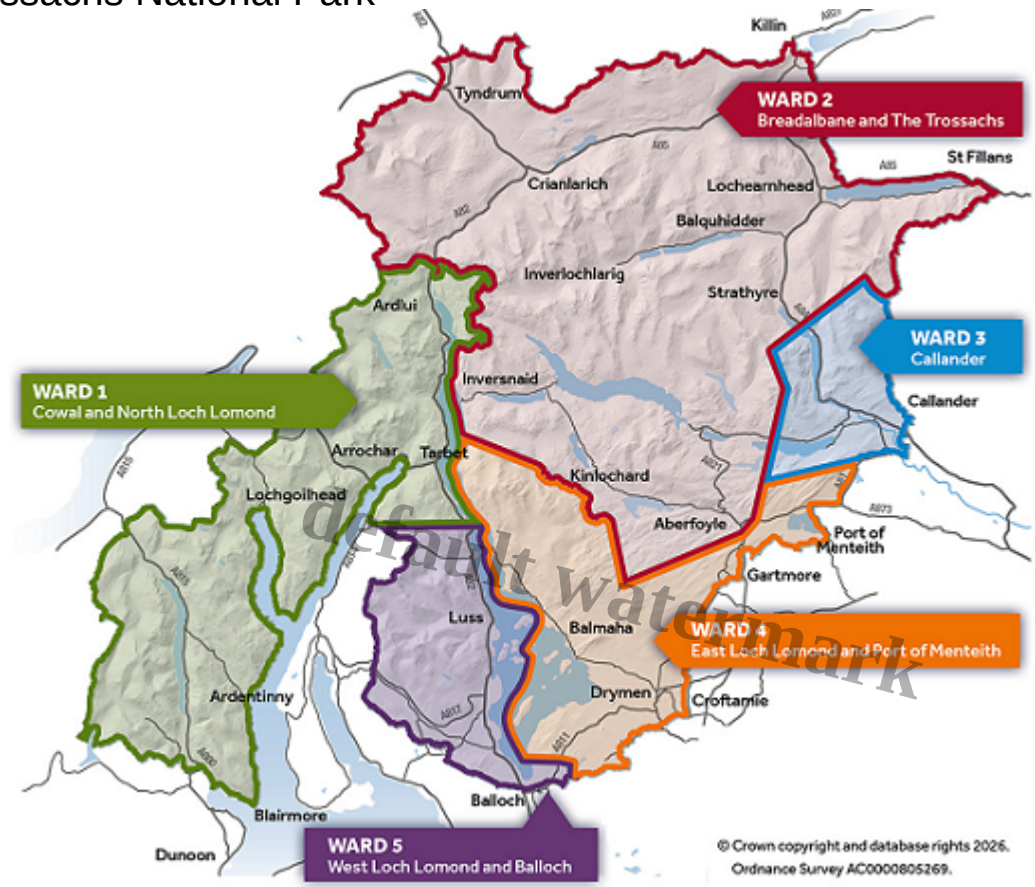
Democracy, the 2026 local member elections and the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park



Last Friday, the day of the Scottish Parliamentary election count, the appeal by the locally elected member for Balloch, Sid Perrie, against the decision of the Standards Commission for Scotland (SCS) to suspend him from the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) for six months for sending six emails (see here) was due to be held in Paisley Sheriff Court. Unlike the SCS, which refused to adjourn the hearing in February and found Sid guilty in absentia, the Sheriff Principal agreed to defer the appeal on health grounds. That is very welcome.

Almost immediately after that decision the SCS agreed to defer another hearing they had scheduled for June into a second complaint about Sid, this time by LLTNPA CEO Gordon Watson (see here for coverage in the Sunday Mail). When Sid is well enough to attend the appeal at the Sheriff Court, it will be interesting to see how SCS defend their decision to proceed with that case but not the second. The wider issue, however, is about how the SCS and the Code of Conduct for Public Life are being used by unelected officials and Scottish Government appointees to silence locally elected representatives, whether on National Park board or local authorities. The forthcoming local member elections to the LLTNPA provide a further insight into what is going on.

Arrangements for the 2026 local member elections to the LLTNPA

On Thursday (14th May) official notice of the LLTNPA Local Member elections will be published (see here). Anyone aged over 21 can put themselves forward as a candidate but people interested in doing so have three weeks, until Thursday 4th June, to gain nominations from 10 registered voters in the electoral ward in which they wish to stand.

Candidates are allowed to provide a 250 word statement which will be circulated along with ballot papers on 11th June. Ballot papers need to be returned by 4pm on Thursday 9th July and the vote, which is conducted on a first past the post basis, is then counted that evening.

The Natural Environment (Scotland) Act passed earlier this year included a section on National Parks but failed to reform the system for electing local members which I first argued was unfit for purpose eight years ago (see here). Among the issues are:

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- 250 words is insufficient to enable any candidate to inform voters what candidates stand for;
- election expenses have not been uprated since the LLTNPA was created 23 years ago, are limited to Â£100 compared to Â£806 minimum for local authority elections and are insufficient to enable inform voters what candidates stand for;
- the first past the post voting system resulted in Bob Darracot being elected for the Cowal ward in 2018 wlth less than 17% of the vote on a 32.4% turnout (see here) i.e with the support of less than 5% of the total voters;
- a person needs to be 21 to stand for election to a National Park Authority but only 18 to stand as a local councillor.

Despite these serious issues neither the LLTNPA nor the Cairngorms National Park Authority boards have, to my knowledge, discussed the electoral system at a Board Meeting let alone made representations to the Scottish Government about the need for reform. Among other things this shows all the talk about the LLTNPA involving young people through their Youth Committee (see here) is hot air.

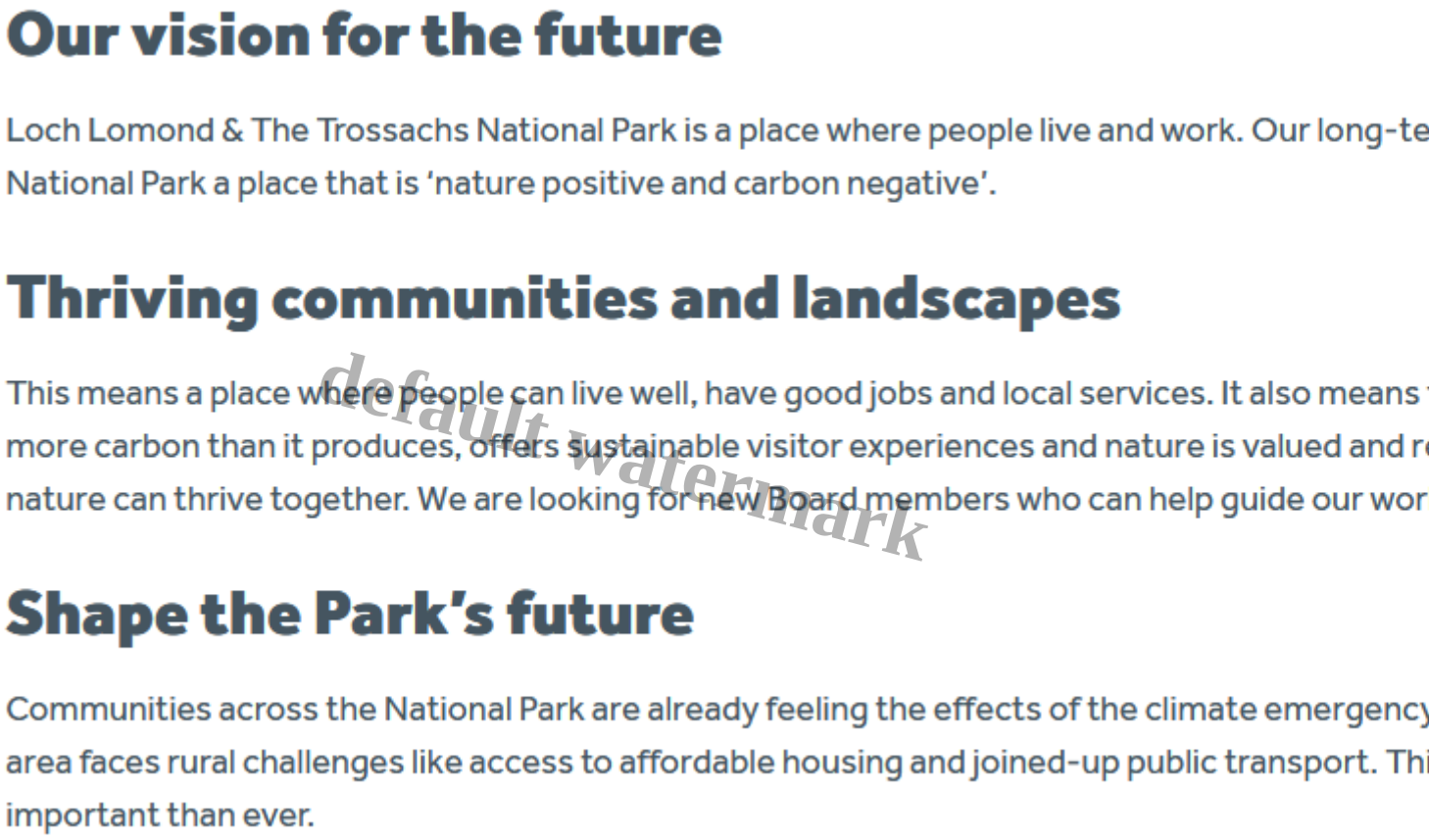
Just like four years ago there was nothing on the agenda of the LLTNPA Board Meeting in March about the elections. That is despite reducing turnout (from 32.5% to 31%), the falling proportion of women standing and the total number of candidates having reduced from 24 to 14 between 2018 and 2022 (see here). That is not an accident, the LLTNPA donâ??t want democracy to work better.

The LLTNPAâ??s approach to the 2026 local member elections

A short new section has appeared on the LLTNPA Boardâ??s webpage publicising the dates of drop-in sessions for â??interested candidatesâ?? for the 2026 elections (see here). Those wishing to attend have to submit a registration form which allows officials to keep tabs on who might be standing. Three of the sessions are within 8 days of the deadline for nominations closing and one just two days before. This will make it extremely difficult for anyone who wants to find out more before deciding whether to

stand to then obtain the necessary 10 signatures in time.

There is a link (see here) to another web page with more detail about becoming a candidate. This includes a couple of tokenistic references to local issues (â??access to affordable housing and joined-up transportâ??) while managing to be crass, confusing and controlling:

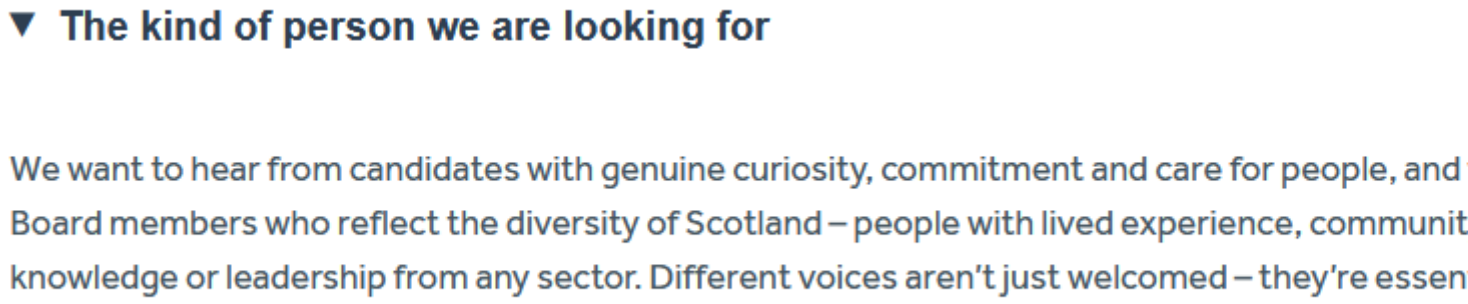


Crass: â??*Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park is a place where people live and workâ??, â??this means a place where people can live wellâ??* and *â??Communities across the National Park are already feeling the effects of the climate emergency and nature crisisâ??. Those crises have now been well documented for over 35 years.*

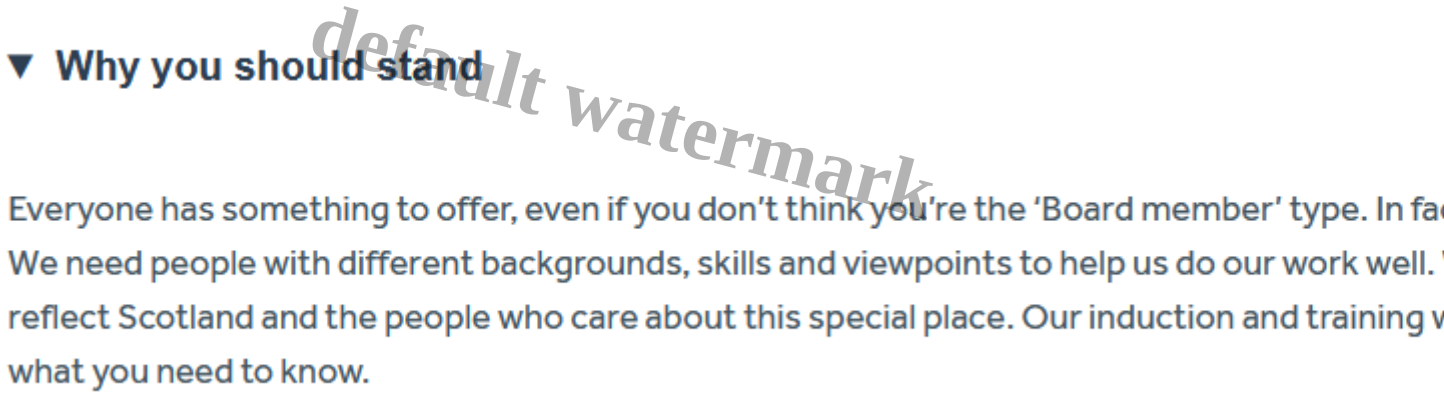
Confusing: A vision for the future is not the same as a long term goal. And what does a National Park which takes in more carbon than it produces mean?

Controlling *â?? â??We are looking for new Board Members who can help guide our work and achieve this visionâ??.*

As important as the vacuous vision is the misrepresentation of the role of locally elected members. National Park Authorities are different to other non-departmental public boards (quangos) because a third of their boards are democratically elected rather than being in the pocket of the Scottish Government. Officials have always had difficulties distinguishing the roles of elected and appointed members, hence the reference in the election blurb to â??Five locally elected members (the focus of this recruitment)â??:

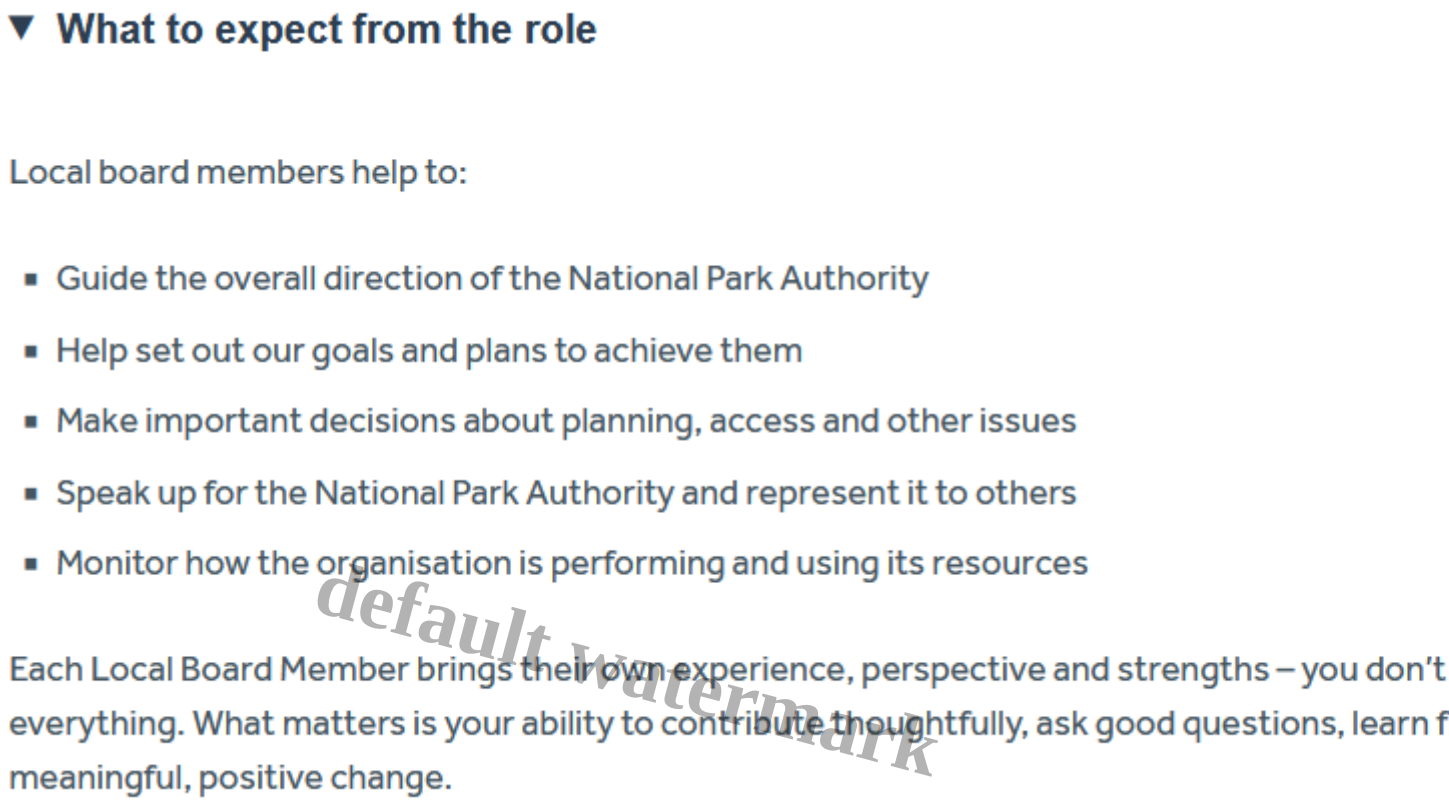


MSPs and local councillors are NOT recruited and no-one tells prospective candidates what type of elected representative the Scottish Parliament or a local authority is looking for â?? so what gives the LLTNPA the right to do so?



The claim that â??everyone has something to offer, even if you donâ??t think youâ??re the â??Board Memberâ?? typeâ?? and â??that can be a strengthâ??, should be judged by what happened to Sid Perrie. He stood out from the rest of the board by being neuro-diverse and speaking plainly as many working class people do, about what he thought on the Flamingo Land planning application and other matters. For that, he has been relentlessly bullied and suspended from the board.

The LLTNPAâ??s claim, however, also deliberately misrepresents the role of locally elected members. This should be to represent the needs and views of local people on the National Park board, exactly as Sid Perrie tried to do for Ward 5 (West Loch Lomond and Balloch). Instead, the LLTNPA blurb portrays the role of locally elected members as being to â??reflect Scotland and the people who care about this special placeâ??. Actually, its the role of the Scottish Ministerial appointments to fulfil that function.



▼ What to expect from the role

Local board members help to:

- Guide the overall direction of the National Park Authority
- Help set out our goals and plans to achieve them
- Make important decisions about planning, access and other issues
- Speak up for the National Park Authority and represent it to others
- Monitor how the organisation is performing and using its resources

Each Local Board Member brings their own experience, perspective and strengths – you don't
everything. What matters is your ability to contribute thoughtfully, ask good questions, learn f
meaningful, positive change.

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The LLTNPA then redefines the role of locally elected members as being to â??Speak up for the National Park Authority and represent it to othersâ??. This is the exact opposite of what locally elected members should be doing, i.e speaking up for local residents, representing their views to the LLTNPA, scrutinising what the Park does locally, ensuring strategies and plans reflect local needs and informing local people where this does not happen.

Discussion

This attempt by officials to change the role of locally elected members is new. Much the same words were being used eight years ago (see here). What is new is its now clear what lengths other board members and officials will go to silence locally elected members who try to speak out and how the Code of Conduct for those involved in Public Life has been weaponised to do this (see here).

Anyone wanting to change how the LLTNPA operates and who wishes to stand for election should therefore be aware of the considerable pressure exerted on board members to conform. This will start with the briefing sessions scheduled over the next few weeks and then, for those elected, with an induction process designed to persuade those elected that they are there to do the bidding of officials.

I hope people who want to change the LLTNPA will stand and say this in their 250 word election addresses but anyone doing so should be aware of the need for a wider support network, including among the public who elected them. Having supporters present at board meetings, for example, would have greatly helped Sid Perrie to feel less isolated. Developing such networks will be very challenging

until all locally elected members have their own independent emails and phone numbers so they can be contacted by constituents like local authority councillors. Even better would be if the LLTNPA funded the costs of local surgeries.

Meantime, the ability of locally elected councillors and National Park board members will be helped if elected representatives like Cllr Fiona Higgins, who tried to expose attempts to cover-up education cuts in Glasgow, and Sid Perrie win their cases. The SCS employs lawyers to represent them at great public expense and Sidâ??s chances of success would, I believe, improve significantly with legal representation. If you havenâ??t contributed to Sidâ??s fundraiser (see here) please consider contributing if you can.

The position of locally elected members in parts of our National Parks is not helped by the rules which prevent MSPs representing people living outside the areas which elected them. By a quirk of the Holyrood election system, people living in Ward 5 have no SNP MSP they can ask to represent them. That is because once again Jackie Baillie won the West Dunbartonshire constituency and there are no SNP list MSPs in the West of Scotland. Whereas everyone in Scotland can, if they so wish, contact a Reform MSP, outside of Highland Region no-one living in a constituency which elected another party has any SNP list MSP despite the SNP being by far the largest party. The consequence of these rules is that no-one in Balloch has an SNP MSP they can ask to represent them on local matters, no SNP MSP has been allowed to get involved in Flamingo Land and Sid Perrie has had no SNP MSP he could go to for help. These rules have helped insulate Scottish Ministers from any internal party pressure to reform the LLTNPA and served to increase the power of officials further.

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Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. Governance
2. LLTNPA
3. Local communities
4. Scottish Government

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