

Response to the European and External Relations Committee call for evidence on the EU referendum and its implications for Scotland

Scottish Environment LINK is the forum for Scotland's voluntary environment community, with over 35 member bodies representing a broad spectrum of environmental interests with the common goal of contributing to a more environmentally sustainable society.

Following the European and External Relations Committee call for evidence on the EU referendum and its implications for Scotland, LINK members wanted to share views with members of the Committee:

1) Scottish Environment LINK members believe it is critical that the Scottish Government and elected Members of the Scottish Parliament work to ensure that the standards of environmental protection provided to Scotland by European law are upheld and enhanced, regardless of Scotland's constitutional future.

- Neither the UK electorate's decision to vote in favour of leaving the EU, nor the Scottish electorate's decision to vote in favour of remaining in the EU, changes the fact that Scotland and the UK are facing tremendous challenges in terms of environmental degradation. No change in political or constitutional structures alters the need for well-designed and well-enforced legislation to protect and maintain our precious natural environment.
- We note the Scottish Government's initiative to set up a Standing Council on Europe to review options for Scotland and hope that sustainable development will be a core part of its remit.
- Moving forward, it will be important that different scenarios about the future relationship between the UK, Scotland and the EU fully reflect implications for the environment. It will be important to consider what environmental risks and opportunities might emerge.
- Environmental challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss know no boundaries. Regardless of Scotland's constitutional future, there must be a continued commitment to working across borders in co-operation with the EU and its member states to overcome the major environmental challenges of our time.

2) EU funds have had a critical role in enabling research for our environment as well as implementing programmes for its protection and enhancement. This funding has been critical for Scotland's environment.

- EU funding has both enabled the roll out of important projects in Scotland to increase our understanding of how our environment operates as well as provided incentives for sustainable practices. To ensure that the good progress being made in those areas continues, it will be important to safeguard this level of funding.
- For example, one such project is EcoCo LIFE which provides funding of £2.3 million for improving ecological coherence within the Central Scotland Green Network. This piece of research will provide useful insights for meeting Scotland's Biodiversity Route Map "Priority project 10: improving ecological connection". The project is led by Scottish Natural Heritage with the support of several civil society organisations, including several LINK members (<https://www.ecocolife.org.uk/>).
- In addition, it is also understood that some charitable trusts employ Rangers to manage areas of landscape and cultural value and to provide education and information to both local

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communities and visitors. Some of these funds have come from European sources and will no longer be available post-Brexit.

- What is more, the impacts of a potential Brexit are already being felt across the environment sector. For example, earlier in 2016, two LINK members (RSPB and Plantlife) finalised a submission of an £11 million bid for EU LIFE+ funding to support the control and eradication of the invasive non-native species *Rhododendron ponticum* and restore the biodiversity and declining status of key Special Areas of Conservation (SACs). This bid has now been withdrawn due to the considerable uncertainties associated with LIFE funding beyond 2018. The project would have helped deliver both the Scottish Government's strategy on *Rhododendron ponticum* and a key project in the Government's Route Map for Biodiversity. While the organisations are rethinking the bid, the scale of the original project, which included significant parts of the Scottish west coast, is likely to be lost in the absence of alternative funding. Supporting landscape scale action against non-native invasive species is one of the key benefits that membership of the EU allowed. In the absence of EU funding resources, the Scottish Government will be called on to provide an alternative mechanism for delivering this project if Scotland is to meet its commitments on biodiversity.

3) LINK members warmly welcome statements from the First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform confirming the government's continued intention to deliver on its manifesto commitments and to "make sure that we maintain, protect and advance our own environment"¹.

- It is also important to emphasise that EU Directives and Regulations continue to apply to Scotland and the UK until a withdrawal agreement is negotiated between the EU and the UK. There is therefore a continued need to respect and continued implementing those pieces of legislation.

4) We look forward to engaging with both Scottish Government and Members of the Scottish Parliament in the next steps of this process and contribute on implications and options for environment policy once these are available.

- Discussions with all relevant stakeholders need to be initiated in a transparent and inclusive manner to consider the relationships we will need with the EU, and to ensure delivery of adequate environmental protection.
- Given the devolution of environment policies to Scotland, it is imperative that UK deliberations for setting out the UK's options involve not only the UK's devolved administrations but allow input from stakeholders operating in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England.

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¹ Roseanna Cunningham, Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee meeting, 28 June 2016:
<http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=10483>

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