



FOR LINK Board (October) and Members (November) 2016

Political Strategy Report, Autumn 2016

1. INTRODUCTION

The sections of the PSR follow the usual pattern covering the different levels of government, and our involvement in the various branches at each level as appropriate. An additional section has been added which provides an overview of the Scottish political landscape given the emerging complexities of the post-EU referendum environment. Board members are invited to reflect to the points made below, comment and indicate agreement on planned LINK activities in *italics*.

2. SCOTTISH POLITICAL LANDSCAPE AT A GLANCE

Following the Holyrood 2016 elections, SNP is at the head of a minority government (63 MSPs) and will seek support from other parties in Parliament to pass Bills. The Conservatives and Greens have been strengthened (31 and 6 MSPs respectively) while Labour and Liberal Democrats have been reduced in numbers. More detailed information on LINK's relationship with Scottish political parties is included in part 4.

Local council elections will be held in May 2017. For a full list of upcoming elections see part 6. LINK's Governance Group is developing a strategy for engaging in the local elections. *Governance Group proposes activities which focus on areas where LINK can make a positive contribution in terms of supporting the work of local councils – whilst being mindful of the economic constraints in which we are all are operating. The Board noted that they will be mindful of this point.*

Following the EU referendum, Scottish politics are dominated by a discussion of how a “hard” Brexit will impact Scotland and what options are available to Scotland given that 62% of citizens voted in favour of the UK remaining in the EU. To this end, the First Minister has appointed Mike Russell as “Brexit Minister” and set up a Standing Council where experts have been tasked to develop options for Scotland's relationship with Europe. A bill for holding a second independence referendum has also been published for consultation.

For LINK and its members, a substantial part of our resources will have to be devoted to following and being active on “Brexit”. Particular attention will have to be paid to coordination among LINK members, with other LINKs and the Green Alliance.

At the same time, the Scottish government has committed itself to pursuing the policy priorities it had set out in its manifesto and has presented its government programme. Key areas for LINK and its members are the revised Climate Change Plan, the Climate Change Bill, follow-up to SNP manifesto commitments on biodiversity, MPA consultation and planning reform. Read more details in part 3.

Looking more specifically at environment policy, it is worth noting that a Cabinet Secretary for the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform has been appointed for the first time. This is positive in terms of the importance placed on the environment but at the same time it creates a divide between the environment and climate change portfolios and the rural economy, agriculture, fisheries and forestry which are very important for delivering on environmental ambitions.

3. SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT POLICY OUTLOOK

Relationships with key cabinet members from the party in government have continued and are progressing well. LINK has had meetings with the ECCLR and REC Cabinet Secretaries securing regular interactions with them and their team. LINK has also established a relationship with other Ministers such as Paul Wheelhouse and Mike Russell. Efforts will now also focus on developing a relationship with the Cabinet Secretaries and Ministers in charge of the economy and planning. Meetings with new SPAD for the environment and energy David Miller have been conducted, meetings with other SPADs are in the works and will be pencilled into the calendar as appropriate.

Government is only now beginning to launch different consultations and drafting upcoming legislative documents. As such there are no bills that LINK is currently actively working on. There are however a number of issues that LINK and its members are working on with a view to developing internal positions, meeting with different civil servants and coordinating with like-minded stakeholders in order to be ready to engage once documents are published. These issues include:

- Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement
- Planning Reform White Paper
- Climate Change Plan and Climate Change Bill
- Inshore Fisheries Bill

For a number of issues (e.g. MPAs, forestry devolution), the government has released consultations to which LINK is responding.

LINK will try to raise the importance and relevance of biodiversity as an integral component of any solution to climate change adaptation. Deliberations are ongoing regarding the need to link the work of the Economics Group on investment to the climate change plan. This is part of the wider work of the Economics Group which focuses on shifting the economics debate towards new thinking, broader than growth (beyond GDP). It is expected that in the context of "Brexit" more traditionalist approaches to economics will seek to prevail.

The implications of the EU referendum will be felt across the policy spectrum. In terms of this area of work, LINK has sought to engage with the Scottish government (through Minister Mike Russell), Scottish Parliament (submission of evidence ahead of key meetings and debates), the Standing Council on Europe (LINK is a member of the Social Benefits and Human Rights roundtable, LINK members are part of the Environment subgroup), with MEPs (outreach to Alyn Smith, others to be pursued as appropriate) and to coordinate with other stakeholders (through SCVO). LINK has also established contacts with leading Scottish academics and is looking into seeking their support to complement LINK's internal audit on Brexit implications for Scotland's environment. A draft of the audit is expected towards the end of the year.

To help develop LINK's thinking on Brexit strategy, a panel discussion will take place as part of this year's Congress. Participants will include LINK honorary fellows, LINK members, academics, Norwegian representatives and MSPs(tbc). The aim of this session will be for LINK members to discuss the impacts of Brexit, the structures available to Scotland and the UK outside of the EU and to gather lessons learnt from the Norwegian experience.

4. PARTY RELATIONSHIPS

Following the Holyrood elections, contact has been established and continues to be pursued with key members of the Scottish Parliament. LINK is an observer to the SNP, Green and Lib Dem conferences taking place this autumn. A successful evening reception was held with the ECCLR Cabinet Secretary during the SNP conference.

- **SNP:** in addition to the contacts with SNP MSPs members of the Scottish Government, LINK has met with the SNP ECCLR delegation and held exchanges with the Convener of the ECCLR Cttee. LINK will be seeking to set up meetings with the REC Cttee, also when the LINK Agriculture Vision has been further developed.
- **Conservatives:** preliminary contacts with Conservatives have been made focusing on engaging with Maurice Golden, MSP. Further meetings with Conservative MSPs including Alexander Burnett.
- **Labour:** relationships have resume with MSPs members of the ECCLR and REC Cttees. Engagement is ongoing with Claudia Beamish MSP, the new Labour environment spokesperson.
- **Greens:** contacts with Green party researchers have continued and engagement with key MSPs has been initiated. Meetings are due to be pencilled in.
- **Liberal Democrats:** so far, minimal contact with Liberal Democrats. Engagement is going to build relationships and overcome gaps given environment/economy spokespersons not an MSP.

The overview below does not provide an account of the interactions that have been occurring in the context of the relaunch of Species Champions (over 50 MSPs now signed up) or contacts in the context of Scottish Environment Week.

5. LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEVEL

The online database was launched in April 2016. Currently over 40 local bodies are registered. Opportunities to further promote and utilise are being explored.

6. ELECTIONS

The cycle of elections is set to run as follows:

- The next local council elections are due to be held on Thursday, 4th May, 2017. LINK will further deliberate on activities ahead of local council elections following Holyrood May elections and June EU referendum.
- The next European Parliament elections are to be held in May/June, 2019, though by that point it is likely that the UK's exit from the EU will have been negotiated.
- The next Westminster General Election is due to be held on Thursday 7th May, 2020.

7. UNITED KINGDOM LEVEL

Over the last few months the political landscape at UK level has changed dramatically: following the EU referendum vote, a new PM has been appointed as well as a new cabinet. Prominent Leave supporter Andrea Leadsom is now in charge of DEFRA. A key policy document which is expertly over the next few weeks is DEFRA's 25-year plan. Some intelligence has led stakeholders to believe that this plan may be used by the UK government to provide a mechanism for delivering a UK-wide plan for agriculture and environment post-Brexit. *Governance group has indicated to the Links that DEFRA's 25-year plan would not be an appropriate Scottish solution.*

From a LINK point of view, it will be important to ensure coordination with sister Links on activities following the EU referendum and as next steps for Brexit firm up. It will be important for LINK to monitor discussions regarding DEFRA's 25-year plan. There are discussions ongoing about setting up a UK Links group, following the work that happened on the EU Birds and Habitats Refit, to coordinate E-NGO activities on Brexit. Scottish Environment LINK is also in contact with Green Alliance to coordinate on Brexit activities they engage in.

The Scottish government has already issued a draft bill for another independence referendum for consultation. The Governance Group will continue to monitor developments on Brexit and keep wider LINK membership informed. The next Governance Group meeting will take place in January 2017; all members are welcome to attend.

As a reminder, the PM has indicated that article 50 will be triggered by end of March 2017.

8. EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS

LINK will be hosting the annual EEB conference in Edinburgh in 2017. This comes at a very interesting time politically given Brexit negotiations are likely to have started. LINK staff are going to be concluding a cooperation agreement with EEB in November 2016 and seeking to raise substantial funds for holding the annual conference, AGM and other internal EEB meetings. *A steering group to develop ideas and a forward plan for the conference will also be set up. Several Board members have undertaken to participate.* The aim is to organise a high level conference which will position LINK as a relevant stakeholder in Scottish and UK environment issues but also a valuable resource for relevant EU discussions.

9. CONCLUSION

Brexit and implications for Scotland are at the focus of political discussions; this is likely to continue for the foreseeable future with different spikes and lulls of interest. The publication of the consultation of the bill for holding an independence referendum will only add to the discussions. *In this political climate, LINK needs to be prepared to "Brexit-proof" its messages and consider engaging with new audiences (e.g. Scottish MPs, MEPs).*

Discussions on Brexit come at an already very busy time where a lot of important policy discussions are taking place, on climate change, biodiversity, forestry and the marine environment. As a result, LINK staff and members will need to allocate resources carefully. In terms of social justice, the first few months of SNP government have continued to indicate that this is a political priority. At the same time, limited resources on the part of LINK make it necessary to proceed in a careful manner. It must be noted that so far discussions with stakeholders have provided useful and positive feedback with respect to LINK's initiative to engage in the social justice agenda. Further discussions on this issue will take place at Congress.

The next PSR report is due in Spring 2017.

//ends//