

## The crisis in democracy and the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority

### Description

As the UK Government and possibly the British state continues to unravel, today is local member election day for the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA).

Back in May, when I wrote a series of blogs on democracy in the National Park (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)), I had hoped the parkswatch could play a small part in helping to make these local member elections more democratic. While Stirling Council should have circulated election statements from all candidates along with the postal ballots, these are limited to just 250 words. Anyone who has tried to make decisions between candidates standing for election, whether this is for a trade union, company board or voluntary organisation, will know that making informed choices on the basis of such short statements is almost impossible. Unless you know the person, it's almost impossible to tell what they stand for or whether they will do a good job when elected.

Information, therefore, really is power and is key to making democracy work. One advantage that local elections have over other types of election is that electors are more likely to know the candidate or what they stand for. A disadvantage, however, is that people who hold a lot of power locally, like large landowners, can often exert undue influence on how people vote. For example, it will be interesting to see how that pans out on east Loch Lomond where one of the candidates is the son of the local laird. I had hoped parkswatch could play a small part in rectifying this information gap but it has proved beyond my capacity to do so. I apologise to readers and those candidates who did get in touch and were up for making their views more widely known.

### The role of the LLTNPA in the local member elections

Improving how our democratic organisations work, however, should not be dependent on individuals or the media but should be built into how those organisations function.

Unfortunately, the papers in item 7 of the June meeting of the LLTNPA ([see here](#)), entitled "Board Appointments 2022, Update and Board role profiles" suggest that the opposite is happening in the National Park.

The main paper ([see here](#)) under this item claimed:

*"A full Communications Plan has been developed and is being implemented to raise awareness of the elections, firstly with a focus on potential candidates and now to encourage engagement and participation in voting across the five wards."*

This is contradicted by the fact that nothing has been added to Local Member election section ([see here](#)) of the LLTNPA website since May. Without information about candidates, the choices on offer

and the differences between them, any attempt to encourage engagement and participation in voting is likely to be unsuccessful.

The LLTNPA's claim that they wanted to encourage more people to put themselves up for election has already failed, with only two candidates standing in three of the five wards. The paper also claimed that:

*there had been communication with around 30 people expressing interest in the election across all Wards, with a 50/50 gender split in enquiries from potential candidates.*

Of the 14 candidates in total, one is a woman.

Since nominations closed, the LLTNPA has issued just one news release, on 29th June, and that is to urge residents of the National Park to vote ([see here](#)). They are unlikely to do so unless they know what they are voting for and have a real choice. Today, I have submitted a Freedom of Information requesting a copy of the full communications plan.

## What right does the LLTNPA have to determine who can stand for election?

The democratic deficit, however, goes far deeper than a failure in communications. Accompanying the Board paper were nine appendices setting out role profiles for Board Members which the current board was asked to approve. Here I will consider the Member role profile and the Convener role profile.

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### Key Skills of an Effective Board Member:

- Ability to contribute effectively to organisational strategy and development.
- Ability to work collaboratively and constructively with key partners and stakeholders.
- Ability to communicate effectively.
- Ability to analyse and review complex issues, weigh up conflicting opinions and reach informed decisions
- Ability to constructively and supportively challenge.
- Ability to monitor performance and governance.

This

completely contradicts basic democratic principles, which is that almost anyone (there are exclusions for people who are judged mentally unwell etc) can stand for election. There is NO list of skills for people who want to stand to be a local councillor or member of the Scottish Parliament yet the Convener and senior staff working for the LLTNPA (the paper was in their name) effectively decided

there should be for people wanting to stand for the LLTNPA Board.

As proof of their usurpation of power, the list of key skills was included in the nomination packs and sent out to all people expressing an interest in standing in the elections ([see here](#) for an example) BEFORE the profile had been considered or approved by the Board. That makes a mockery of the recommendation that the Board should approve these profiles. It has already been decided by an unelected clique.

Thankfully the unelected bureaucrats and Board Convenor, James Stuart (a Scottish Government appointee) do not yet have the power to vet candidates and assess whether or not they have these abilities deemed necessary to make them fit to stand for election.

Listing skills, however, is highly off putting and tends to encourage candidates who are confident about their abilities, whether justified or not. In our gendered world, men are more likely to have such confidence and you need to look little beyond this list of skills included the nomination pack to understand why only one of the women who expressed an interest in standing for election appears to have done so. This is a public authority which is not just undemocratic but which builds discriminatory measures into its very fabric.

Notably absent from the skill list was any mention of the ability to represent the views of constituents. While the Park bureaucrats should have no role in vetting that ability either, arguably it is the key attribute that would enable our National Park boards to become more democratic. The problem, however is the last thing that those who currently control the LLTNPA want is a more effective voice for local people.

## **An attempt to concentrate power still further**

That is also seen in the role profile for the convenor of the LLTNPA. Historically, the role of convenor has been to bring people together for a purpose, in particular to make decisions and chair meetings. While it is not uncommon for holding the position to try and use it to increase their power and influence, fundamentally the convenor should be no different to the people they are convening, in this case other board members. It should be a very different role to that of a Chief Executive, who is the boss of their management team.

That, however, has been changing in our public authorities. The convenor of the LLTNPA Board may still be elected by their peers but has for some time been responsible for appraising them â?? that creates a totally different power dynamic â?? but is now deemed to require certain abilities:

*â??The Convenor is a critical role for the organisation, working with the wider Board, the CEO, and Executive Team to lead, drive and develop our strategic direction.â??*

No longer a convenor but a â??leaderâ?!. There is nothing in the National Parks Scotland Act that requires this.

In an apparent attempt to reduce the risk that Board Members might want to exercise their rights and choose someone different, someone for example who believed in democracy, was keen to encourage

real debate at board meetings and recognised that voting has a key role in decision-making, the current convener James Stuart and his senior staff have produced a list of "Skills and Characteristics" for the person who will replace him (he retires at the end of January):

*• Strong leadership skills*

*• Formal and informal communication skills*

*• Ability to develop and maintain strong working relationships and ambassadorial skills*

*• An understanding of, and commitment to, good governance in public bodies*

*• Commitment to Board Training and Development*

*• Comfortable and confident in chairing meetings*

*• Ability to think strategically and innovatively and understand associated risks and opportunities*

*• Detailed understanding of, and commitment to, the aims and purpose of the National Park*

*• Comfortable in dealing with members of the public and conducting meetings accessible to the public*

Just like the Board Member profile, this is a fundamental attack on democratic principles. Thankfully, there is nothing as yet that can prevent the new local members who will be elected today and those soon to be nominated by local authorities from making up their own minds. They are still free to choose as the new convener the person they believe most likely to encourage debate and represent the views of the board, two attributes missing from the list above.

And if the new LLTNPA Board members want a precedent they need look no further than the Cairngorms National Park Authority which has become far more democratic since Xander McDade was elected convener.

## Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

## Tags

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