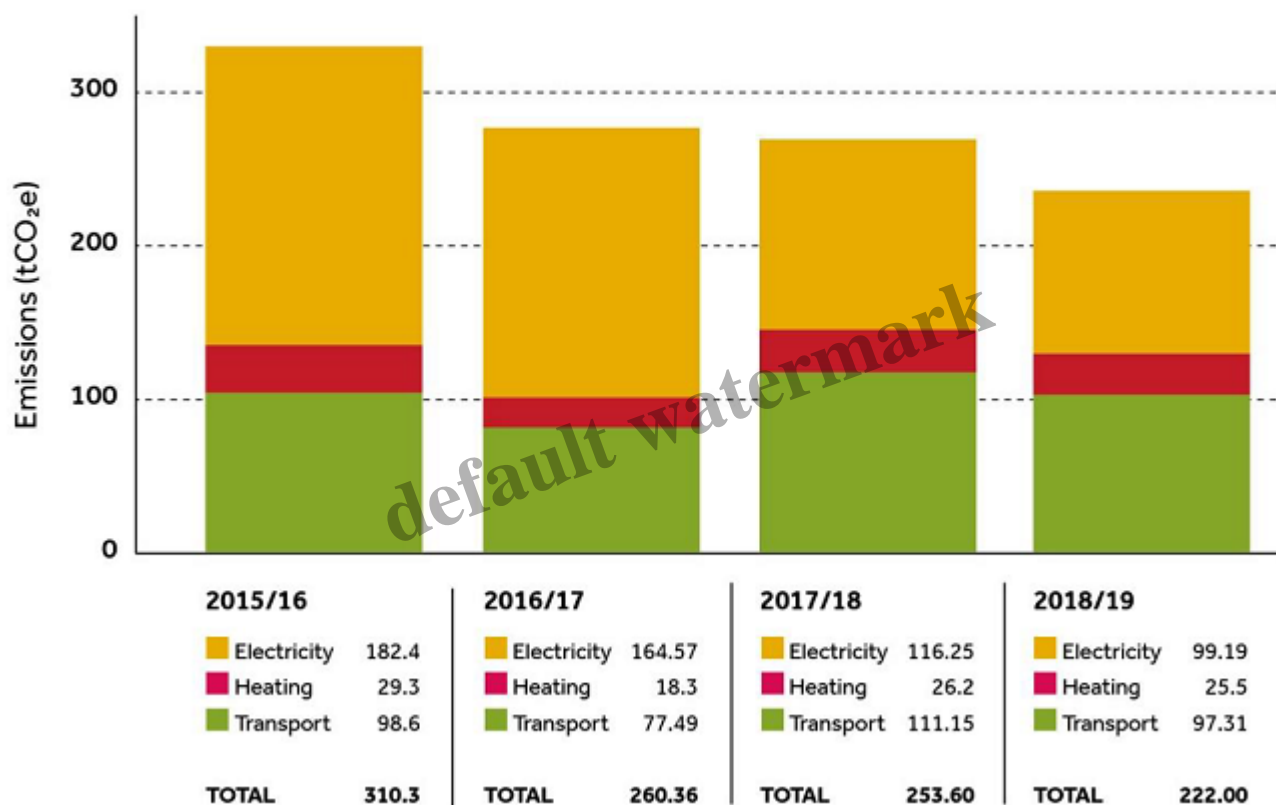
Already? The evidence has been sitting before the LLTNPA’s eyes ever since it was created and, living in the National Park as he does, Mr Watson should know that.

The LLTNPA’s proposed response to the climate emergency is that they should reduce their own emissions to zero by 2030, well ahead of the Scottish Government’s 2045 target. To assist them to do this they have, rather bizarrely, got their Litter Prevention Manager, Nik Turner, to work on the case. I have nothing against Ms Turner, its not her fault she has been asked to work on this, but it is

presumably an indication that the LLTNPA lacks staff with the skills to do this and that their senior management have decided that, despite the disaster this summer, there is nothing more they need to do to address the litter problem.

The whole net zero route map appears, I am afraid, a deeply cynical attempt to tick boxes with Scottish Ministers rather than deal with the real issues.

Emissions Reductions (tCO₂e) 2015/16 – 2018/19



*“The graph outlines our emissions over this period, and shows a reduction of 38%, from 310 to c.222 tCo2e. This reduction **has largely been due to the marked decarbonisation of the national grid** through use of more renewable energy sources and also subsequent amendments to the reporting metrics used to calculate emissions.”*

In other words so far reduction in carbon emissions have had almost nothing to do with actions taken by the LLTNPA.

“We have however also taken active steps to reduce our emissions. A particular success is our road vehicle fleet: as of March 2020 our road fleet was approximately 37% electric or hybrid vehicles; and despite increased operational need for staff to be on the ground across the National Park, we have also reduced our overall emissions associated with transport. Other incremental changes that have improved our energy efficiency have included enhanced internal training on our biomass heating system at our head office at Carrochan and shifting to LED lighting across our estate wherever possible”

No account is given here of the carbon emitted in producing electric cars. Responsibility for that is shunted somewhere else in the LLTNPA's carbon accounting methodology. Nor is any attempt made to consider the carbon consumed by LLTNPA staff travelling to work. That appears out the equation too even though those emissions only exist because the LLTNPA exists. You can see the drift, as long as the LLTNPA can find a way of heating its buildings through renewable energy and convert all its own vehicle fleet to electric, it will be able to claim to be a world leader. The paper estimates the cost of investing in these changes will be £500k and be totally dependant on funding from the Scottish Government.

One question from Chris Spray, another Board Member to have regained his critical faculties after the Hunter Foundation meeting, exposed the stupidity: might there not be better ways to use the £500k to reduce carbon emissions taking account of what goes on in the National Park as a whole? For example, would £500k invested in public transport not achieve more? The answer to that seemed to be the real challenges are far too complicated. Who then is to show a lead in the National Park if not the National Park Authority?

Even if the LLTNPA does convert to electric cars and heating from renewable energy sources, it will still have some carbon emissions (eg from its patrol boats). It is planning to offset these and, in a final piece of cynicism, it proposes to use work funded by others to do this:

“Our preference for offsetting would be to allow us to account for a portion of the sequestration activity that we facilitate and deliver within the National Park, for example, through peatland restoration and woodland creation projects that capture carbon”

Claire Chapman, to her credit, questioned this but the route map to zero was not amended. You can anticipate now a scramble among public authorities to claim a portion of the £250m peat bog restoration programme being funded by the Scottish Government against their own emissions. Are we to expect treble carbon accounting, with landowners, public authorities and the Scottish Government itself all trying to claim the same patch of woodland to justify their own continued emissions?

After this, it was refreshing to hear Simon Jones and Chris Spray persuade the LLTNPA sign up to something called the Edinburgh Declaration. This was a clever way of getting the the LLTNPA to acknowledge here is a nature emergency, and to *“show greater leadership and deliver more for restoring nature in the National Park”*. It was also an implicit acknowledgement that the LLTNPA has failed to deliver its conservation purpose since it was created. Alan Bell, a staff member, provide a succinct summary of the failures: flooding; rises in water temperature (which impact on aquatic life); the spread of pathogens such as phytopthera, which are destroying larch plantations through the National Park; the limited regeneration of native woodland, which might help stabilise slopes in places like the Rest and Be Thankful; etc. He also pointed out the “destructive vandalism” of the EU's Common

Agricultural Policy, the first time I have heard anyone at the LLTNPA refer to the adverse impacts of the rural subsidy regime in the National Park. A reminder that there are some good people in the National Park.

All three got a lot of support from the Board and one got the sense this could be a turning point. Billy Ronald, for example, asked if the LLTNPA could do more to promote native woodland? It's just a year since Billy and other members of the LLTNPA Board signed up to their Trees and Woodland Strategy ([see here](#)) which basically created a framework for the continuation of the industrial forestry practices that have been so destructive to nature across the National Park. If instead of seeing their main purpose as being to do endorse decisions from on high, LLTNPA Board Members started to use their critical faculties and insist on their right to take decisions, all might not yet be lost in the National Park.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. climate change
2. conservation
3. Governance
4. LLTNPA

Date Created

December 9, 2020

Author

nickkempe

default watermark