

Notes of LINK meeting with SG Environment Minister, on 3 December 2009

Attending

Roseanna Cunningham (Minister), Ian Hooper & Fiona Page – Scottish Government
 Ian McCall LINK Chair, Carey Coombs RSPB Scotland, Maggie Keegan Scottish Wildlife Trust, Judy Wilkinson Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society, Helen Todd Ramblers' Scotland, Jen Anderson & Andy Myles LINK Staff

The meeting had been postponed from November by the Minister's office.

1. Sustainable land use and climate change

1.1 Sustainable land use strategy

CC introduced LINK's *Living with the Land*, launched 2 Dec (Holyrood) with Peter Peacock MSP; this proposed an ambitious scope, which LINK strongly encouraged Government not to narrow. He asked how the initiative would be progressed and about opportunities for input. The Minister reported Government had embarked on land use strategy review even prior to the CC Act, with the big picture in mind. Given the timescale set by the CC Act, however, proposals were to be ready for Cabinet sign-off in June 2010. Regional stakeholder events (not topic-based) would be held round the country towards Easter (details to be published on SG website). A stakeholder group was impractical. This would be a rolling process, of necessity given the proposed 5-year cycle, and this stage was not the end of the story; the current work could not be comprehensive given the timescale available for presentation to Parliament (ie by March 2011), however, constant underlying work was intended. A report on the consultation process would be published along with the strategy, once this was cleared by Cabinet. CC hoped LINK's contribution was useful, and indicated that LINK was keen to assist.

JW asked if the SLUS would address development and regeneration: the Minister gave indications that SG was tending towards focussing on the 'biggest land uses'. She confirmed that SG recognised the SLU as crossing boundaries; the SLU was set up through the Climate Change Act so would include urban as well as rural land use; all Ministers were to be involved; she had met with Stewart Stevenson.

1.2 Climate and agriculture/ *Farming for a Better Climate*

CC welcomed the ambitious targets for emissions reductions in agriculture, was concerned at SG's reference to an expected 20% take-up, and asked how LINK could support greater contributions by land managers. The Minister indicated that the 20% was SG's anticipation of the lowest level of take-up rather than a prediction of the likely level. She was optimistic. SG did not intend to limit livestock and instead was stressing the need / options for cutting other avoidable emissions. She had no sense that farmers were not supportive; there were incentives, and the NFUS appeared to be onside. To concerns that more encouragement would be needed to turn established practice round, she indicated the SRDP (despite budget limitations) was the appropriate route.

1.3 Diet / farming systems / food policy

CC outlined LINK's interest in seeing Government take a lead on the relationship between a healthy diet and farming systems. The Minister believed farmers were already taking steps to developing efficiency and reduce avoidable emissions in farming. She recognised the food issue and was concerned too about GM but was keen to have farmers voluntarily on board the necessary changes, informing themselves of the benefits of changes in practice. Through the food and drink policy, Government also

aimed to get producers interested in the premium market and in altered practices. Richard Lochhead would review this if uptake was not significant, though the Minister could give no timescale. AM indicated that LINK would watch trends. The Minister was keen to encourage a situation where traditional farmers act as champions of the changes in practice, and would be interested to hear of contacts.

CC asked where the National Food and Drink Policy would go eg in relation to issues such as biodiversity. The Minister recognised the need for more join up between farming, production and wider economy, and was now looking at this. In terms of how this would roll out, and opportunities to input, she advised LINK to write to Richard Lochhead.

2. Sustainable development and Single Outcome Agreements

2.1 LINK Plans

MK gave an outline of work LINK was about to publish on ten areas relevant to the Single Outcome Agreement arrangements.

2.2 Reporting and Monitoring / Below the waterline

MK asked if the Minister was satisfied at the plans for scrutiny of the process. The Minister reported constant discussion of the relationship with local government; things were at an early stage and Government were currently behind progress. She stressed that if an issue is not covered in the SOA this should not be taken as an indication that the issue will not be addressed by local government as usual. She acknowledged 'difficulties' in reporting especially in the first year; annual reports were in preparation and she was interested in suggestions of how this could be managed in future. She recognised the debate over measuring and reporting indicating that national and local government were looking for the best way to gauge progress on national outcomes. She reiterated that local government is accountable particularly to local voters.

HT referred to the Improvement Service Menu of Local Indicators (Nov 09), noting its acknowledgement of gaps and LINK's effort to address some of these. Noting recent work by Sustrans on Active Travel (relevant to national outcomes) she reported concerns that inclusion or exclusion of activities in the SOA currently seemed to bear little relation to what was happening on the ground. However, local authority officers did report worries that in future any omission from SOAs might threaten active travel activities due to budget constraints. The Minister acknowledged that the misunderstandings about 'below the line' activity would need to be better addressed in future; she assumed that the thrust of the Active Travel work would still be delivered, under transport headings. The SOA was only ever meant to be a strategic indication of things to be checked against.

MK reported that her own survey work across the Councils indicated that even staff in the authorities believed that 'below the line' now equated to 'not happening'.

AM acknowledged the importance of focussing at the local level in relation to the SOA, reiterating LINK's concern with delivery of *national* objectives and asking what framework Government would put in place to monitor that. The Minister confirmed this also concerned SG though she cautioned the need for realism; her view was that enabling legislation gave Government capacity to do things but not necessarily with the expectation that these would all be done; where duties were involved there were generally remedies if these are not being carried out; but it was difficult for any government to monitor in detail, and this also relied on data availability. In relation to the SOA, some of that data was only being introduced now. As the PQ process showed, MSPs often feel it is they who do the monitoring. To have follow-through on everything would require the means to have been established at the outset. The aim with the SOA was to make these function at the level where they were meant to deliver.

JW asked, in the actual cases where certain duties were clearly not being undertaken, where could the public access intended remedies? IH responded saying that the SOA process provides a new locus for discussion between the two levels of government - liaison which was previously *ad hoc* – and noting that central and local government were not responsible for each other. He encouraged LINK to pursue its work, supporting the network's plans. The Minister added that accountability was being set through the SOA for national objectives and part of the expectation was that pressure for delivery would come from local voters.

2.3 Stakeholder involvement

LINK asked what scope there was for greater stakeholder involvement in the SOA process especially given Improvement Service acknowledgement of gaps and need for development. The Minister outlined the current arrangements but noted LINK's interest in greater community involvement and agreed to take this into consideration.

3. National Parks

LINK had written to the Minister about the proposed NPs Strategy Group and its remit and membership. The Minister indicated that the Group would have its first meeting in early 2010. As the letter indicated she had not yet made a decision on membership.

4. Environment, health and wellbeing

JA and HT indicated the tremendous overlap between LINK members' work and the health & wellbeing agenda, reported on discussions with SNH and others about this, and asked if Government could take a lead in promoting the relationship. The Minister indicated a lot of work was already afoot within her brief with crossover to health and other areas (eg Central Scotland Green Network, transport) though noted that more overt recognition of the overlap could be of value. She felt institutional pace was an issue as well as the inevitable differential between the environment and health budgets. Historic Scotland and Forestry Commission Scotland were active. The challenge was to achieve cross-sectoral thinking and SNP was addressing this.

The Minister offered to put in a bid for a debate organised by herself and Shona Robison, though stressed that she had no control over whether and when this might come about. AM welcomed this offer, suggesting it focus on health benefits of environmental spending. The Minister saw mileage in this and indicated that she would welcome LINK support in attracting MSPs to take part, particularly those who had not yet engaged, and in encouraging other business managers to support the bid.

IM asked what more might be done to focus on GPs' roles; IH felt this was already being addressed, eg by the Chief Medical Officer.

JW asked about SROI in relation. The Minister indicated that with a lot of crossover already afoot it was important to keep lines of responsibility clear; she wished to hold judgement until the SG working group reported.

5. National Conversation

The Minister had added this to the agenda and urged LINK members to respond to SG's paper, *Rural Affairs, Environment and Climate Change*, as this related to LINK concerns. AM indicated LINK would consider work plans of Scottish and UK Governments. He noted members' recognition of the challenges of government and benefits subsidiarity can provide locally, but stressed the network's national-level role in relation to policy and members' reluctance to be involved in constitutional debate, partly as this was marginal to environmental stewardship and because members' primary concerns were not constitutional, but practical.

The Minister observed that the paper outlined a range of options; Fiona Page urged LINK members to respond to this in the context of implementation of the climate legislation. AM indicated LINK members' view that there are means available to Scottish Ministers to make our voice heard under Scotland's current status. Whilst LINK was grateful for the opportunity, he felt the network would not take a view on constitutional matters but would work with government, short and long term, to deliver environmental stewardship. The Minister was surprised at the stance outlined, suggesting there were ways in which LINK members could contribute to the debate without damage politically or in terms of their own status. AM indicated that the network was attentive and would bring forward issues where they were concerned that environmental stewardship could be impeded.

6. AOB

6.1 Scottish Landscape Charter

Following up earlier correspondence between LINK's landscape task force and the Minister, IM asked if decisions had been reached about the Charter. The Minister indicated that she had now passed this to Scottish Natural Heritage, and understood that an event was planned linking sign-off on the Charter to National Performance Framework outcomes.