

The Loch Lomond & Trossachs National Park Authority avoiding the issues that matter (2) – water safety on Loch Lomond

Description

The number of people drowning in Loch Lomond has been a major issue for years, with our public authorities being far more concerned about the health and safety standards being applied to competitors in the European Swimming Championships, all by definition great swimmers, than the general public ([see here](#)). But even after the terrible events this summer ([see here](#) for critical coverage in the Guardian), LLTNPA's senior management avoided producing a paper for the last Board Meeting that analysed the issues and set out clearly what the National Park Authority could do about them. Instead information about water safety was hidden away in their Chief Executive's Report ([see here](#)).

This was despite the LLTNPA Chief Executive, Gordon Watson, claiming in a news release on 25th July ([see here](#)) that:

“Over the coming days we will, along with our partners, reflect on the events of this weekend and discuss what more can be done by us all to prevent further tragedies in our lochs.”

So what did the reflection conclude and why wasn't the outcome presented to the Board in the form of a practical plan, maybe using some of the unused £200k which staff had reported at the Board Meeting had been offered back to the Scottish Government?

A possible answer is that producing a proper paper might encourage public scrutiny of what the LLTNPA has actually been doing to reduce the likelihood of accidents. Here is the start of the Chief Executive's report:

5. Water Safety

- 5.1. We wanted to provide an update to the Board on actions that are being taken following the tragic water-related deaths in the National Park earlier this summer. We send our sympathies to the family and friends of those who lost their lives, as well as our thanks to all of those involved in the emergency response to the incidents, including our staff.
- 5.2. Our own water safety project has been running since 2019. It has made significant progress since then including commissioning a report by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA) in 2020. ROSPA assessed the sites around Loch Lomond that we own and manage and made a number of recommendations. In response, over the past year we have been progressing these recommendations including installing a number of new warning signs and PRE around Loch Lomond, with the next stages moving to other lochs in the Park.

While claiming significant progress on their “own” water safety project, just six months before, at the

March Board meeting, this was described as being “behind schedule” ([see here](#)):

AOP Activity	AOP Deliverable	YTD Progress (Feb 2021)	Rating
2. Enhancing our visitor experience, volunteering, and active living opportunities			
2.1 We will continue to promote ways to get active in the outdoors.	Finalise our 'Active Park, Healthy People' plan	In light of ongoing COVID-19 impacts, proposal to defer plan until March 2022 submission	Postponed to 2021/22 due to COVID-19
	Progress key aspects of our Active Park, Healthy People plan such as developing new health projects.	No capacity across partners due to COVID-19 to fully consider and develop new projects at this time	Postponed to 2021/22 due to COVID-19
	Support the delivery of Go Swim Loch Lomond in summer 2020, increasing participation from last year.	Event cancelled for 2020 in conjunction with delivery partner and sponsors.	Cancelled due to COVID-19
	Explore new opportunities to promote outdoor swimming and water safety throughout the National Park	Majority of Infrastructure has now been installed at National Park sites around Loch Lomond, this includes upgraded Public Rescue Equipment and water safety signage where appropriate. Suite of visitor and site risk assessments behind schedule, staff continue to work towards a revised timeline where possible. The project will continue into 2021/22 to finalise our water safety policy and ensure RoSPA recommendations are completed.	Behind schedule

More specifically “the suite of visitor and site risk assessments were behind schedule”. One appreciates that these could have been affected by Covid, but the Chief Executive’s report fails to state whether risk assessments had been completed for Ardlui and Balloch before the four deaths in July. Why not? What is the LLTNPA trying to hide?

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Sign on Luss Pier, managed by the LLTNPA

The LLTNPA commissioned a report from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents in 2020, which is referred to in the Chief Executive's report, but this only considered the sites the LLTNPA owns and manages. It does not appear to have been published on either the LLTNPA or RoSPA websites. It's impossible to ascertain therefore how far its recommendations have been met even for the sites the LLTNPA manages.

If the original plan was fit for purpose and the signage really complete as claimed in March, why does the Chief Executive's report say new campaign signs have been installed?

5.5. We also use our communications channels to provide water safety advice and important information and this has in particular been a key focus this summer. New campaign signs have also been installed and we are using our website and social media channels to promote these messages.

And why, after all the drownings in the National Park over the years, has the LLTNPA only started to draft a Water Safety policy this year? Some of the measures that could be taken to reduce deaths are obvious, as Jackie Baillie, the West Dunbartonshire MSP, pointed out to the Guardian (link above): not just warning signage but lifebelts (which could help reduce the number of people who drown as a result of jumping in to try and save others) and lifeguards on popular beaches.

A primary reason for the lack of practical action is that the LLTNPA, which is supposed to be the lead for outdoor recreation in the National Park as a whole, has been taking a very narrow view of its responsibilities and only considering its own “estate”. That is clear from the next paragraph in the Chief Executive’s report to their meeting two weeks ago:

5.6. Responsibility for water safety is shared amongst a number of bodies, including Local Authorities, landowners, and emergency services. Whilst the National Park Authority is not legally required to lead on water safety across the Park we consider that the most effective way to make improvements to water safety outcomes and prevent tragedies is for the National Park Authority to work in partnership across these bodies.

Actually, this claim is disputable. The LLTNPA have a statutory duty to promote public enjoyment of the National Park and have only been too happy to promote water based tourism, e.g. through mass swimming events. Doing that, while trying to absolve themselves from responsibility, is an untenable position. It seems that it may have taken the intervention of the Scottish Minister responsible for community safety, Ash Denham, who convened a meeting after the deaths by drowning in July, to knock some heads together.



Sign at Luss September 2021

Reducing the number of people who drown in Scotland is a complex matter and in my view the single greatest difference could be made through the Scottish Government ensuring all children were taught to swim at school. It is not the LLTNPA’s responsibility to do that. But where they do have a key role is in advising the public of natural hazards, promoting safety in popular visitor spots and preventing

accidents caused by competing interests.

Although cheap, signage is not the best way to increase public awareness of natural hazards and water safety. If you buy or hire a paddle board, someone will almost certainly advise you to wear a life jacket, and talking to other more experienced people is the best way to learn about safety issues. Promoting outdoor education centres and giving people the opportunity to experience and learn about various water-based activities under the supervision of qualified instructors is likely to be far more effective than signage in the medium to long-term.

While not responsible for outdoor education centres directly, the LLTNPA have kept silent while they have been shut down and there was not a single mention of the role of outdoor education in the LLTNPA draft Outdoor Recreation Plan ([see here](#)). Further consideration of that plan, which would also have been the appropriate place to include plans for water safety, has now been delayed to next year five whole years AFTER the last outdoor recreation plan expired ([see here](#)).

Another area where the LLTNPA clearly does have direct responsibility for water safety is in preventing accidents caused by competing water-based recreational interests. There can be no disputing this on Loch Lomond. The LLTNPA is responsible for the water byelaws there, part of whose purpose is to ensure the “*many types of recreational activity to be undertaken safely and responsibly*”. And it is the LLTNPA that is responsible for enforcing them.

Problems have been increasing over the last few years and the great increase in wild water swimmers, paddle boarders and people using inflatable kayaks (all good things) combined with speeding boats is an accident waiting to happen.

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Without floats, swimmers are almost invisible, but in choppy water and poor visibility even large floats may be difficult to see

12:17



< Iain McFadyen in Glasgow Paddleboarders

Group posts



Iain McFadyen is in Luss.

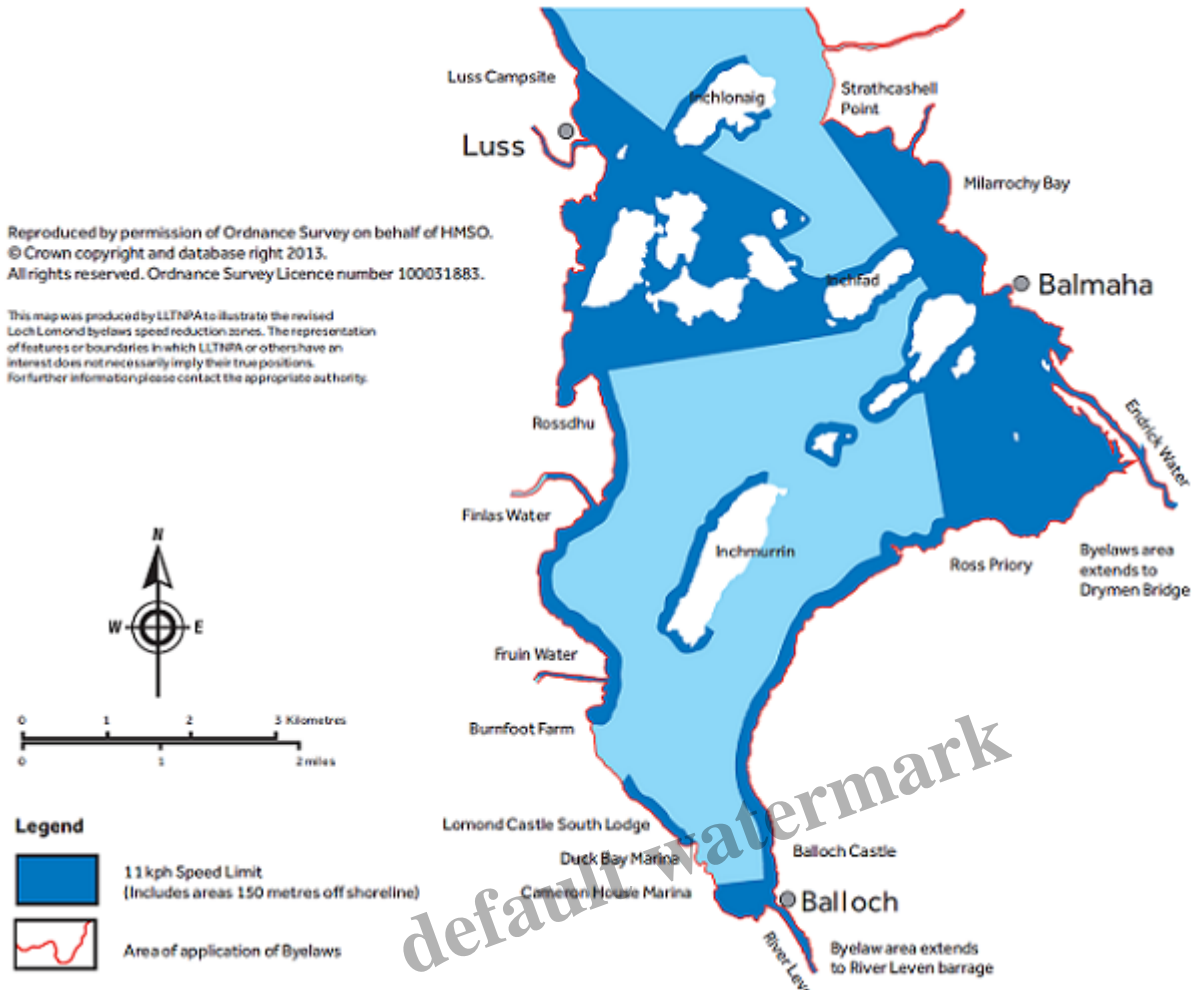


Wednesday at 23:51 ·

* Sunset paddle safety note *

We watched an unlit speedboat zooming around, pulling a towable with a passenger, well after dark at Luss this evening 😡. If you might be out anywhere with motorised traffic after sunset make sure you have a light with you. I prefer a head torch which you can shine towards the motorised craft to give them a chance to avoid you.

Under the Loch Lomond byelaws 2013 ([see here](#)) any vessel, defined as a craft capable of being used for transportation, has to carry a light between sunset and sunrise – though how a paddle boarder or kayak should carry a lantern (a single head torch is not enough) is unclear. Moreover, in the restricted areas on the loch, which include Luss, there is a speed limit of 11 kph.



Even the wake from a motorised vessel going at 11 kph is challenging enough to an inexperienced paddle boarder but around Luss the speed limits are being frequently breached. I am reliably informed the even the commercial operators ignore them, while others (and I appreciate it is only a minority who behave in this way) go out of their way to speed:

10:45



  **Glasgow Paddleboarders**
Denise Anderson · 59 mins · 



Why do jetskis feel the need to come close up to someone on a board knowing fine well that they make the water choppy and chances are your at risk of falling off the board, do they really think this is hilarious, again I'm speaking of loch lomond where there's the whole loch for them to use and no need for this stupid behaviour!



Like



Comment

 Ian Walker and 9 others

All comments 



Mary Cassells

Had this at Maidens too. Waited until we were going past, then roared off leaving a decent wake 🙄.

Altho, guy at Prestwick is a lot more considerate 👍

36 m Like Reply



Graham Kelly

Honestly, I think many simply don't see us or understand the impact.

33 m Like Reply



Iain Walker

They do that to swimmers also. Had a few too many close calls on loch Lomond

Many of these people fail to display registration numbers, as required by the byelaws, so its very difficult to report them, while the LLTNPA patrol boat is notable by its absence. Perhaps the water rangers are having to cover too many areas? But Luss Bay has this summer (there are numerous posts on Facebook about this) been full jet skis showing off at full throttle between swimmers and paddle boarders. Why has it not been a priority? Meantime, jet skis fly down the west side of Inchtavannach, an area very popular with swimmers. How someone has not been killed in a collision or drowned is something of a miracle.

What needs to happen

Contrary to all the waffle in the Chief Executive's report about the LLTNPA taking water safety seriously, the reality is they are doing almost nothing. The LLTNPA Board needs to take back control, take a strategic view of their responsibilities, analyse what has been happening and then produce a practical plan AS A MATTER OF URGENCY. This should:

- Clearly set out out its role in relation to water safety within the wider context (the need for swimming lessons, outdoor education etc);
- Commit to an early review of the Loch Lomond byelaws, reducing speed limits further in congested areas like Luss Bay and the River Leven and to enforcing speed limits in the restricted areas
- Consider what practical measures could be taken to reduce the likelihood of accidents (life belts, life guards etc) and what resources would be required to deliver this.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. Governance
2. LLTNPA
3. outdoor recreation
4. visitor management

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