

The Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority – avoiding the issues that matter (1)

Description

The Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority Board meeting two weeks ago was only the second I have not observed in seven years. There appeared no point. The whole agenda ([see here](#)) was based on corporate box ticking – finance reports, audit reports, corporate governance:

6. [Audit and Risk Committee Annual Report](#) (Ronnie Erskine / Eilidh McKerry)

7. [Virtual Meetings](#) (Pete Wightman / Douglas Smith)

8. [Board Calendar Update – revised 2022 schedule and draft 2023 schedule](#) (Pete Wightman / Douglas Smith)

[Appendix 1 Amended 2022 calendar](#)

[Appendix 2 Draft 2023 calendar](#)

Session 2: 11.45 am

9. [CEO Report](#) (James Stuart / Gordon Watson)

10. [2021/22 Annual Operational Plan Progress Report](#) (Pete Wightman)

[Appendix Annual Operational Plan Progress Report](#)

11. [Financial Report](#) (Pete Wightman / Eilidh McKerry)

[Appendix Management Accounts to 30th June 2021](#)

A snapshot of the agenda, enough to put anyone off!

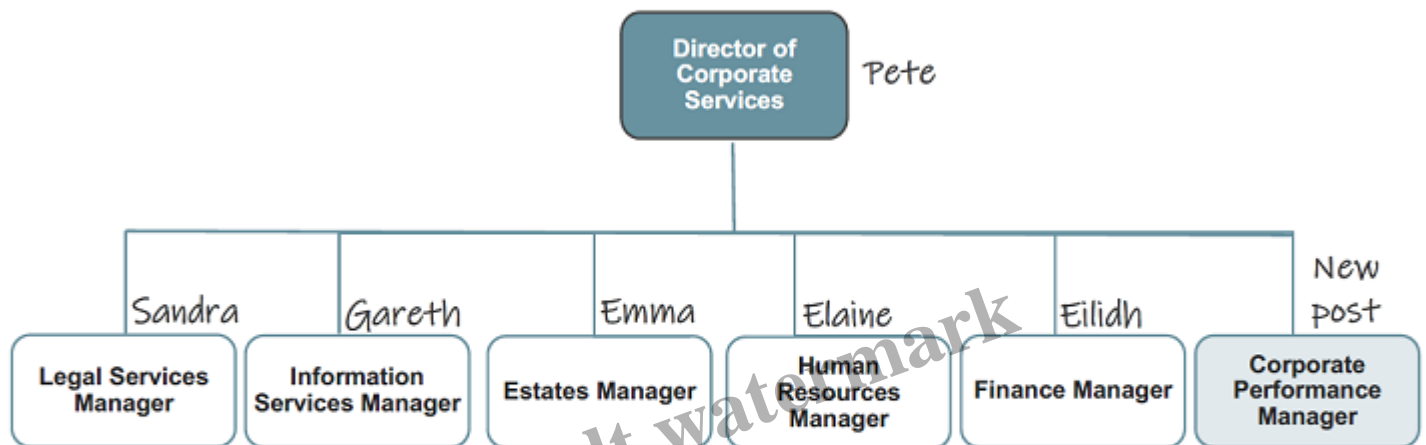
There was no substantive item about any of the issues that matter: the environmental crisis; the climate crisis; the impact of Covid-19 on the local economy; or the infrastructure for visitors in the National Park which faced unprecedented pressures due to Covid staycationing this summer.

The LLTNPA is doing some things on these issues of course but the decisions about them are being taken by staff and not by the Board. Decisions are not, as a consequence, made in public but rather noted in various corporate documents that are then rubber stamped by the Board. That leaves Board Meetings with very little to discuss, hence why the meetings are only worth observing if you want to understand how little democratic control there is in the National Park.

A new manager to control the Board

In April, I questioned the number of new managers that the LLTNPA was appointing with the extra £3 million it was had been awarded by the Scottish Government ([see here](#)). It turns out that the list of managers in corporate services was not complete:

Corporate Services



CONFIDENTIAL: Operating Model update for partners

March 2021

The most recent addition to the structure is a new Board and Committee Manager, Douglas Smith – the title says a lot – who appears to have replaced the former Committee Clerk. He, together with the Director of Corporate Services, Pete Wightman, was the author of two papers presented to the meeting for endorsement.

The first was on virtual meetings. It recommended that, once the provisions of the Coronavirus Act expire on 30th September, the facility for Board Members to participate in and for the public to observe statutory Board Meetings (i.e the Main Board, Planning and Risk and Audit Committees) virtually should continue. While this will particularly help Board Members who live in England, not least by helping to reduce their “*travel related financial costs and carbon emissions*”, it will also mean the public can continue to observe these meetings without attending in person. That is positive. Public attendance at the main Board Meeting has increased from 3-4 (in my experience) to an average of 11 (according to LLTNPA staff) since the meetings were livestreamed.

The paper explains the reasons for this: more members of the public, “*who may not have been able to attend in-person meetings due to their location, time constraints, or physical abilities*”, have been “reached” by livestreaming. However, the paper then ignores the obvious conclusion, that if webcasts remained available for a period of time after meetings even more people could be reached! I have been calling on the LLTNPA to follow the example of other public authorities and publish their meetings as webcasts for several years now. I also wrote formally to the Convener, James Stuart, suggesting this only to be rebuffed, with him claiming that no-one else was calling for meetings to be recorded.

Perhaps one of the councillors on the Board from Perth and Kinross or West Dunbartonshire Councils, both of which now make recordings of their meetings available, argued at the meeting that the LLTNPA should do the right thing and record their meetings? If not, I hope the new Minister for National Parks, Lorna Slater, will intervene.

The second paper was a schedule of future Board meetings, not just for next year but also for 2023!:

DRAFT 2022 Board Calendar

	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
Sat 1										1		
Sun 2					1					2		
Mon 3	Public Notice				2	Public Notice: 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, 100, 110, 120, 130, 140, 150, 160, 170, 180, 190, 200, 210, 220, 230, 240, 250, 260, 270, 280, 290, 300, 310, 320, 330, 340, 350, 360, 370, 380, 390, 400, 410, 420, 430, 440, 450, 460, 470, 480, 490, 500, 510, 520, 530, 540, 550, 560, 570, 580, 590, 600, 610, 620, 630, 640, 650, 660, 670, 680, 690, 700, 710, 720, 730, 740, 750, 760, 770, 780, 790, 800, 810, 820, 830, 840, 850, 860, 870, 880, 890, 900, 910, 920, 930, 940, 950, 960, 970, 980, 990, 1000	1	Public Notice				
Tue 4	Public Notice	1	1		3			2		4	1	
Wed 5		2	2		4	1		3		5	2	
Thu 6	Public Notice (after 10:00am)		3		5	2		4	1	6	3	1
Fri 7		4	4		6	3	1	5	2	7	4	2
Sat 8		5	5	2	7	4	2	6	3	8	5	3
Sun 9		6	6	3	8	5	3	7	4	9	6	4
Mon 10		7	7	4	9	6	4	8	5	10	7	5
Tue 11		8	8	5	10	7	5	9	6	11	8	6
Wed 12		9	9	6	11	8	6	10	7	12	9	7
Thu 13		10	10	7	12	9	7	11	8	13	10	8
Fri 14		11	11	8	13	10	8	12	9	14	11	9
Sat 15		12	12	9	14	11	9	13	10	15	12	10
Sun 16		13	13	10	15	12	10	14	11	16	13	11
Mon 17		14	14	11	16	13	11	15	12	17	14	12
Tue 18		15	15	12	17	14	12	16	13	18	15	13
Wed 19		16	16	13	18	15	13	17	14	19	16	14
Thu 20		17	17	14	19	16	14	18	15	20	17	15
Fri 21		18	18	15	20	17	15	19	16	21	18	16
Sat 22		19	19	16	21	18	16	20	17	22	19	17
Sun 23		20	20	17	22	19	17	21	18	23	20	18
Mon 24		21	21	18	23	20	18	22	19	24	21	19
Tue 25		22	22	19	24	21	19	23	20	25	22	20
Wed 26	Public Notice	23	23	20	25	22	20	24	21	26	23	21
Thu 27		24	24	21	26	23	21	25	22	27	24	22
Fri 28		25	25	22	27	24	22	26	23	28	25	23
Sat 29		26	26	23	28	25	23	27	24	29	26	24
Sun 30		27	27	24	29	26	24	28	25	30	27	25
Mon 31	Planning & Access Plan	Planning & Access Plan	Planning & Access Plan	Planning & Access Plan	Planning & Access Plan	Planning & Access Plan	Planning & Access Plan	Planning & Access Plan	Planning & Access Plan	Planning & Access Plan	Planning & Access Plan	Planning & Access Plan
Tue 1		28	28	25	30	27	25	29	26	31	28	26
Wed 2		29	29	26	31	28	26	30	27		29	27
Thu 3		30	30	27		29	27		30	30	30	28
Fri 4			31	28		30	28		31		31	29
Sat 5				29			29					30
Sun 6				30			30					31

The Green denotes Planning and Access Meetings many of which are cancelled due to

“lack of business”

The key thing to note here is that the Board (yellow) is scheduled to meet just four times a year and one of those is a private “strategic” session. Just three meetings to take decisions, each of which is then stuffed with governance papers (finance reports, annual reports, corporate plan etc – in effect staff seeking endorsement for decisions already made – leaving no room for the main Board to decide anything.

By contrast the Futures Group, which was set up a year ago and as a non-statutory committee and meets in secret, has six meetings scheduled (dark blue) and another six dates (light blue) earmarked if they are needed. The idea behind the Futures Group – getting Board Members involved in considering issues early on – is not all bad (and I will consider what it’s being doing in another post) – but in my view the papers it has been considering, like sustainable transport, should have gone to the main Board. It has become another means by which staff sideline the main Board.

The continued failure to deliver – £200k cashback to the Scottish Government

Despite all the new managers, the finance report for April – June ([see here](#)) revealed that “we have identified £200k of uncommitted capital as noted above that could be re-allocated by SG [Scottish Government] if needed”. This is money that appears to have been awarded to help the LLTNPA make its operations carbon neutral but already, in the first quarter of the new financial year, LLTNPA senior management have decided they can’t spend it. Extraordinary! Having failed to consult the LLTNPA Board on how to spend the extra capital allocation, staff have now decided to return it. This was not even a recommendation, the Board were asked to note the contents of the paper.

Even if ring-fenced to reduce carbon emissions, had the LLTNPA asked local communities or recreational organisations for ideas of how to spend £200k this year, they might have received dozens of ideas from insulating community halls to creating new paths – enabling people to ditch the car. Sadly, the overriding priority of senior staff at the LLTNPA appears to be keeping their sponsorship team at the Scottish Government happy.

Keeping key issues out of sight of the public – what is the point of the Board

There were three issues that really matter which were reported to the Board Meeting but, instead of being considered as papers in their own right, they were tucked away in the Chief Executive’s Report:

- visitor management (a report will be made to the December Board Meeting by which time it will be too late for the Board to change anything);
- two very important legal cases on access, about which more anon (all credit to the LLTNPA’s Access Team for this but why doesn’t access deserve a place on the agenda?); and
- water safety on Loch Lomond which I will consider in my next post.

In the two and a half years since I blogged ([see here](#)) about the need for the Board to take back control from staff, the evidence suggests the opposite has happened and staff have gained even more control

over the Board. Perhaps its time the Board once again consider abolishing themselves, as a number of members to their credit proposed four years ago ([see here](#)), or failing that write to the Minister for National Parks and ask for help?

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. climate change
2. Governance
3. LLTNPA
4. Local communities
5. Minister National Parks
6. natural environment
7. outdoor recreation

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