

**Scottish Environment LINK
Political Strategy Report - Spring 2013**

1 INTRODUCTION

Items where a decision of the Board and Network are requested appear in ***bold italics***. The sections of the PSR follow the different levels of government, and our involvement in the various branches at each level.

2. ELECTIONS

2(a) European elections

The next European Parliament elections are to be held on Thursday 22nd May, 2014 (date to be confirmed). It is proposed to draw up a LINK manifesto for these elections in Autumn 2013 (after the completion of the refresh of the Rolling Manifesto).

2(b) Westminster elections

The next Westminster General Election is to be held on Thursday 7th May, 2015.

2(c) Holyrood elections

The next elections for Holyrood will be held on Thursday 5th May, 2016.

2(d) Council elections

The next local council are due to be held in Thursday 4th May, 2017

2(e) LINK Rolling Manifesto

The Rolling Manifesto is in the process of being refreshed during 2013.

3. PARTY RELATIONSHIPS

3(a) Conservatives

Relationships with the Conservatives are reasonably cordial and cooperative at present. A fringe meeting is planned for their spring/summer conference in Stirling.

3(b) Greens

LINK attended the Green conference in Glasgow in October - where we hosted a successful fringe meeting on the LINK economics paper, with Alison Johnstone MSP speaking. Relationships with the Greens are cordial and cooperative at present.

3(c) Labour

Relationships with Labour are reasonably cordial and cooperative at present and several useful meetings have been held with researchers and MSPs at their request. We are to hold a fringe meeting at their spring conference – jointly with SERA and the Co-operative Party.

3(d) Liberal Democrats

Relationships with the Liberal Democrats are reasonably cordial and cooperative at present. We are held a successful fringe meeting at their spring conference – jointly with the Green Liberal Democrats.

3(e) Scottish Nationalists

LINK held a fringe meeting to discuss our economics paper at their conference in Perth on 20th October. Relationships with the SNP are reasonably cordial and cooperative at present but there are emerging tensions as they become defensive to criticism of the Government in the run up to the independence referendum. The regular meetings with Ministers have been re-established after the recent ministerial reshuffle, and while meetings with the Environment Minister, Paul Wheelhouse MSP have appeared productive, it is more difficult to gain access to the Cabinet Secretary, Richard Lochhead MSP.

4. LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEVEL

Due to capacity issues and a lessening of momentum, the LINK Local Governance Task Force has gone into abeyance. The Rolling Manifesto will still capture policy proposals at local level. The possibility of bringing independent local environmental groups into the LINK network is being actively discussed currently and a paper presented to the Board and Network.

5. SCOTTISH LEVEL

5(a) Legislative Issues

The following bills are currently in progress and of interest to members.

- Freedom of Information (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill (G) - Introduced 30 May (Finance Ctte).
- Scottish Civil Justice Council and Criminal Legal Assistance Bill (G) - Stage 1 (evidence, lead committee (Justice)) 26 June – LINK written evidence in preparation.
- Water Resources (Scotland) Bill (G) - Introduced 27 June – LINK provided 3 witnesses to give Stage1 evidence.
- The Aquaculture and Fisheries Bill is at stage 2 (RACCE) and is being considered by the Freshwater and Marine Task Forces.
- Better Regulation Bill - The bill will aim to improve the way regulations are applied, with specific measures to further reform planning and deliver a "simpler and more effective" legislative framework for environmental regulation and enforcement.
- Budget Bill - The annual Budget Bill provides parliamentary approval for the Scottish government's spending plans (Finance).
- Forth Estuary Transport Authority Bill - The bill will co-ordinate the management and maintenance of the Forth Road Bridge and the new crossing.
- Land and Buildings Transaction Tax Bill - The bill will set out how the proposed replacement for stamp duty land tax will operate.
- Landfill Tax Bill - The bill will put in place a replacement for landfill tax in Scotland, establishing the administration, charges and rules governing the new scheme.
- Procurement Reform Bill - The bill will establish a national legislative framework for "sustainable public procurement to support economic growth". The government said it would aim to do this by "delivering community benefits, supporting innovation, considering environmental requirements and promoting public procurement processes and systems which are transparent, streamlined, standardised, proportionate, fair and business-friendly".
- Referendum Bill - The bill aims to clear the way for an independence referendum to take place in autumn 2014. It will include provisions for the date of the referendum, the franchise and the procedures to be followed. The bill will also provide for oversight arrangements to ensure the referendum is run to the highest international standards, with the involvement of the Electoral Commission and Electoral Management Board.
- Tribunals Bill - The bill will establish a new, simplified statutory framework for tribunals which determine devolved matters.
- Community Empowerment Bill – the pre-legislative consultation has started for this bill. A LINK briefing – Defining Community Empowerment – has been sent to Councillors and MSPs.

5(b) Administrative Issues

LINK Task Forces are engaged in continued stakeholder engagements and monitoring of the progress of the SNP Administration, based on their manifesto commitments. These were largely of a tentative nature in the field of the environment – and dominated overall by a continued overarching commitment to "sustainable economic development". The Programme for Government continues to be "light in environmental substance". In particular receipt of monitoring and advocacy are, *inter alia*:

- Scottish input to reform of the Common Agricultural & Fisheries Policies, and in particular the future of the SRDP;
- the Government's zero waste plan;
- the Scottish Government's Budget, and 'carbon accounting' of the spending priorities therein (where most work is being done by LINK members through SCCS);
- the proper implementation of the Sustainable Land Use Strategy;
- the introduction of the latest National Planning Framework (NPF3) and the review of the content of the Scottish Planning Policy guidance (SPP);
- the pursuit of Climate Change targets – both in respect of mitigation (mainly through SCCS) and adaptation (through LINK's Task Force);

- early discussion of plans for restructuring of the environmental agencies with a close eye to be kept on the Forestry Commission Scotland (following changes made in Wales and under discussion in England) (A discussion paper on this subject has been prepared for the Board and Network by Angus Yarwood. ***How do the Board and Network wish to proceed?***);
- the will of the Scottish Government to implement the Marine Act (where the extent of their commitment may be flagging) and the resources allocated to the project;
- the probable merger of the agencies charged with care of the Scottish historic environment; and
- the refresh by SNH and the SG of the Biodiversity Strategy.

The LINK Economics Group has published a major paper commissioned from Simon Pepper on the move towards sustainable wellbeing. Governance Matters is being pursued across the Scottish policy community in various ways, with the possibility of a conference/public discussion on the issue in 2013.

A variety of reports have arisen in recent months with regard to deer numbers – it being suggested that they have achieved their highest ever density. No indication has been given by the Scottish Government that they are prepared to shift towards statutory management, despite the repeated failure of the voluntary system and the continued increase of numbers on protected sites and natural forest regeneration. ***Do the Board and Network wish to review the priority attached to the issue of deer management?***

5(c) Infrastructure and Planning Issues

Several major planning decisions are in process and have been discussed by the Planning Task Force. The development agenda remains dominated by:

- energy issues – including new windfarms, fossil fuel and nuclear powered generation (after the withdrawal of the Hunterston proposal) and on transmission lines;
- marine renewable energy development issues;
- ongoing introduction of local development plans;
- the review of permitted development rights (PDRs) – including the matters of hill tracks (with progress on their removal from the list of PDRs) and micro energy generation, and
- transport issues – including the Forth Crossing, the Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route and a variety of road dualling schemes.

In the context of the continued development of terrestrial wind farms, the Landscape Task Force continue to develop proposals for the Board and Network to discuss as means of directing government subsidies and incentives from terrestrial wind to newer, and more efficient and less intrusive forms of renewables. These were discussed at a LINK seminar in early November.

A LINK briefing on the issues of unconventional gas extraction and ‘fracking’ is in preparation, with a view to opposing strongly this development of fossil fuel production. ***What priority do the Board and Network attach to this issue?***

5(d) Judicial Issues

The Legal Governance Group is dealing with legislative issues and consultations arising from the several reviews of legal procedures in Scotland. LINK has been consulted also as part of the BRIA for proposed changes to the system of appeals from marine licensing decisions. Continued progress is being made on several fronts and in particular with regard to Protected Expenses Orders and other aspects of Aarhus Convention compliance.

5(e) Civic Issues

LINK continues its involvement in SCVO and LINK members are widening the field of their co-operation with others in the Civic Sector (as within Stop Climate Chaos Scotland - SCCS). Meetings have been held with the Confederation of British Industry (Scotland) and contacts with the STUC, the Church of Scotland, the Poverty Alliance, the Equality Network and other groups are growing.

LINK has been invited to a ‘round table’ discussion of charities and the independence referendum by OSCR on 17th April (the Parliamentary Officer having attended a meeting on the subject with the Carnegie Trust late last year)

5(f) Political Horizon

We still await a response from the referendum campaigns to our Referendum Challenge leaflet, published in June 2012, setting out our position on the dominant political issue of the day. A reminder letter was sent in January this year. A further reminder will be sent this month. The aspirational approach has been followed by other groups in civic Scotland. It appears to be the case, though, that most active discussion of substantive issues continues to be overshadowed by economic arguments and legal wrangling. The continuing contribution of fossil fuels to the Scottish budget is a key feature of this debate – with, thus far, little reference to climate change. ***Are the board and Network content that LINK displeasure at the lack of response to be made public in the summer?***

LINK has been invited to participate in the Office for the Scottish Charity Regulator's round-table discussions charities and preparedness for any constitutional change. This follows similar discussions hosted by the Carnegie Trust UK and their research project on the subject.

6 UNITED KINGDOM LEVEL

The UK Government continues to take an all-out approach to raising Gross Domestic Product. The attention of the Coalition to environmental issues appears to be stymied by the almost total focus of the Treasury on purely economic matters.

The Scotland Act was passed at Westminster and the instruments for its implementation are being followed. LINK has attended stakeholder discussions on matters of taxation. It is unlikely that any further major constitutional reforms will be passed in this Parliament, but discussions of further changes have begun as a consequence of the approach of the Referendum.

Several officers, members and staff attended the joint LINKs biennial meeting in Belfast during September. Contacts were refreshed and continuing cooperation discussed. A joint LINKs' meeting of Parliamentary staff is to be held in Edinburgh in April.

7. EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS

Issues of interest to LINK at present include the following.

- LINK members are following the developments in the UN Climate Change process, principally, but not exclusively, through involvement in SCCS.
- The Rio de Janeiro conference in 2012 of the Convention on Biological Diversity. (Rio+20) was not considered a major success with governments concentrating their attention on the financial crisis. LINK members continue to pursue Rio+20 through the Flourishing Scotland alliance.
- LINK members are closely following the implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive and the debate around the Industrial Emissions Directive (which has particular importance with regard to CO2 emissions).
- Attention is continuing to be focussed on the possibility of the Commission introducing a draft Directives on Sustainable Procurement and Non-Native Invasive Species.
- The EU Common Fisheries Policy is in the process of major reform and actions are being pursued to influence the process, especially within the European Parliament.
- The EU Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) review in the light of the 2014 EU budget continues to produce serious fears that historic production dominates rather than sustainability thinking and measures. ATF are actively seeking to influence decisions as the debate proceeds.
- Financial weakness in the Western economies and turbulence in the world markets continues to cast shadows of protectionism across the globe, with the Doha WTO negotiations apparently in limbo still.
- Jonny Hughes of SWT has been elected to the Council of the IUCN and is to contribute to the international sections of the LINK Parliamentary Monitoring Report.

Further work is underway towards understanding the potential for LINK (together with WCL and other UK interests) to maximise inputs to the EEB with small effort. LINK continues to support the IUCN Peatlands work, which has an administrative base in our Parliamentary office.

8. CONCLUSION

This PSR contains fewer questions than earlier iterations. Many important areas are covered, however, and large strategic issues are discussed. ***Are there any areas that the Board and Network wish to concentrate on in the next PSR?***

ABM/PO 08.03.13