

## Political Strategy Report, Spring 2015

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This is the first PSR since Spring 2014 as an Autumn 2014 report was not published due to the proximity of the Referendum. 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

The cycle of elections is set to run as follows.

- The next Westminster General Election is to be held on Thursday 7th May, 2015 – see Section 6 below for a discussion. A LINK manifesto for these elections has been published.
- The next elections for Holyrood will be held on Thursday 5th May, 2016. Preparation of a LINK manifesto has begun.
- The next local council are due to be held in Thursday 4th May, 2017
- A Referendum concerning UK membership of the EU may be held in 2017, dependent on the outcome of this year's Westminster election.
- The next European Parliament elections are to be held in May, 2019.

### 3. PARTY RELATIONSHIPS

Fringe meetings were held at the autumn party conferences to discuss economic issues with the parties – but these have been de-coupled from the conferences in the run up to the 2015 Westminster elections. Relationships with the five Scottish Parliamentary parties are reasonably cordial and cooperative at present. The LINK Species Champion initiative and Scottish Environment Week continue to provide useful lines of dialogue with MSPs of all parties.

- a) **Conservatives:** The Conservatives have diminished influence in times of a majority party at Holyrood. Individual relationships with MSPs have been building up, despite many of the adverse decisions of the Coalition Government at Westminster. Little progress is appreciable at a policy level.
- b) **Greens:** Our carefully modulated relationship with the smallest Scottish Parliamentary party continues.
- c) **Labour:** Cooperation with Labour spokespeople continue to be fruitful in relation to a range of issues, including arguments around sustainability, but the extent of this penetration into the party's central economic policy thinking is unknown.
- d) **Liberal Democrats:** The Liberal Democrats have diminished numbers and influence in the current session at Holyrood. At a UK level the party has seen a withdrawal from environmentalist positions on energy and other issues, and this is reflected at the level of Scottish policy.
- e) **Scottish Nationalists:** The SNP remain largely focussed on constitutional matters. In economic matters, their emphasis on “sustainable economic growth” has appeared to diminish since the election of Nicola Sturgeon as leader and First Minister. Regular meetings with Ministers continue, but pressure to cut the number of meetings has been felt from officials, and engagement with the Cabinet Secretary, Richard Lochhead MSP continues to be non-existent for LINK (and its task forces) and for the G6 group. LINK is in correspondence with officials over the arrangements for access. ***Do the board and network wish to discuss access to the Scottish Government?***

- f) **Other Parties:** A careful watch is being kept on the range of parties with representation from Scotland in Parliaments and Councils. Parties such as the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) might reach the stage where their presence is significant and where greater contact may be required as opposed to the very periodical contact at present.

The Parliamentary Forum has, once again, reviewed attendances on the party conferences' fringe. Consideration has been given to the view that it might be better to engage with audiences at alternative meetings of the policy community such as CoSLA, the STUC, CBI and others. The Woodland Trust has recently had useful experience at such gatherings. The Board's view in 2014 was that LINK should keep an eye on the relative value of all such events, rather than opt for either one set, or another.

#### 4. LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEVEL

Due to capacity issues and a lessening of momentum, the LINK Local Governance Task Force went into abeyance in 2012 – although some limited work and thinking continues about Single Outcome Agreements and useful contacts remain open with the LBAP network and through the Countryside Rangers. The Rolling Manifesto will still capture policy proposals at local level, although it has been agreed to streamline and reduce the scope of this version of our manifestos. The LINK Local pilot project, aimed at strengthening networking with independent local environmental groups, is proceeding slowly. We should be in a position to launch our year's trial of an interactive database by June this year.

#### 5. SCOTTISH LEVEL

##### 5(a) Legislative Issues

Only a single Bill before the Holyrood Parliament is of serious interest at present. The **Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill** has seen successful efforts made by LINK member bodies to heighten the importance of allotments, path development by communities of place and interest and green space within this Bill at Stages 1&2. The Government's **Land Reform Bill** will be introduced, however, before the Summer recess and might create a legislative focus in the rest of the Session. This is a rare legislative hiatus, caused partly by LINK not pressing for any major legislative items but concentrating on delivery within existing systems. It is also a result of the SNP having concentrated on constitutional matters during this Parliament. ***Do the Board and network wish to carry out a review of legislation as part of drawing up manifesto 'asks' for 2016?***

##### 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 (together with monitoring all the other levels of government). The Scottish 2014/15 Programme for Government continues to be light in environmental substance.

- **Agriculture:** In the wake of the latest round of CAP reform the agriculture TF has been dealing with the new SRDP. It has also been re-assessing its work in relation to issues of food and sustainability.
- **Climate Adaptation:** The Climate Change Adaptation TF remains as a corresponding group. Climate change mitigation is dealt with by individual members – mostly through SCCS.
- **Deer:** The Deer TF continues as a corresponding group taking action as and when required.
- **Economics Task Force:** The Economics Task Force continues to pursue the reform of the NPF and changing political and broader attitudes towards sustainability and 'growth'. Progress is

being made towards a fuller understanding of the relationships between economics and the environment. It is following up after the publication of ‘Scotland and the Carbon Bubble’.

- **Freshwater:** This Task Force is focussed on responding to a number of current or upcoming consultations.
- **Governance:** The Governance Group has continued to work on all areas covered in Governance Matters and, in particular, constitutional and lobbying reform matters at both Westminster and Holyrood.
- **Land Group/Land Reform Bill Team:** The Land Group have met to consider broad terrestrial policy, and a Land Reform Bill Team has been established to work on the forthcoming Bill follow through on our submissions to the LRRG and the SAC land inquiry.
- **Landscape:** The TF continues to operate and has nearly finalised its statement on landscape and energy policy. The hill tracks campaign continues monitor implementation of the recent reforms.
- **Legal Governance:** The Group continues to pursue access to justice issues.
- **Marine:** The TF continues to actively pursue the implementation of the Marine Act. The TF is working with the other Links at the UK level on related issues.
- **National Parks:** The Task Force has provided backing to the calls from APRS and SCNP for additional national parks.
- **Planning:** The TF has been focussed on the draft National Planning Framework 3 and the Scottish Planning Policy – but is now turning to building pressure for an Equal Right of Appeal in planning policy. The TF incorporates the Hilltracks subgroup which is now considering the implementation of the Government’s draft guidance.
- **SLU:** This TF is coming out of hibernation to Consider the second iteration of the Land Use Strategy.
- **Wildlife:** The Forum is focussed on the implementation of the Government’s Biodiversity Strategy.
- **Wildlife Crime:** The Task Force has published ‘Natural Injustice’ (papers 1&2) a review of our position on wildlife crime and is pursuing their recommendations.
- **Woodlands:** The TF continues to monitor policy implementation. Discussions continue around the issue of the future shape of forestry and natural heritage public bodies.

LINK has continued to commit attention to the following public policy areas but has no formal mechanism for their discussion.

- **Waste:** The Economics TF is discussing the circular economy and resource management.
- **Energy:** The Landscape TF is finalising its ‘Landscape and Energy’ statement. LINK at Board level is initiating a review of collective positioning on climate change and energy at April 2015. The Economics TF oversaw the publication of ‘Scotland and the Carbon Bubble’.
- **Transport:** LINK helped to co-ordinate the insertion of active travel routes as a National Priority within NPF3.

LINK Congress and the Strategic Planning day saw calls for the development of our thinking with regard to the ‘social justice agenda’ but no mechanism currently covers this work. ***Do the Board and Network wish to discuss how to establish a mechanism for the discussion of social policy matters as they interact with environmental issues?***

## 5(d) Judicial Issues

The Legal Governance Group is dealing with changes arising from the several reviews of legal procedures in Scotland. Continued slow progress is being made on several fronts and in particular

with regard to Protected Expenses Orders, legal standing and other aspects of Aarhus Convention compliance.

As it becomes less costly and problematic to access justice in environmental matters, attention might profitably be turned to finding mechanisms for members to seek out, prioritise and test areas of legislation where concerns have been identified as to the legality of the way the law is being implemented. ***Do the Board and network wish to begin discussion of such a mechanism?***

### 5(e) Civic Issues

A certain disenchantment has led to LINK involvement in SCVO lessening in the last year while, at the same time, many LINK members are widening the field of their co-operation with others in the civic sector as part of identifying allies within their advocacy strategies. Working in co-operation with other groups in the policy community has proved fruitful, as in the informal alliance built in opposition to including the duty to promote “sustainable economic growth” in the Regulatory Reform Bill and the reform of the National Performance Framework. Space for discussion within Scotland is limited, however, as:

- we remain without an effective ‘Civic Forum’ surrounding the legislative, executive and judicial branches; and
- SCVO remains tightly focussed on matters of social welfare and service provision as opposed to the wider concerns of NGOs.

***Do the Board and network wish to review the structures for debate and discussion in civic Scotland?***

## 6. UNITED KINGDOM LEVEL

In the run up to the 2015 Westminster General Election the UK Government continues to take an all-out approach in pursuit of economic growth. The attention of the Coalition to environmental issues appears to be stymied by the almost total focus of the Treasury on purely economic matters. It is unlikely that this will change dramatically as the result of the forthcoming General Election, although some change in tone may emerge.

The energy market, policy and prices have emerged as an area of debate between the parties. The balance of subsidies for renewable energy, nuclear developments and exploitation of unconventional gas resources are the focus of this debate. The large bulk of this area of public policy is covered by powers reserved to Westminster, with no devolved control over taxation or the direction of energy subsidy, but powerful opportunities through the planning system. LINK is developing a brief for a review of our position on energy policy.

Contact between the other Links continues with a vigorous discussion of issues and future co-operation at the 2014 conference in Clydebanks. A new joint meeting of Chairs and COs is planned in the Spring of 2015. Evidence was submitted to the WCL review of their own strategy. ***Do the Board and network endorse the building of stronger links between the sister Links and the pursuit of a more ‘federal’ approach to cooperation? What would those members which are part of a UK organisation particularly like to see addressed in this process?***

LINK has published a Manifesto for the 2015 elections. To date the environment has not featured as a major issue in the campaigns – being overshadowed by the tactical confusions of emerging multi-party politics and the debate over the economics of austerity.

## 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 in the run up to the next major conference of the parties to be held in Paris in December 2015 - principally, but not exclusively, through involvement in SCCS.
- 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).
- Increasing attention is being paid to the negotiation of new trade agreement between the EU and the USA (TTIP).
- Attention is continuing to be focussed on the possibility of the Commission introducing a draft Directive on Sustainable Procurement and Non-Native Invasive Species. A joint Links response is in preparation.
- A joint Links position is in development also with regard to the 'refit' of the Birds and Habitats Directives.
- The EU Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) review in the light of the 2014 EU budget is all but complete. Historic production still dominates rather than sustainability thinking and measures.

There are plans to assess the potential for LINK (together with WCL and other UK interests) to maximise inputs to the EEB, within our limited resources. Efforts continue to hold a meeting with the UK representative on the EEB Board and to strengthen our EEB participation. LINK continues to support the IUCN Peatlands work, which has an administrative base in our Parliamentary office.

## 8. THE POLITICAL HORIZON

LINK agreed to limit our participation in the referendum in favour of concentrating on core environmental issues and priorities. In the wake of the Referendum of September 18th, 2014, political attention remains on constitutional issues as part of the Westminster election. We made a submission to the Smith Commission and note the probability of more fiscal powers and social responsibilities being devolved to the Scottish Parliament in new legislation at Westminster. ***Do the Board and network wish to continue with the current LINK strategy of adopting a neutral stance and concentrating on our own issues?***

The possibility of a Conservative Government emerging from the 2015 election opens the possibility of intensive negotiations for reform of the European Union followed by a Referendum on this issue in 2017. ***Do the Board and network wish the Governance Group to prepare a LINK strategy for this eventuality – and should the aim of concentrating on core environmental issues and priorities be retained in the event of further constitutional turmoil?***

As the Paris 2015 climate change summit approaches and as the inexorable process of limiting emissions continues, tensions between the application of the precautionary principle at the local and global levels continue to arise – with a particular focus on matters of energy generation. ***Are the Board and network satisfied that the emerging LINK review of climate and energy positions is a satisfactory way forward?***

## 8. CONCLUSION

Many important areas are covered in this PSR and large strategic issues are discussed. ***Are there any of these areas, or other fields of policy, that the Board and Network wish to concentrate on in the next PSR?***

ABM/AO 06.04.15