

Scottish Environment LINK, Scottish Environment Festival After Action Review

Introduction

This year was the first Scottish Environment Festival (SEF). It was also the first time that new Parliamentary Office Administrator would be event managing the task without prior knowledge or experience of previous SEWs. Overall it was felt that SEF went well and was a success.

Exploring Scotland's Past

This was the first event to launch the Festival and was sponsored by Historic Scotland and hosted by Claire Baker MSP, Labour Party.

Positives:

The MSPs seemed to really enjoy and value the event and Claudia Beamish MSP even requested photos to be sent to her office to use as press release material for her local newsletter. The comments and discussion at the end of speeches were very positive and informative with good range and variety of people adding to the discussions. It was also felt that the lunchtime slot was suitable and appropriate for the event.

Things to work on:

Of all the SEF events, LINK staff felt this one to be the most challenging for numerous reasons. During the planning period, it was felt there were great delays in setting up a planning meeting both from members and Historic Scotland and staff had to continually chase-up and send reminders. Historic Scotland also delayed in nominating a representative person from their organization. Probably due to these delays, staff were limited by the date choices available from Parliament and therefore had to settle for third choice, which unfortunately also coincided with Historic Scotland's AGM in Glasgow.

At the event itself, there was not a high MSP turn out (in fact there was only two including the hosting MSP). This was due to miscommunication in the Labour party and was completely outwith LINK's control as staff were acting on Labour's instructions, who changed the hosting MSP from Sarah Boyack to Claire Baker at a very late stage.

Lastly there seemed to be a misunderstanding between expectations and briefing between SEF and invited voluntary community group Edinburgh Archaeology Field Society. Their speaker was not adequately briefed or misjudged the purpose of the event, as their speech was ten minutes over (and they had to be cut-off) and seemed to be more about a history of the society rather than a concise illustrated presentation on the work of the society and the valuable contribution of their volunteers. Speaking afterwards some LINK staff also got the impression that the society's attendees also seemed confused about the purpose of the event. A learning point for the future is to ensure that members ensure their invited speakers are better briefed and prepared, even suggestion to review presentations beforehand.

Future

Next year is the last year in Historic Scotland's three year funding commitment and following the event, MCS said they found the event really interesting especially since there are many historical sites under water, some of which are important to biodiversity, this could perhaps be the bases of the seminar next year.

Evening Reception

The evening reception was hosted by Sarah Boyack MSP and sponsored by Scottish Natural Heritage and the National Parks. Speakers included Sarah Boyack, Minister for the Environment Stewart Stevenson and LINK President Ross Finnie.

Positives:

The evening was considered to be very well attended and very successful. Tweets from MSPs on the event included:

Claire Baker - Enjoyed Scottish Environment Link reception this evening - really looking forward to working with everyone on some of the challenges ahead 9:53 PM - 7 Mar 12 via Twitter for BlackBerry®

Alison Johnstone - Great to see so many friends, old and new, at tonight's @scotlink Environment Festival gathering. 9:27 PM - 7 Mar 12 via Twitter for iPhone

Stewart Stevenson - Wed: Long Leases Bill at Ctte; Discuss Aquaculture Bill; Discuss 2013 Year of Natural Environment; Environment Link Reception. Busy! #fb

Things to work on:

Overall preparation and execution of the event went very well, only challenging areas were disagreements and negotiations with sponsors over wording and logos on the invite, which took up much staff time. Also there was some initial confusion with the National Parks over what they would be doing or providing on the night. It was initially understood they would be bringing local produce to sample at the reception, but they decided against it this year, although it was noted from a few attendees that they had been looking forward to this and in some ways a shame that this didn't happen.

Pub Quiz

Took place in the Canon's Gait Pub and comprised teams from member organizations, Scottish Government and parliamentarians.

After review of workload the planning of this particular event was delegated to the Parliamentary Officer and whilst a little last-minute in organizational terms, the event was well attended and enjoyed.

Exploring Scotland in Your Constituency (Visits)

The closing event of the programme had 11 members participate and put forward visit offers around Scotland and we had a total of 30 individual visits offered. 16 MSPs participated in a visit, with at least seven more expressing interest but being unable to participate due to prior commitments. Of these seven, two MSPs have requested whether they could still visit out with SEF programme.

Positives:

The Constituency visits were considered to be a value both to the members and MSPs who participating; giving members a chance to show and speak to MSPs first-hand what they were currently working on, why it was important and soliciting support for future activities. From the MSPs point of view they welcomed the opportunity to find out what was happening 'on the ground' in their constituency and appreciated the time and effort given by the members. Following his visit, Drew Smith MSP has offered to lodge a motion in the Scottish Parliament about The Hidden gardens and the John Muir Trust. WDCS got good media coverage with Richard Lochhead's visit and had media coverage in the following papers: Band Advertiser, Press and Journal, Ross shire Journal, Northern Scot which helped highlight their recent campaign ACT NOW (To help protect Scotland's whales and dolphins). Four MSPs provided feedback on request:

"I think the visit was an important part of Environment Week. Nothing beats seeing for yourself what is happening on the ground." **Alison McInnes MSP, North East Scotland**

"The visit was very interesting and I appreciated the opportunity to participate. It was useful to learn what activity is being undertaken by Froglife in my constituency, and how they have assisted with developing the amenity of Cumbernauld Community Park." **Jamie Hepburn MSP, Central Scotland**

"I was very well looked after by representatives of the local Butterfly Conservation group and by Stirling Council Ranger Services. They gave generously of their time and were very informative as to the work that is going on. I would be very happy to participate in a similar visit in future." **Murdo Fraser MSP, Mid Scotland and Fife**

"Drew thoroughly enjoyed his visit, and found it very beneficial to see the work that was being done by the project." **Drew Smith MSP, Glasgow**

Things to work on:

Feedback from members was generally positive. A few said they would have appreciated more forewarning in order to better prepare something. Below is one feedback from Helen Rowe from SCRA:

"Maureen Watt MSP attended our visit by herself. (She thought members of other parties may have been represented). After a big build-up as initially no-one quite knew what to expect, the visit was very informal, mostly talking while walking and answering Maureen's questions between us. We explained how improvements and developments on the sites for biodiversity and recreation have progressed over the last few years. The group brought along a portfolio of photos and articles about past events, including ranger-led activities. We felt that we gave Maureen a clear message about the importance of partnership working to ensure the projects' success, with the council's ranger service, environment team and other organisations, e.g. BTCV, supporting the community group to deliver actions. She sent a thank you email to everyone immediately after the visit with best wishes for 'continuing efforts to green and make accessible the areas around Portlethen'."

If these visits happen again next year an improvement to be made is more forewarning to both members and MSPs; to allow members to adequately prepare and develop a meaningful visit and for MSPs to block the date out in their diary. Despite sending a 'save-the-date' preannouncement before the Christmas break, many MSPs were previously committed and couldn't participate. Pre-planning will also allow LINK staff to start work on programme at an earlier date and there could be possibilities of printed programme which could elicit more MSP uptake and member exposure.

Conclusion

SEF (SEW) remains a very good opportunity for LINK members to promote the environment and the role it plays, with parliamentarians, in Parliament, in a celebratory way. We refined and streamlined programme design in advance of the 2012 event, agreeing to reduce the number of seminars (unless offered full funding by external partners to put these on) and to include the constituency visits. This has meant there is less planning, and, combined with a tighter planning timeline, has taken some of the pressure off, in the months leading up to the event in Parliament.

Next year we revert back to Scottish Environment 'Week' (instead of 'Festival') and the earlier the theme is decided and the planning can start, the better for all those involved and the more chance of MSP interest and success. We have one more year of HS funding promised, and SNH as a core funder remains a sponsor of the Week. The signs are that the Parks, and Calor are glad to have some involvement in the Week.

With this in mind, a meeting of the steering group will be arranged in May - to set the theme, review support needs, agree programme content and set the planning timeline.