

A democratic challenge to the unaccountable Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority

Description

My thanks to a reader who, following my post on the board games at the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) ([see here](#)), alerted me to some further shenanigans which I had missed.

Seven out of the eighteen board members of the LLTNPA are nominated by local authorities in the area. After a bye-election victory, the SNP/Greens ousted the Labour-Tory coalition which had been running Stirling Council at a special meeting on 10th November ([see here](#)). The new Council immediately voted to replace the previous administrations nominations to the LLTNPA, Cllr Martin Earl (Tory) and Cllr Gerry McGarvey (Labour), with two SNP councillors, Gene Maxwell and Scott Farmer.

Martin Earl is currently Depute Convener of the LLTNPA and was the board member whom staff, in a paper for their December meeting, recommended should assume the convener role on an interim basis at the end of October 2026 when the current Convener, Heather Reid, steps down. Both councillors should have informed Heather Reid and senior management that Stirling Council had lost confidence in them. Senior management responsible for good governance nevertheless went ahead with their recommendation to promote Martin Earl to the Convener's role regardless. That failure raises serious concerns about the public interest and provides further evidence that it is staff who control the LLTNPA Board and not vice versa.

How the LLTNPA operates is very secretive. It refuses to make the online video recordings of its board meetings publicly available, once those meetings are over, and only publishes minutes months later.

By contrast one can still view the special Stirling Council meeting where they voted to replace Cllrs McGarvey and Earl online ([see here](#)),

As a result of the LLTNPA's lack of transparency the general public has no way of finding out whether either LLTNPA staff or Councillors Earl and McGarvey reported to the meeting that Stirling Council have voted to remove them and whether the recommendations from officers were as a consequence amended. It is possible therefore the arrangements I described in my first post have changed that, however, would have required other board members to challenge staff.

The minutes of the Stirling Council Special Meeting, by contrast, show that Cllrs Martin Earl and Gerry McGarvey refused to resign from the LLTNPA Board when the SNP took control. They failed to follow the example of their Lord Provost who, under council rules, could not have been removed immediately but who did the decent thing and resigned.

What follows, in the minute, is significant for the future democratic accountability of National Park Authorities:

“Council recognises the loophole in the existing legislation regarding appointments from this Council to the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority. Council notes with regret that Councillors

[note the American spelling] McGarvey and Earl have indicated that they intend to remain on the National Park Authority. Council urges the two Councilors to reconsider their decision and resign immediately. If they fail to do this Council will not approve any senior Councilor payments to Labour or Tory councilors until Councilors McGarvey and Earl resign from the Board and councilors are appointed who have the support of this Council?•

At present Councils only nominate people (they don't have to be councillors) to the National Park Authority, it is Scottish Ministers who appoint them on the advice of civil servants. Councils therefore have no power to remove their representatives in cases like this. It will be up to Mairi Gougeon, as the Minister responsible, to decide whether to change Stirling Council's representatives. There is a strong case for her doing so, apart from putting an end to the recent staff shenanigans. A primary justification for councils being able to nominate to National Park Authorities was to ensure a joined up approach between the two organisations on matters such as housing, for example. That is unlikely to happen if the council representatives on National Park Boards do not have the confidence of the local authority concerned.

The Stirling SNP have rightly been quite critical of the LLTNPA in the past, for example after the last local member elections in 2022 ([see here](#))

Gene Maxwell, local Stirling Councillor for Trossachs & Teith ward, said:

Whilst I applaud the election of fellow Stirling residents, these results suggest more engagement from the Park with local communities is sorely needed. In several wards, only two candidates came forward despite heavy advertising of the posts and process. The percentage of ballots returned was under a third in all but one ward.

One of the Park's core aims is to promote sustainable social and economic development of the area's communities, and this must be a priority for future work plans. Many of my constituents agree we need to unlock the right kind of economic development in the right places, whilst also enabling decent levels of rural housing to build sustainable communities. Through proper stewardship, we can ensure Stirling can reap the full benefits of this wonderful natural asset for generations to come.

Rosemary Fraser, local Stirling Councillor for Forth & Endrick ward, said:

I welcome these new Board members to their posts, and hope they can look afresh at the work of the National Park. In particular, the gender balance of the board should be addressed 4 women on a board of 17, 3 of whom were appointed by Scottish Ministers, is pretty poor.

The Park should balance demands for short-term holiday lets and rural recreational opportunities with housing needs and environmental stewardship. In many places, the number of holiday lets is now 30% or more of the available housing stock. Tourism will always be a vital part of the local economy but to be sustainable short-term lets need to be balanced with actual homes for a diverse mix of residents.

In view of these criticisms, one suspects that LLTNPA senior management would have no wish to see councillors such as these on their board. They would appear more likely to challenge what staff do and

those same staff might even lose control of the LLTNPA board. It's just a shame that having criticised the LLTNPA for the lack of women members in the past, the new SNP/Green administration are now trying to persuade the Minister to accept two male nominees!

It will be interesting to see what Mairi Gougeon now does but she now has an opportunity to restore a small element of democracy to the LLTNPA by recognising the Councils should have the right to decide who represents them. If that leads to more frequent changes in councillors on the board, that would be healthy thing which would help keep senior management on their toes..

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Author

nickkempe

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