

Democracy and voting systems – the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park local member elections

Description

Local Board Member Elections 2022



Elections are taking place this summer to recruit five members to our Board, chosen by the people who live in the National Park. If you live in the National Park you can help shape the next chapter for this amazing place by [standing as a candidate](#) to become a Board member, or by casting your vote to elect the local member in your ward.

2022 is an historic year as we are celebrating 20 years of the National Park. Much has changed in the time since the National Park was first created and the role of the National Park Authority continues to evolve, with a focus on tackling the climate emergency and nature crisis more than ever before. To meet this challenge we need a wide range of people with different perspectives and skills on our Board to help guide the organisation, so that we can make sure that the qualities that make this place so special are restored and protected for everyone to enjoy for now and the future.

On 11th April the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) notified stakeholders of the local member elections which are due to be decided by postal ballot on 7th July

Four years ago, I blogged both before ([here](#)) and after ([here](#)) the last set of Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) local member elections, arguing there was an urgent need for their Board to consider how the election of local members could be made more democratic in future. Having followed every meeting since, I can say that this has never been discussed by the Board. The forthcoming elections were not on the agenda of the last Board Meeting held on 13th March

and there was not even a mention of them Chief Executive's report to that meeting. Since most of the meeting was totally inaudible ([see here](#)), I cannot categorically state that there was no mention of the local member elections but you get the picture.

Democracy and the LLTNPA Board

The most likely reason the LLTNPA have avoided discussion of how they could be made more democratic is it is not in the interests of existing Board Members to do so. From a local member perspective, as I explained after the last elections (see second link above), some candidates were elected with very little competition, meaning it is not in their interests to do anything that encourages more people to stand, while those who did face competition have benefited from the first past the post voting system. In Ward 1, for example, which covers Cowal and North Loch Lomond, Bob Darracott was elected with just 113 votes or by under 6% of the population.

Arguably it would have been just as democratic to select a Board Member for the area by picking names out of a hat. I suspect most people chosen in this way would have welcomed the opportunity to receive c£600 a month while devoting three days to LLTNPA business.

The contrast between the first past the post system used in our National Parks and the Single Transferable Vote used in local authority elections, which allows voters to rank candidates, is striking. With nine people standing last time in Ward 1, five of whom received 80 votes or over, it is quite probable that under the STV system someone else other than Bob Darracott would have been elected. The current locally elected LLTNPA Board Members know this and have no incentive to upset the gravy train.

At the same time it suits the Board Members nominated by the Scottish Government and Councils that the locally elected members have such a weak mandate. It reduces the likelihood of any democratically inspired challenge to the decisions the rest of the Board are making. As a consequence the rotten voting system, the most rotten in Scotland, has been allowed to continue without comment.

Encouraging people to stand as candidates?

Ostensibly the LLTNPA are trying to encourage more people to stand in the election as per the email they distributed. They have set up an election page on their website ([see here](#)) and have been holding briefing sessions for candidates.

However their publicity (see above) implying that only residents of the National Park can stand in the election appears wrong. My understanding is the elections are still governed by the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority Elections (Scotland) Order 2002 ([see here](#)) which states:

The Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park Elections (Scotland) Order 2002

Scottish Statutory Instruments ▶ 2002 No. 202 ▶ PART II ▶ Article 6

The screenshot shows the website interface for the Scottish Statutory Instruments. At the top, there are navigation tabs for 'Table of Contents', 'Content', and 'More Resources'. Below these are buttons for 'Previous: Provision', 'Next: Provision', 'Plain View', and 'Print Options'. On the left, there is a 'What Version' section with options for 'Latest available (Revised)' and 'Original (As made)'. The main content area displays the 'Status' of the document and the text of Article 6, which states: '6. A person shall, unless disqualified by virtue of this Order, be qualified for being nominated as a candidate for election as, or for being elected, or for being an elected member only if he or she has attained the age of 21 years.'

Being over 21 appears the main restriction on putting yourself up for election. (As an aside, it is interesting that the LLTNPA, having set up a youth committee, have done nothing to remove the age barrier that prevents young people being elected to the main board).

The following clause (7) sets out people who are disqualified from standing but this makes no reference to residence. So, unless the law has been changed and has not been updated on the UK legislation website, people living outwith the National Park can stand as a candidate so long as they are nominated by 10 residents of the National Park.

This is very important. There are many people living in Balloch, for example, whose residence is just outwith the National Park boundary who have a keen interest in what happens with Flamingo Land and might as a consequence be inspired to stand at these elections. That, one suspects, is the last thing the LLTNPA wants.

There are significant other constraints on candidates standing in these elections getting their message across which creates another barrier to participation.

Election expenses are still restricted to Â£100 (Regulation 49), twenty years after the LLTNPA was formed, compared to over Â£800 in local authority elections. This makes it almost impossible for candidates to do much campaigning (the lifeblood of elections and what gets people to vote), particularly in the more rural wards due to the very high costs of fuel.

The provision made for Stirling Council, which organises the elections, to circulate 250 word statements from candidates does very little to counter this. Candidates can say very little in 250 words, which may suit some political parties but hampers individuals trying to get their message across.

Moreover, to save costs, these statements are now sent out with the ballot papers, too late to spur any real debate.

Low voter turnout

While the LLTNPA wards are considerably smaller and boundaries different to those used for local authorities, turnout at the last elections was considerably lower. For the LLTNPA electoral wards it

ranged from 26.4 to 40% whereas by comparison in the last local elections turnout in Trossachs and Teith (Stirling) was 59.4%, South Lomond (West Dunbartonshire) 48.9% and North Lomond (Argyll and Bute) 55.4%. In other words between 10 and 20% more of the eligible electorate voted in the local authority elections compared to LLTNPA elections.

If local authority democracy in Scotland is in a poor state, as many people believe, the state of democracy in our National Parks appears dire. And that is despite all voting being by postal vote which makes it easier for some people to vote.

Part of the reason for this is the rotten electoral system as described above. There is little incentive for people to stand because it is made so difficult for candidates to get their message across and then they are faced with the lottery of first past the post.

There is, however, a deeper reason which lies in the record of the LLTNPA. It has done almost nothing for residents of the National Park. For example, rural depopulation continues, as a result of poorly paid jobs and the lack of affordable/social housing. And where residents have raised concerns, for example the need for much better public transport as highlighted by the Park's Youth Committee, or through local community councils these remain unaddressed.

How to make the LLTNPA more democratic?

If you check the pages of the Electoral Commission, the UK body responsible for promoting public confidence in the voting system ([see here](#)), or the Electoral Reform Society Scotland ([see here](#)) there does not appear to be a single mention of the voting system in Scotland's National Parks. The issue appears to be off their radars. Meantime successive Scottish Ministers have failed even to update the regulations governing the National Park elections. That needs to change and I will be writing to all asking them to consider the issues raised in this post. I would encourage anyone else concerned with the state of democracy in the National Park to do so.

In order to counter the very real difficulties candidates in the local member elections in getting their message across, I am considering offering all candidates, whatever their views, the opportunity to put their case on parkswatch. With official nominations closing on 2nd June, if parkswatch published statements from all candidates who were interested a week later, ward by ward, that would give almost a month for those ideas to be circulated and discussed before votes are counted on 7th July. I would welcome any feedback on this suggestion. I hope all the local media will do the same.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. Governance
2. LLTNPA

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