

LINK meeting with Minister Paul Wheelhouse, 14 November 2012, Holyrood

SG - Paul Wheelhouse, Keith Connal, Gareth Heavisides, Bob Macintosh, Jo O'Hara

LINK - Deborah Long (Chair, WiF), Vicki Swales (SLUTF), Aedan Smith (PTF), Jen Anderson (CO), Andy Myles (PO)

1 Introductions

Introductions were made round the table.

DL thanked the Minister for the opportunity, outlining LINK, members' shared interest in sustainability and the range of expertise which LINK members could offer; she hoped the Minister could champion environment across Government. PW had met LINK players at recent agriculture and biodiversity stakeholder groups and was looking forward to liaison. He felt LINK would provide a helpful focal point for reaching organisations. He was up for a championing role on shared causes, was holding bi-laterals with junior ministerial colleagues as Richard Lochhead (RL) was with Cabinet colleagues, to explore how to achieve common goals.

2 CAP / SRDP

VS referred to LINK LUS objectives and our full support for these, welcoming Government's intent to embed these across all strategies and policies and asking what assessment had been done in relation to the CAP proposals. PW recognised the degree of LINK ownership of LUS and its importance to LINK, reporting that this would form the basis of negotiations and was important to CAP. SG wished to keep stakeholders like LINK involved and interacting with emphasis on Pillar 2 and getting this right.

ABM reminded PW of the origins of the LUS in the 99 year forest leases and of Parliamentary unanimity around the principles, and the strong support from CONFOR. The principles strongly supported economic and social strategy as well as environment and this combination was important to LINK. PW took ABM's point. He said SG were keenly exploring how to integrate ecosystem services though this did mean changes in behaviours; they were less concerned about language if a change in the fundamental attitude to jobs and products was achieved drawing in people less persuaded of environmental value.

JOH reported that till finance and framework were known all was uncertain, with most debate around Pillar 1 where SG has least influence. It was important to look at impact of proposals across the board and not just in terms of payments. The Pillar 2 timetable was longer and there was more domestic control. Outcomes could have huge impact on scope to do things we want to do as LINK was aware from being in the stakeholder discussions.

VS noted progress and process were good. WRT the next SRDP priorities and targeting whilst there was a lot of choice, LINK reminded Ministers of things to which Government was committed at international and EU level and where Scotland was underspending to targets. LINK hoped SG would bear this in mind when considering other ideas such as food and drink strategy, and which were not necessary in the same way. ABM added that in economic and social terms, biodiversity, water, etc, could have huge consequences further down the line. PW felt that industry such as aquaculture were getting the message about the importance of a quality environment to investors and saw Government's role as helping industry to grow without damaging that. BM added that the environment dept was pressing very hard on this and that pressure on other parts of Government was important. VS felt this point had been made at the stakeholder group recently.

WRT delays in EU and the likely shortfall in funding, VS asked the latest thinking. PW had no detail. JOH said the outcome of the EC discussion legally was uncertain though worst case scenario would be no funding. SG was considering what other funds it could allocate, could not consult on that kind of bottom line, but felt there was hope of some funds for the transition year; in terms of priorities, LINK's voice had been heard, its paper seen, and these thoughts were being fed in to discussions. An announcement was likely in a couple of weeks after which there would be time to work on Scotland's reaction; she implied that LINK members would have an opportunity to feed in at that stage. ABM observed that ten years work could be lost in a one year funding gap, with which BM agreed, but added that legacy commitments have to be met. VS encouraged SG in this context too to bear in mind our legal

commitments as the bottom line and to leave other aspirations, which would not suffer so badly, for a year. PW and BM confirmed strong commitments to these and indicated officials were pushing hard. PW would reflect LINK points in his discussions with RL.

3 Biodiversity

DL explained LINK had had feedback on the latest review group meeting but flagged frustration at the process. LINK had input a lot to the first strategy and hoped the new one would bite more effectively. LINK welcomed the targets but noted direction at all levels needed revised and a step change to ensure..... ecosystem services. Lack of priorities was a key LINK concern, of biological outcomes and a list of a top ten actions.

PW said the lack was a result of SG trying to avoid too long a list. BM said Government was also keen for this kind of approach, coordinated by a separate group, in the wake of what has been a strategic discussion to date. PW suggested the Aquaculture & Fisheries Bill relates in terms of monitoring and delivery of strategy, and groups were needed to focus on specific details.

DL urged SG to give this leadership, which PW acknowledged, inviting LINK input.

KC said Government wanted a strategic balance between a 'top ten', on the one hand, and mainstreaming the process for public, NGOs and others to achieve targets. BM indicated SG wished to approach this carefully so as to keep enough breadth (more than 10) but not too broad (ie, hundreds).

DL stressed that the duty needs to be made to work. Noting that the stakeholder forum is not so very engaged, she reiterated that LINK is keen to see a process that delivers better. ABM asked how Government would get the balance on delivery right. BM felt that delivery was the focus of the group below the strategy group. The strategy was to avoid setting actions for which there are no deliverers, and to ensure monitoring arrangements with measurable targets in the next stage. PW added that this has to remain relevant to the public bodies signed up.

DL added that the difference or value the actions will have to them is an important objective to clarify.

4 Hill Tracks

AS noted that this was more Derek Mackay's brief, though there were important environmental issues involved. LINK was very pleased with the proposals to remove forestry and agriculture tracks from the GDPO and require these to have planning permission (as with other land uses), having long campaigned for this. LINK was aware that for planners it is an important development which applies consistency and will help to ensure the public know where they are. LINK supported Government in holding to this intention and was keen to support Ministers in enacting this. PW indicated that Derek Mackay was considering his responsibilities, and that Government recognised arguments for and against; he invited key points for a meeting he had with Mr Mackay on 29 November.

AS agreed to do this indicating that LINK would be able to give the decision a very warm welcome; PW acknowledged that this would be helpful if the change went ahead. ABM reiterated the strong case for landscape as part of the environmental quality, observing that hill tracks have economic consequences for tourism in areas of the country, and encouraging PW to flag the tourism aspects. PW referred to tracks he had recently noticed in this context and acknowledged the point.

5 NPF3 and SPP

Noting their key importance to LINK members, AS observed that the imminent, radical review which would shape things for some decades mattered a lot to the network. NPF as a strategy needed to continue to identify the importance of Scotland's environment and allow us to meet long-term duties to improve quality of life, whilst protecting our commitment to sustainability, and to giving adequate recognition to the principles of the LUS and Nat Marine Plan. Outlining LINK's role in promoting CSGN in the last review AS argued for it to be used as a vehicle for positive national development of green infrastructure, quality environment and green jobs, walking, cycling and more. LINK hoped that the intent was for co-ownership.

WRT national developments AS noted that Hunterston had been one which caused Government difficulties in both process and in promoting the NPF concept; he offered LINK's advice that Government avoid that kind of use of NPF this time round. VS added that in terms of the intention for NPF₃ and LUS to relate, the requirement for land in rural areas for development should be taken into account.

PW concurred with this last point. Government was keen to see CSGN progress, and also woodland round towns, woodland amenity for health and wellbeing and economic benefits, and cycling support. He would 'bang the drum' in bi-laterals which aim to explain the legal targets for climate change and the role which other departments can play in meeting these. He encouraged LINK to contribute specific points for his meeting on 29 Nov with Mr Mackay. Building on NPF₂, Government wanted to reflect ecosystem services, natural environment, economic growth, linkages to bio strategy. He reiterated acknowledgement of VS's point on LU strategy. He felt that a joint push would be happening. Building regulations for environmental improvement, implementation of Sullivan recommendations, were already being discussed in relation to CC targets, and there was discussion with Derek Mackay on design in relation to energy efficiency targets, benefit of semi-detached over current model of detached, ensuring new build does not bring new problems. Long distance trails as well as local walks were being considered and he would raise LINK's points with colleagues. He agreed NPF was a way of demonstrating positives and expected a positive reception of the ecosystem services approach.

ABM observed that links between health and environment gave good arguments for support from the health budget. PW felt there was quite strong concord with health colleagues, and indicated this was very much the approach his department was taking, in the hope of inspiring new areas of integration.

6 Review of SPP recently announced AS explained LINK had been heavily involved and remained very interested. The SPP re-stated EU law for protection for sites and species and is critical to protecting SSSIs, etc. Reviewed, to ensure against a risk of exposure of Government, it needs to meet these aims for designated sites and take seriously the wider environment outwith designations. The impending review carried risks, and the recent bad press over the UK/English review, should be avoided.

PW invited briefing (copies of any submissions we have made in relation). **LINK to provide briefing.**

ABM reported that LINK saw the SPP as a way of avoiding conflict by articulating how development can meet sustainability commitments. Such advice is better for developers even if it requires the SPP to be longer than some would like. As a bible for developers, there was a case for it carrying enough detail. AS reminded the Minister of LINK's input to the last revision and our work to secure SD commitment then.

KC invited specific issues. ABM reported LINK's view that the recent discussion with SG had gone well and members welcome for the open approach being adopted and a meeting of minds on key points. KC observed that tourism had surfaced here too in terms of the value of our natural environment, with useful maps of designated areas to build on, in order to illustrate key areas. Government was considering whether our NPs should be considered as national developments. AS indicated that this was on LINK members' minds too.

PW reiterated a request for indications of what LINK considered to be the biggest risks.

7 Representation of the environment sector

DL outlined the various approaches government had to inviting representation of the environment sector on stakeholder groups and forums, stressing that LINK itself is the most appropriate repository from which to invite expertise, and operated with a democratic ethic, with the aim of selecting the most appropriate rep in the network's view. Recent examples which have been less helpful in truly presenting the broad environment sector view are: the WEAG; the biodiversity review group; the Common Strategic Sometimes it was appropriate too for more than one rep to represent the breadth of views in LINK. LINK sought the Minister's assistance in encouraging departments and divisions to see LINK as the appropriate broker and first point of contact, in order to be offered what LINK considers to be the best representation on the respective issues.

PW, indicating that he was new to the department, understood Government's desire to identify individuals for particular technical input, though appreciated the problems this caused LINK and

welcomed suggestions as to how this could be better tackled and the range of units in SG which were relevant.

In the following discussion it was agreed that SG would be clearer about where LINK was being invited and in such cases would come direct to LINK. Greater clarity would also be given about the terms of engagement expected of the individuals approached (eg., whether they were ultimately to be considered as having represented a broad environment viewpoint). KC agreed that Government clearly needs to be explicit about whether people are invited as individuals or as representing an interest group. In LINK's view, the desire for representation of sector views calls for a direct approach through LINK, and particularly where there is a LINK task force or forum engaged on the issue. Greater clarity around how far forums' information and papers can be shared with wider players would also be given by SG.

VS reiterated LINK's request that Government look to achieving more appropriate balance of reps in relation to different interests; in WEAG she had represented environment alongside numerous reps of business. ON the CAP group the case had been accepted for LINK to field two reps, though again, this was alongside many more reps of the farming industry. KC acknowledged the point.

KC invited LINK to send details of examples of where this was a problem for LINK so that he could act as a conduit in addressing this within government.

8 Funding environment sector of the voluntary environmental sector for the service if delivers

JA sought the Minister's support in ensuring that the spirit of the recent agreement LINK had reached with SG over its funding, as a civic sector intermediary, would be sustained in future, to reflect what LINK assumed was Government's desire to continue to support that role and independence of voice. NGOs in the environment sector deliver public benefits and an important service, in ways including advocacy. The issue of concern to LINK was the recent decision to channel funding through SNH whose grant support understandably comes with agency-related grant objectives.

The ensuing brief discussion clarified that whilst for the coming 18 months this protection of LINK's intermediary role had already been agreed in writing with SG and SNH; also that with changing personnel the intention could easily be lost sight of. The Minister confirmed he had found the coordinating role of LINK valuable in today's discussions. KC indicated that Government would look at this though he felt SG would not be able to make a commitment for longer than any one Spending Review. **He would put something in writing to LINK.**

9 AOB

DL advised the Minister about members' concern over the Government's 'light touch' on MPA implementation and slippage of the National Marine Plan timeline; this was an item for discussion with G6 on 12 December at which LINK would be represented. PW noted the point.

In relation to the next meeting and the recent discussion of involving the Cabinet Secretary DL suggested that if this proved too difficult, LINK be offered a separate meeting with Mr Lochhead in early 2013. She noted that LINK's access to the Cabinet Secretary over recent years had diminished though LINK felt greater contact would be useful to Government as well as LINK. **PW noted the request and would pass this on.**

PW thanked LINK for a helpful discussion. The meeting closed.