

Notes of LINK meeting with Environment Minister, 14 September 2010

Attending

Roseanna Cunningham, Environment Minister
 Ian Hooper, Deputy Director, Natural Resources
 Peter Stapleton, Greener Scotland Division
 Fiona Harrison,

Deborah Long, LINK Chair & Plantlife Scotland
 Lloyd Austin, LINK Trustee & RSPB Scotland
 Dave Morris, Ramblers Scotland
 Tony King, Scottish Wildlife Trust
 Jen Anderson, LINK Chief Officer
 Andy Myles, LINK Parliamentary Officer

Introductions

Introductions were made. The Minister apologized for a late start, offering to run the meeting on; however, the room was not available for longer. The Minister welcomed Deborah Long as LINK's recently elected Chair.

It was noted that this was a 'catch-up' meeting in the main, and Deborah introduced Tony King regarding the first agenda item.

1. Wildlife & Natural Environment Bill

Tony King outlined LINK's view that the Bill offered exciting opportunity in terms of:

- Revisiting aspects of the biodiversity duty to increase accountability in terms of the Nature Scotland Act, in terms of funded work on the ground rather than reliance on officials and public bodies;
- Potential to take a lead in the UK and Europe in relation to as-yet-unaddressed aspects of the Habitats Directive and Natura which are prerequisites for landscape-scale conservation;
- Exploring habitat restoration/recovery, including in peatlands where there is demonstrable good practice, good value for money and wider benefits delivered;

and emphasized interest amongst LINK members in constructive discussion to move forward with this bigger picture in mind.

The Minister acknowledged LINK's premise, that the Bill does not go far enough, and reiterated her view that Government needs to ensure balance with other stakeholder views, some of which are opposed to LINK's. In addition, Stage 2 amendments would be influenced by the economic climate, ie the need to avoid greater financial burden. However, officials were considering whether some of the more 'significant' points in LINK's proposals were appropriate as a Government agenda, and hoped there was scope to take things forward together.

Ian Hooper believed some of LINK's proposals might equally well be pursued outwith legislation, citing work being done on the biodiversity duty as a result of the Audit Commission report, and consideration of instruments to achieve habitat restoration. He suggested ongoing dialogue could be more productive than the legislative route. Deborah Long confirmed that LINK was also following these processes.

In relation to Government's concern not to incur new financial burden, Dave Morris observed that achieving appropriate deer management in Scotland is about political will and leadership much more than it is about finance. He noted that good deer management is achieved by SNH, eNGOs and a few landowners. LINK's view was that these exemplars should be promoted by Government. The Minister indicated

Government concerns not to impact negatively on economic activity in rural Scotland and again mentioned the need to find balance between stakeholders from 'vastly different interest groups'.

2. LINK paper on protecting the environment in a time of cuts

Deborah Long introduced Andy Myles who had drafted LINK's paper.

Andy reported LINK's aim of protecting the environment in a time of austerity; he confirmed that members were aware there would be cuts, understood Government did not yet have all the information; at this stage simply LINK wanted to contribute constructively to the debate. Members' concern was not with structures and regulation but with ensuring desired outcomes and key functions are delivered. LINK believed Scotland could be more sustainable in 5 years' time even through an era of cuts, and had opportunities to increase jobs, develop healthier local communities, sustain wildlife and protect the environment. LINK was flagging questions for strategic debate. He hoped the paper was seen as a mature contribution and invited the Minister's views on questions it raised and on how LINK bodies could expect to engage in the debate.

The Minister confirmed that LINK's was a really useful, constructive piece of work and agreed the focus of the debate should be on results and delivery. She referred to challenges given the degree of uncertainty and confirmed that SG's priorities are:

- Promoting economic recovery
- Protecting services on which the public depend
- Action to combat climate emissions (including carbon sequestration, woodland creation, peatlands)

Whilst these were not exclusive effort would be made to maximize them. The full scale of cuts would not be known until 20 October (UK budget draft); SG's own draft would be published a month later; however, Ministers already knew the cut would be at least 25% over three years. Difficulties in planning included UK level decisions which impact devolved administrations, eg future of FC/FCS. SG were pressing Westminster for consultation on this kind of proposal but at best might get very little notice of decisions which would then require Scottish-level consideration of options such as merger, demise, stand-alones, Celtic-only options. Agencies such as SEPA and SNH were meantime reviewing own scope for efficiency savings.

Andy Myles welcomed the continued focus on these priorities and asked how LINK could be involved in ongoing discussions. The Minister suggested that LINK pitch for involvement in the series of meetings which Mr Swinney was now holding round the country with government and other stakeholders. Peter Stapleton offered to provide further information to LINK on this. **Action: PS to advise on LINK meeting with Mr Swinney**

Lloyd Austin noted that LINK's proposal of a strategic approach, focusing on necessary outcomes for a sustainable Scotland, related well to these priorities and referred to LINK's letter to the Finance Minister about the importance of an independent sustainability audit and scrutiny function. He observed that the same approach could usefully be applied in Scotland if, for example, the FC were closed down through the Public Bodies Bill at Westminster. The Minister replied that SG were weighing up the merits of being proactive in relation to changes at the UK level or simply seeking consultation.

Lloyd Austin saw merit in identifying key outcomes and functions in advance of pre-emptive changes again asking about opportunity for participation. The Minister agreed, indicating such discussions were afoot, internal at this stage, partly clearing out the 'impractical' options, though there would be consultation. Andy Myles noted that in the Scottish context there are fewer agencies and a very small sector, to begin with, so with less scope for economies of scale. Whilst LINK members supported the SEARS work in respect of savings in backroom services, however, they were

concerned not to see important core functions lost in this wider review. The Minister reported that discussion would focus on core functions, though where these did not exist or were out of date (eg FCS) a wider view had to be taken. In terms of participation she indicated all options would be considered unless there were challenges in legal /statutory terms. The time to make proposals was now and in doing so proposers really should specify functions (ie., who is to be included, delivering what). Ian Hooper welcomed the paper appreciating its understanding of the prioritization involved and indicated there was a role for stakeholders to address the question of what are key priorities, as well as what are not.

Andy Myles reported LINK plans to think further about institutional architecture in relation to the ongoing debate, though this was not their area of expertise. He indicated LINK interest in discussing services which Government felt might be transferred; LINK bodies had a reputation for providing value for money; however, the eNGOs could not provide services 'on the cheap'. The Minister referred to SG discussions about activities which might be transferred to the voluntary sector in the context of the cuts, and later bought back; Government recognized that such services would need funded, she said. If LINK bodies could identify obvious areas of government activity which they could deliver, that information would be useful now.

Action: LINK to contribute soon

The meeting noted that environmental services delivered by trusts and other charitable or quasi-NGO structures set up by government might be amongst those considered appropriate for transfer. Andy Myles observed that LINK bodies would want to preserve their independence, and ensure their other legitimate roles as campaigning bodies were not constrained in any transfer process. The Minister noted that there might be tensions in this respect as government is reluctant to fund where funded bodies may use the funds for campaigning. The meeting agreed there are models which allow delivery of services funded by government alongside campaigns funded by NGOs' other income streams.

Lloyd Austin observed that NGOs' ability to attract other funds enables them to deliver more for 'bang' per buck; so, whilst environment may be an easy budget to cut, in fact this kind of investment delivers more than direct spending. The Minister felt this could usefully be flagged in the ongoing debate.

Andy Myles reiterated LINK's interest in strategic planning for the long-term, towards a sustainable Scotland, with attention to key environment commitments including climate, and to taking care of the environment that supports many industries – especially given the current comparatively tiny spend in this area. The meeting agreed that if Eu agricultural spend were stripped out, the Scottish budget for environmental spend is already very small.

The Minister repeated her interest in hearing where third sector bodies could deliver current government activity. LINK asked if there were a lead official. The Minister suggested that though Finance were the lead dept, Ian Hooper should be LINK's first point of contact. Lloyd Austin proposed a discussion between reps of SG and of LINK in the coming months.

Deborah Long thanked the Minister for a very useful discussion noting the January date already in the diary for a further meeting. The Minister hoped that LINK and its members would contribute to and thereby help to inform the ongoing discussions and anticipated further contact sooner than January. She apologized again for the somewhat truncated discussion.

JA/LINK/15.9.10