

More botched estate management by the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority – what's the cost?

Description



Carrochan, the LLTNPA HQ, in Balloch May 2024. Photo credit Parkswatch reader

On 22nd November the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) issued a news release announcing it was investing £1.6m of Scottish Government funds in its facilities over the winter in order for it to become a “net zero” organisation by 2030. The bulk of the money was earmarked for “retrofitting” the LLTNPA’s HQ at Carrochan which had been closed two weeks earlier:



Photo credit Parkswatch reader

Perhaps the absence of anywhere for staff to work explains the late news release? Maybe too this explains why the contract award notices, for the installation of a heat pump to replace wood biomass heating system ([see here](#)) and to add solar panels to the roof ([see here](#)), weren't published until 15th November AFTER the work appears to have started?

At the December LLTNPA Board Meeting senior management confirmed what was said in the news release about the work being undertaken over the winter and claimed they were on track and due to be completed by mid-March:

Upscale the pace of our Mission Zero programme, and consider the route to net zero for the National Park as a place	Install a new heating system powered by Air Source Heat Pumps in Carrochan, removing the aging biomass boiler and natural gas back up system.	Works started, due to complete
	Increase our use of solar electricity at Carrochan through the installation of PV Tiles/Panels and EV Chargers	Installation of PV Tiles/Panels March 24.

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The progress report to the Board Meeting on 11th March indicated timescales had slipped slightly to the end of the month with snagging work due to continue into April:

Upscale the pace of our Mission Zero programme, and consider the route to net zero for the National Park as a place	Install a new heating system powered by Air Source Heat Pumps in Carrochan, removing the aging biomass boiler and natural gas back up system.	Works progressing well, expected to complete by end of March 24 with some snagging likely in early April 24.	On track
	Increase our use of solar electricity at Carrochan through	Installation of PV panels progressing well, expected to complete by end of March 24 with some snagging likely early in Q1 24/25.	On track

Either LLTNPA senior management were not supervising the contract properly or they were concealing more serious problems from their Board because by May Carrochan was still very much shut and there was little sign of building work:



The plastic covering above the PV panels suggests the work on the roof was not complete. Photo credit Parkswatch reader

Could senior management at the LLTNPA have been using the term “snagging” like HIE did with the funicular ([see here](#)) to cover up the truth?



Photo credit Parkswatch reader

If a robust contract had been in place one might have reasonably expected the contractors, DCF Joiners and Building Services for the heat pumps and Shire Energy Services Ltd for the PV panels, to have faced penalties for late completion of the works and to have had staff on site around the clock to get the work done. There was no sign of that.

The cost of the delays

The scaffolding will be costing a large amount of money – one wonders who will be paying? – but the closure of Carrochan for six months will have saved the LLTNPA significant fuel and other operational costs.

This will be at the expense of their staff, forced to work at home whether they like it or not, unless the LLTNPA have given them additional allowances to keep warm over the winter. And its not just their staff, as the LLTNPA now shares its HQ with a number of other organisations:

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Photo credit Parkswatch reader

The human cost to the workforce is likely to be even more significant. Isolation has a serious impact on mental health and morale, severely affects organisational learning (staff can't just simply walk over to another desk to get an answer to a question or discuss an issue) and almost certainly lowers productivity of staff. The Cairngorms National Park Authority recognised some of this last week when their Resources Committee considered a new organisational development strategy that aimed for office based staff to work at least 50% of their time in their premises rather than at home ([see here](#)). Among the points that Strategy made was that the need for "A senior management team that is visible and accessible".

That hasn't existed in the LLTNPA now for over six months – however many meetings have been held on Microsoft Teams that does not make up for lack of personal contact and space to create effective working relationships.

What's gone wrong?

Unlike the CNPA, the LLTNPA Board treats staffing matters almost entirely as an operational matter, which it leaves to its all-powerful Chief Executive, Gordon Watson. The Board has no resources committee to consider or oversee either staffing or project management issues. The consequence is there is likely to have been a considerable increase in staff dissatisfaction and a considerable reduction in staff productivity over the last six months and no means for the Board to respond to this.

On past form, LLTNPA senior management will try to cover up what has gone wrong, just as they have with many other examples of disastrous project plans and building management: the large cost overrun for the Loch Lubnaig visitor facility; the failed water supply at the Loch Chon campsite ([see here](#)); the disastrous lease for the former National Park visitor centre in Balloch (empty but which could now be being used by staff) and the Luss Visitor Centre ([see here](#)) etc etc. This is not an isolated example of project failure.

It was partly to conceal these failures that about 10 years ago the LLTNPA ceased to publish its Risk Register and started to conduct most of its business about how it was managing its estate in secret board sessions. That in my view has been an important contributing factor to the highly critical internal audit report by Glasgow City Council on the LLTNPA's management of its assets ([see here](#)). This is dated November but was only considered by the LLTNPA's Audit and Risk Committee in March. That report – despite its extraordinary front cover showing the Tron in Glasgow and its failure to consider the causes of the problems – found an almost complete lack of basic governance:

"Whist [sic] there is some asset management performance information reported to the Board, the current information does not include tracking the progress of the delivery of the [Asset Management] Strategy objectives. We were advised that this will be introduced once the corresponding plans have been developed."

One wonders if there was a plan for the Carrochan "retrofit" and who on the board saw this?

The internal audit Report went on to recommend that "asset management performance information is

reported to senior management and the Board” but not that this should be done openly to enable critical public oversight of what are supposed to be public assets. It will be interesting to see if the next meetings of the LLTNPA Board and its Risk and Audit Committee, which are due in June, will consider reports of what has gone wrong in open session or behind closed doors.

The LLTNPA has also completely failed to explained why this retrofit, of what was supposed to be a building “green to its core” was ever needed – its website ([see here](#)) still says this:

National Park Opens HQ for meetings and events

The Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority is opening up its eco-friendly head-office in Balloch for use as a perfect venue for business meetings, conference and events.

Just 30-minutes from Glasgow, the Park Authority hopes that its unique, flexible space will appeal to a wide range of organisations. The incredible variety of activities available in the National Park also make it a perfect location for team development days. Situated a stone's throw away from the iconic Loch Lomond, the venue is also close to Glasgow Airport, so is ideally placed to welcome international visitors.

Green to its core

The Park's head office, Carrochan, is the largest building in the UK with a locally sourced 'green' timber structure, and over 2,500 sheep donated their winter coats to create the wool insulation in the walls and ceilings.

Carrochan's carbon footprint is less than half that of a conventional building, with heating being supplied by a biomass boiler. You would never guess when looking at them but our smart, comfortable meeting rooms chairs have been created using recycled car batteries and old seat belts.

Its tempting to speculated that the Scottish Government's revised building regulations, which banned wood burning stoves in new houses, and the desire to be seen to politically correct played a part in the decision to replace the biomass heating system which has been criticised locally ([see here](#))? I have heard, however, on reliable authority that there has been significant problems with both the biomass heating system and the design of the building, a consequence of yet more past failures in asset management which the LLTNPA has been keen to cover up.

The LLTNPA's recently adopted new target for reaching net zero across the National Park by 2034 almost immediately became redundant after the Scottish Government abandoned its policy off trying to achieve a 70% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030 ([see here](#)). Instead of doing anything serious to reduce carbon emissions in the National Park – e.g by improving public transport or reducing damaging forms of land-use – the LLTNPA chose to focus on reducing the carbon emissions of its own operations. That strategy too now appears to be in a state of collapse.

There is a pressing need for an independent review of how the LLTNPA has been managed since it was set up including the role played by civil servants in the Scottish Government. This was something

that was supposed to happen in the second stage of the review of our National Parks that was quietly abandoned over ten years ago. The financial and human cost of that failure to scrutinise the LLTNPA has been considerable.

Category

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