

The Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority – how democracy has been destroyed

Description

On Monday morning I watched the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) Board Meeting online ([see here](#) for agenda and papers). It should be essential viewing for anyone who cares about what is happening to democracy in Scotland but neither the LLTNPA Board nor the Scottish Government want public to see how they operate so the recording was removed from the internet immediately after the meeting.

Meaningless meetings

There were seven substantive items on the agenda for the meeting but the Board was only asked to take a decision in one of them. That was to approve an annual report from its own Risk and Audit sub-committee, as required by the Scottish Government's Audit and Assurance Committee Handbook. That handbook ([see here](#)) like many other procedures which now govern non-departmental public bodies was issued by civil servants not politicians. Effectively all this provision does is to get the main board to rubber stamp its own sub-committee's work and this paper was decided without a murmur of criticism or a proper vote.

All the other papers, which included updates on the Loch Long fishfarm and Flamingo Land planning applications where Scottish Ministers recent interventions ([see here](#)) and ([here](#)) have massive implications for the future of National Parks in Scotland, were for noting only. While a few were sponsored by board members, none invited any comments from other board members or presented any options for discussion, as illustrated by this example:

Mission Zero Update Paper

Agenda Item 8

National Park Authority Board Meeting
15 September 2025

Paper for information

1. Purpose
2. Recommendation(s).....
3. Contribution to National Park Partnership Plan and/or Our 5-year Plan.....
4. Context
5. Delivery Update
6. Progress towards emissions reduction targets
7. Risks to delivery.....
8. Adaptation Planning.....
9. Beyond Mission Zero: Net Zero National Park.....
10. Conclusion

1. Purpose

- 1.1. To provide and update on the National Park Authority's Mission Zero action plan as part of our work towards reaching Net Zero as an organisation by 2030.
- 1.2. To share progress on our emissions reductions against the 2018/19 base figures.
- 1.3. To outline the priorities for climate-related action in the coming year.

2. Recommendation(s)

2.1. Members are asked to note the contents of the report.

These papers are variously headed "Paper for Information" or "Paper for Noting" but invariably are asked "to note the contents of the report", with "note" sometimes in bold and sometimes in italics. Please safely ignore the slight differences in wording, which are immaterial.

The important point to appreciate is the board has no active role to play in most of the "business" on the agenda. The only function of these papers, apart from maintaining a democratic figleaf, is to tell board members what the LLTNPA's senior management team or the civil servants at the Scottish Government (who switch funding streams on and off at will) have done or intend to do.

For anyone who still believes the purpose of having boards Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) boards is hold staff to account, the paper on the LLTNPA's Draft Annual Report and Accounts is worth reading ([see here](#)). The paper not only states that it not the board's but the Chief Executive's responsibility to sign off the annual report and accounts (in his role as "accountable officer") but goes to great lengths to explain that the Board has no say at their meeting over their contents. The only function of the Board is to ensure the "accountable officer" does produce these reports, has the accounts audited and sends the package to some nameless official in the civil service who acts on behalf of Scottish Ministers.

Scottish Ministers of course have neither the time, expertise or knowledge of how the LLTNPA is being managed to hold the "accountable" officer accountable. In my view the concentration of power in one person's hands and the lack of democratic accountability is extremely dangerous.

While other papers did not go as far as to explicitly state board members had no role to play in that particular item of business, they had no need to do so. This is because the LLTNPA's code of conduct for board members (which applies to other NDPBs) states:

3.7 Except where it is written into my role as Board member, and / or at the invitation of the Chief Executive, I will not become involved in operational management of my public body. I acknowledge and understand that operational management is the responsibility of the Chief Executive and Executive Team.

Thus while an "Operational Plan Update" was on the agenda, Board Members had no real say over how it is being implemented because that would be them becoming involved in operational management. It is the same with finance management etc etc. The only function of presenting these reports is to maintain a democratic figleaf

Near the end of the meeting Professor Chris Spray, who sits on the Lomond and Trossachs Countryside Trust, "reported" on how that body is reviewing their governance including "simple things" like making meetings "more efficient". Without a hint of irony he then reported that one option being discussed is for the trustees to stop wasting time discussing items which are for noting only! Applying Prof Spray's logic, this board meeting could have been over in 10 minutes! As it was this meeting lasted just 2 hours 45 mins with much of that spent on members introducing themselves, staff introducing papers and board members then congratulating staff on papers over which they have no say.

Silencing dissent

Stuart Mearns, the Park's Chief Planner, introduced the "update" paper on the decision of the Scottish Government to overturn the decision of the LLTNPA to refuse planning permission for the Loch

Long fish farm. One might have thought the decision would have triggered a major debate among board members all of whom are supposed to abide by the LLTNPA's Code of Conduct, Clause 3.1.1 of which states that "once the Board has made a decision, I will support that decision".

Mr Mearns' paper, which went along with Scottish Ministers decision, and his claim at the meeting that the set of planning conditions imposed by Scottish Ministers was "comprehensive" should have presented an open goal to board members. Those conditions, for example, omitted any requirements for health and safety assessments which the LLTNPA up till now included as a matter of standard practice in conditions ([see here](#)). However, when one board member (I couldn't see who it was) had the temerity to suggest that the Planning Committee should monitor progress on implementing Scottish Ministers conditions, Deputy Convener Martin Earl jumped in to emphasise that this would be for information only and board members would not be able to change anything.

Board members are allowed to express "disappointment" at Ministerial decisions, as Heather Reid the Convener did, but not actually to voice any criticism. The only Board Member who attempted to challenge this set-up and the meaningless paper was Sid Perrie, the directly elected member for Balloch and West Loch Lomond. However, when he attempted to speak the Convener Heather Reid tried to shut him down saying he was not asking a question. Under the aegis of Dr Reid, most of the "discussion" that is still allowed at LLTNPA board meetings is limited to asking questions to staff.

Mr Perrie persisted, referring to the Board's decision to reject the planning application and describing how Loch Long is unsuitable for fish farming because of its nature (it does not flush because of its length) and current pollution levels. He then questioned what the LLTNPA is for if it cannot speak out for conservation and expressed fears the precedent this decision would set for National Parks in Scotland. No other board member spoke in support of Mr Perrie or of the statutory aims of the National Park.

Heather Reid's response to Sid Perrie was that the LLTNPA has a duty to abide by planning law and accept what Scottish Ministers decide or do. As Private Eye would comment, "so that's alright then". She terminated the "discussion" by asking Board Members to raise their hands to note a paper, which effectively went along with the Ministerial decision, without giving anyone the opportunity to record their dissent. The principles of transparency and accountability in public life are long dead in the LLTNPA.

Dr Reid and senior management are now going to extraordinary efforts to prevent Sid Perrie, who for the last couple of years has been the one board member prepared to criticise what is going on, from doing so. At the start of the meeting Dr Reid "reminded" board members, as she now does at every meeting, that they have all signed up to the Code of Conduct. She then explicitly referred to the clauses that say board members will "treat everyone with courtesy and respect" and not do anything to "undermine any individual employee or group of employees, or raise concerns about their performance, conduct or capability in public". She went on to emphasise that anyone who breaches these requirements will be removed from the meeting. All this was clearly being directed at Mr Perrie who has quite understandably got upset when Heather Reid tried to prevent him from raising serious issues, which include the role of staff, at board meetings.

The Convener of the Risk and Audit Committee Ronnie Erskine reported at the end of the meeting that that sub-committee was planning to carry out two "deep dives" this year, one into how the Code of Conduct for board members is working. This again appears intended to silence Mr Perrie, But perhaps

Ronnie Erskine's deep dive could now start by looking at why he and other Board Members at the meeting on Monday failed to abide by their decision to reject the Loch Long fishfarm because of the adverse impact they had decided this would have on the National Park and are not prepared to challenge staff, civil servants and Scottish Ministers?

Part of the answer was given at the start of the meeting when Heather Reid announced she has just been appointed to the Board of the Water Regulator – ironic that given the polluting impact fishfarms have and the impact radioactive and plastic pollution will have on Loch Long salmon. Dr Reid also sits on the board of NatureScot. Like James Stuart before her he had been an army major. Dr Reid, formerly known as Heather the Weather, is carving out a new career for herself by being a safe pair of hands and broadcasting only good news.

What is the purpose of LLTNPA board meetings and the LLTNPA Board?

What happened on Monday was not exceptional, it is the same with almost every other quarterly meeting held by the main board (and will be true to varying degrees for all the other NDPBs in Scotland). The main business items are not business at all, they are simply reports for noting from the Chief Executive and senior staff team. Those staff and civil servants now wield almost absolute power over what happens in the National Park (and other NDPBs).

About the only things LLTNPA Board Members still have the formal power to decide are those laid down in statute:

- major planning applications (they have delegated all their other planning powers to officials);
- the National Park Partnership Plan (they are supposed to decide a new one every five years);
- the Local Development Plan (now very out of date, the current one which Scottish Ministers are using to decide the Flamingo Land planning application was supposed to be for the period 2017-21);
- the Core Paths Plan; and
- byelaws (the camping byelaws were supposed to be reviewed after 10 years but that review is now well behind schedule).

In practice, however, even these formal powers of the board are extremely limited as demonstrated by all the out of date plans. For other strategic matters, for which they have no formal statutory responsibility, board members have even less say: a good example being the long promised Outdoor Recreation Plan ([see here](#)) which was dropped by staff without any discussion by the board.

Our National Parks were set up to be different to other NDPBs, not just under the control of Scottish Ministers but democratically accountable to local communities. To ensure that happened provision was made for a third of the board to comprise local councillors and another third to be directly elected by people residing within the National Parks. That democratic accountability has been failing for a long time. I observed the extraordinary board meeting in Callander where the local councillors then on the board said was nothing for them to do and asked James Stuart to write to Scottish Ministers recommending their role be abolished.

At the end of the meeting on Monday, Sid Perrie managed to speak for the second time â?? again Heather Reid tried to shut him down â?? and made the same point. What is the point of a board he asked which is not even prepared to defend its own decisions and the statutory purpose of National Parks?

So why does the SNP Government bother having a National Park board at all? Why not abolish it as part of Ivan McKeeâ??s programme of promised public sector savings and absorb staff into the (ever more bloated) civil service? Such a reform would make absolutely no difference to what happens on the ground for the simple reason that senior staff in league with senior civil servants decide everything anyway. Wouldnâ??t it be more honest to remove the democratic fig leaf?

(I have submitted a Freedom of Information request for the video recording of the meeting on Monday so that all those people who were unable to watch the meeting on Monday but are concerned about what is happening in the National Park can see for themselves what I have described).

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Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. Camping bye laws
2. Development Plan
3. Freedom of Information
4. Governance
5. NatureScot
6. planning
7. Scottish Government

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