

Political Strategy Report, Spring 2019

1. INTRODUCTION

The PSR provides an overview of Scottish Environment LINK notable advocacy activities and engagement at different levels of government. Board members are invited to reflect on the points made below, comment and indicate agreement on planned LINK activities in *italics*¹.

A period of intense LINK advocacy across key fronts:

- Fight for Scotland's Nature campaign (FFSN): the campaign is now fully operational with the support of a dedicated though part-time campaign coordinator. This includes a fully-fledged campaign and communications plan, and advocacy programme.
- Biodiversity post-2020: LINK has been working to develop its own views as well as working with SNH and partners to develop a transparent and inclusive process for developing Scotland's future policy on biodiversity, also in terms of funding.
- Climate and nature-based solutions: the Nature on Red Alert report was very well received from a media point of view and acted as a good hook to engage with MSPs. This is leading to an important discussion about how enhanced policies for nature can also deliver on climate ambitions.
- Rural affairs: raising awareness about the need for a 'public money for public goods approach' which seems to be gaining traction.
- Marine: ongoing work around the designation of protected areas and development of fisheries policies
- Circular economy: developing a LINK manifesto.

LINK is utilising other opportunities, such as the UN SDG voluntary national reporting, to raise key issues with other parts of Scottish Government.

Of particular relevance will be however the work around the State of Scotland's Nature due to be released in autumn 2019. It will be important to ensure that the launch of the report in Scotland is well lined up with our advocacy on biodiversity as well as potentially the FFSN campaign.

LINK is also continuity to work with civil society partners to link up the human rights agenda and call for a right to healthy environment with the FFSN campaign.

On 10 April, LINK held a workshop on environmental policy asks to inform members about how, among other things more closely linked to a potential Brexit fall-out, could be added to our asks for an Environment Act. This helped to streamline LINK policy priorities. Work will soon commence for key groups and subgroups to flesh out views in greater detail.

2. POLITICAL OUTLOOK AT A GLANCE

This continues to be a challenging political environment to operate in. Continued divergence of views between Scottish and UK governments as well as political parties in Holyrood and Westminster on critically important constitutional issues means political tensions are high.

¹ Please note that given focus on national developments, there has been limited engagement at the local government level and therefore the relevant section of the PSR has been removed on this occasion. However, it is anticipated that there will be some engagement with local authorities through the 'Fight For Scotland's Nature' campaign which will be detailed in that section. To ensure that the absence of references to local government in the PSR does not create gaps, this will be revisited with each PSR and activities considered ahead of the next local elections.

SNP Government (and Westminster delegation) support the revocation of article 50 and a people's vote. UK Government supports UK exit from the EU with a deal and the House of Commons is in a de facto deadlock.

Brexit uncertainty continues which means that LINK advocacy continues to need to be couched in careful terms with respect to the potential outcomes while at the same time it is acknowledged that this uncertainty is also perpetuating Scottish Government reluctance to commit to actions to redress the risks of a Brexit fall-out.

However, it is important to note progress in terms of the Scottish Government's commitments towards environmental protections. In its response regarding next steps to the Scottish Continuity Bill, the Government indicated it would:

1. Bring forward new legislation to ensure Scots law continues to align with EU law
2. Strengthen environmental protection, including seeking opportunities to legislate
3. Look at how best to safeguard important EU human rights values

The Government also added that with respect to the environment 'it will put in place the legislative and institutional arrangements that will be required' and if required it will 'design interim arrangements that reflect our policy established through [the environmental principles and governance] consultation'.

This is an important step forward and we need to capitalise on it to get firm commitments on timeframe and scope of such legislative action. In addition, we must reflect on how the proposals to 'keep pace' fit with our ambitions for Scottish environmental targets as well as wider UK discussions regarding 'dynamic alignment'. While in principle the two can be pursued jointly ('keeping pace' and new Scottish targets), in practice there will be important policy detail that needs to be considered.

The flexible extension agreed on 10 April (giving UK up until 31 October to decide next steps on Brexit) could be used by Government as reason for not taking what we would consider timely action. This still leaves the door open for LINK ambitions for an Environment Act to be more directly linked to the commitment to a Strategy.

As uncertainty regarding the outcomes of Brexit persists, LINK continues to be alert to the need to amend advocacy or campaign approaches but has also set out contingency plans.

In engaging with Government, it is important to acknowledge their limited capacity and work to offer solutions, particularly in the context of the governance gap. This of course has knock-on effects on ENGO/LINK capacity.

3. SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT POLICY OUTLOOK

Meetings have been held with Mairi Gougeon, Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment. A number of other meetings are being pursued with Roseanna Cunningham, Fergus Ewing and Humza Yousaf. It would be good for LINK to explore further links with the human rights agenda and therefore the relevant ministers.

Since autumn 2018, LINK put effort into improving the relationship with Roseann Cunningham; this is partly reflected in her agreement to take part in LINK's SNP party conference fringe meeting on 27 April as well as improving contacts with her SPAD. There has been a conscious effort to engage with Roseanna Cunningham on a positive agenda (e.g. Environment Strategy, post-2020 biodiversity ambitions). It has been helpful to have the insights of Campbell Gemmell.

Work is ongoing to create 'nature' champions in the Cabinet beyond the relevant Cabinet Secretary and Ministers. This will be integrated in the campaign forward plans and summer Species Champions activity.

Focus is now also being placed on developing a set of clear asks for the Programme for Government. So far this includes²:

1. Inclusion of a clear commitment for a Scottish Environment Act (or a commitment to consider legislation that addresses the FFSN campaign's three core issues)
2. A forward plan for developing Scotland's post-2020 ambitions and indication of those ambitions
3. Commitments regarding the need to align land use objectives with environmental outcomes, especially in the context of future rural support schemes

4. SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT ENGAGEMENT

Relationships across the political spectrum are progressing very well. Participation at the party conferences has helped raise LINK's profile as well as LINK's activities. This has been good in the context of the FFSN campaign. Advocacy has been focusing on the campaign, post-2020 biodiversity ambitions and links to climate change as well as rural affairs.

Progress is being made to engage more regularly with the SNP MSPs and the SNP research team.

Some highlights include:

- ECCLR Committee considering LINK request for MSPs to look into governance aspects as well as targets for environmental protection.
- Finance and Constitution Committee report on Common frameworks highlighting key environmental governance issues.
- Scottish Conservatives put forward rural affairs policy which also supports payments for environmental goods. This is an improvement compared to previous positions.
- Scottish Greens now calling for a Scottish Environment Act.
- LINK issues raised in variety of chamber debates, oral and written questions.

Over 100 MSPs are now signed up to the Species Champions initiative. After the successful 100 Day Challenge in 2018, the LINK team is planning a series of summer engagement activities which will also support FFSN campaign activities.

5. UNITED KINGDOM LEVEL

At a UK level, LINK activities continue to focus on engaging with the UK Environment Links and Greener UK to ensure a consistent approach to Brexit. Focus of activities is around SI/SSI coordination and seeking reassurances regarding the future of UK-wide work on environmental policies.

Link and GUK colleagues are exchanging views and learning from working on the Defra Environment Bill as well as coordinating on policy asks for their respective governments and parliaments.

There are ongoing discussions about how to link up advocacy so that we work towards joint objectives but in a way that makes sense in terms of the different political situations across the four countries.

6. EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS

The UK Government will decide on 12 April whether European Parliament elections will be held in the UK. Preparations have started among Scottish political parties to select candidate MEPs.

Uncertainty as to whether European Parliament elections will be held will probably not help engagement but parties in Scotland are developing lists of candidate MEPs. In seeking to engage in the elections, LINK

² This is an indicative list which focuses on key priorities. Further discussions ongoing with the Economics, Marine and Planning Groups.

will seek to draw on existing EEB work as well as add specific asks regarding the environmental aspects of Brexit, in coordination with Link and GUK colleagues.

It will be important to enhance links with the IUCN ahead of the Convention on Biological Diversity COP in end 2020. Advice from Stuart Brooks has provided some suggested next steps in relation to a proposed UK Peatland Resolution at the IUCN World Congress in 2020 and some preliminary work by the CO on making better use of LINK's IUCN membership. *How can the Board help with enhancing IUCN links?*

Lloyd Austin continues to serve as the UK Board member of the EEB and will continue to do so until the end of his term. Contacts with EEB continue as part of LINK involvement in some working groups (e.g. on the circular economy).

7. ELECTIONS

The cycle of elections is set to run as follows:

- The next European Parliament elections are to be held on 23-26 May 2019.
- The next Scottish Parliament Election is due to be held on Thursday 6 May 2021.
- The next General Election in the UK is scheduled to be held on 5 May 2022.
- The next Local Government Elections is schedule to be held 5 May 2022.

8. CONCLUSION

LINK staff focus is on ensuring the success of the FFSN campaign as well as progressing other linked advocacy objectives.

There is still a need to enthuse the network about the campaign. This means ensuring adequate resources are in place but also taking the time to raise awareness across the network about the important of the campaign.

There is a clear need for developing evidence and presenting LINK views in a way that captures the attention of politicians is needed. It is increasingly understood that effective advocacy will depend on having a more robust advocacy toolkit which includes better communications materials.

This, in combination with the need for LINK to develop solutions for Government for policy issues, will increase pressure on the DPF. There is ongoing work for LINK to develop evidence around biodiversity funding implications as well as fleshing out solutions for addressing the governance gap.

Actions following the series of CEO dinners will be used to align with and support the FFSN campaign.

The next PSR report is due in Autumn 2019.