

## **Main discussion points & actions from LINK meeting with Environment Minister Stewart Stevenson, held on 27 October 2011 at Holyrood**

### Present

- Stewart Stevenson, Keith Connal, Charles Stewart Roper
- Deborah Long (Chair), Helen Zealley (President), Dave Morris, Dan Barlow, Vicki Swales, Jen Anderson, Andy Myles

### Introductory

The meeting opened after 2pm.

– SS welcomed members and invited LINK to chair.

- DL initiated intros, then noted the value of the ministerial liaison to keep LINK abreast of ministerial portfolio and to inform Ministers of the feeling on the street among LINK members. She proposed strategic discussion on the Spending Review/Scottish Budget, offering support in defending environment spend and drawing attention to LINK's *Environment in a Time of Cuts* paper and proposed prioritisation.

Cuts to environment spend, salami-slicing LINK was concerned that the Budget showed greater than average cuts to environmental spend, itself already a modest area; LINK understood the need for spending cuts and rather than make representations, its 2010 paper had proposed how core objectives could be protected and preventative spend achieved. LINK asked if more clamour now would be helpful, given signs of damaging salami-slicing.

The Minister replied that though there were reductions in percentage terms and ring-fencing of health was impacting all areas, a significant consideration was agencies' and other government bodies' identification of ways to make more effective use of inputs without impacting outputs; in addition, Scotland was able to piggyback on UK Government environmental research (without loss to quality); and a continuing shift in agencies' focus to advisory, from regulatory, changed the way in which they needed resourcing and should not cause deterioration in decision-making. As an example, he cited SNH's lower number of official objections saying that the kind of issues which would have been cause for objection were being dealt with earlier in the process, with resulting savings on spend. **However, SS noted that, as Minister, he relied on people/ NGOs/ others to identify where that is not the case, as critical friends, and indicated the value of others seeing that kind of critique.**

LINK noted the Better Regulation agenda, about which they were in discussion with SEPA, and asked again if more articulation by ENGOs would help to secure greater environment spend. The Minister assured LINK that the existing proposals were much better than earlier ones, that Ministers had been equipped with lines of defence including LINK's, that had helped to ameliorate the earlier thinking. LINK welcomed the Minister's request that ENGOs flag where specific deterioration is noted and would concentrate on doing so where this could be most effective.

Sustainability, economics and the National Performance Framework LINK indicated members' developing interest around the economics agenda and particularly long-term, sustainable growth, noting that there were likely to be some tensions with the Government's focus on short-term economic growth, and proposing the need for blending both approaches. The Minister said that in terms of defending investment, there was general recognition of the direct economic value of the environment, and no attempts to rebut this. In certain areas Scotland commanded a premium because buyers perceived the quality environment; food and drink exports had doubled in the last 4 years - indication that environment has economic value. Government was aware that for example sea eagle and beaver reintroductions secured economic benefits, including through tourism; tourism relied highly on biodiversity, environment, culture (occ weather). LINK stressed the need to defend that environment. The Minister noted that these were exceptionally difficult times.

LINK noted that the Nat Performance Framework set out characteristics important in delivering vision and flagged concern that some indicators were weak, in some cases now

succeeded by legislation, whilst the emphasis on economic growth meant other important dimensions were under-valued. LINK wished to see these other areas developed so that they would play the appropriate part in debate over Scotland's future growth. Whilst LINK supported the outcomes-focused strategy, members were aware the NPF has not had the traction it needs to have around sustainability. **The Minister invited LINK to make specific proposals about measures.** LINK reported its efforts to secure discussion with Government about the NPF over the last three months: **the Minister asked LINK to engage him in this effort.** He could make no promises about end results; he noted that sustainability is about economic sustainability but agreed it was supposed to include environmental sustainability also. He felt the trend of the public discourse towards green jobs was helpful and noted real complexities to the debate about what is best, noting for example, current discussions with Poland's challenge of the different ways of moving to clean power generation. The meeting noted the need for sophisticated thinking, and the greater value of engaging local, small businesses than big corporates.

Preventative spend LINK noted a good start had been made in the Budget on preventative spend, though ENGOs saw scope to apply the thinking across the budget and felt the environment offered real opportunity. The budget's focus on priorities including Scotland's biodiversity was welcome though LINK saw still greater scope to reflect this in budget decisions; likewise the emphasis on early years was positive though LINK recommended greater attention on environment, biodiversity, climate change, energy efficiency – as areas offering massive benefits for jobs in the local economies. The Minister agreed that the focus on very early years (to 2) was absolutely right, noting the increasing evidence; he accepted Helen Zealley's point that investment in pre-birth to 2 years gave double benefits, and better mother response, the Government having heard from Sir Harry Burns on specific effects of poor nurturing during the last administration.

LINK encouraged the Minister to champion greater development of paths and tracks for access, securing the intention at the time of land reform legislation that Scotland deliver better provision than other European countries, as an important dimension of the health, active travel and green jobs agendas. ENGOs wished to see more done by Government, balancing their own efforts via Legacy funding. DM noted that the US in the 1930s had run schemes specifically engaging the unemployed in paths and trail construction in NPs. The Scottish transport budget was of particular concern with active travel just a tiny part and the trend on road-building. The Minister said active travel as expressed in the Budget conceded funding at Council level and thought sustainable travel was to receive £69m over three years. He cited the main difficulty as the relatively slow progress on the core path network. LINK agreed this was a part of the issue but emphasised the importance of putting in the necessary infrastructure, flagging the lack of funds to develop paths and tracks and the emphasis within sustainable transport on buses. **The Minister proposed a one-on-one meeting with Ramblers to discuss this further.**

LINK flagged that, within the environment and climate change areas, in terms of the shift to capital, core paths could benefit besides roads, and could deliver as many if not more outcomes than would road repair. **The Minister agreed to consider this further and noted that some paths were being delivered via the criminal justice budget.**

SRDP LINK expressed serious concerns about cuts to the SRDP in which members set great store, in terms of delivering objectives of biodiversity, access, freshwater and more. LINK was behind the case for a better share from Europe, concerned that this relies on a matching level of domestic spending, and keen to see Scotland keep this up now. LINK was disappointed by the cuts to the SRDP especially the disproportionate hit to agri-environment, and on top of last year's cuts (11% followed now by 10%). Noting the discussions already afoot about reducing high-spend options, the ENGOs, along with many farmers and crofters were seriously concerned, and would be making representations to MSPs. LINK proposed more even application of the cuts within the SRDP and rural affairs budgets, so as to restore some of the agri-environment potential.

WRT state level spend matching EU, the Minister replied that independence would probably result in there being twice as much available. He said this issue highlights the need to persuade UK Government and said Scottish Government would continue these discussions. The meeting noted that Scotland has much less of the UK population and much more of the

target agricultural land, esp areas of high nature value. The Minister reported that the Cabinet Secretary had just met with the UK and other devolved Ministers on CAP reform; Scotland would welcome reduced distance between average and extremities if this could be negotiated. In response to LINK's general point the Minister said Government had seen demand drop and found it difficult to defend retaining budget where there was a decline in demand. **He would see what could be done, though was not hopeful of a change in the outcome.**

LINK reiterated serious worry around the match funding issue, farms struggling to get into schemes, the absence of advisory support other than what NGOs could provide, likely bounce at the end of the programme, and PMC discussion about reducing high-spend options. Whilst there was real demand and interest out there among farmers, this was being 'managed away' by programmatic changes. Conversely, LINK noted the business element was being protected, and made a strong plea for an 'even-ing' out, to provide more support for agri-environment, the help to business and promotion of high nature value farming. LINK also pressed for much needed changes to accounting arrangements since at present, bad design made the scheme unworkable and the messages going out were turning interested farmers off. **The Minister agreed to discuss these concerns with the Cab Sec whose domain this was.**

Delivery of Government's Programmes and Plans LINK was concerned that the Spending Review did not go far enough on areas such as transport, homes, energy efficiency and more by way of change funds and other routes, to ensure delivery of the RPP and sought the Minister's views on this. The Minister felt the proposals were sufficient to deliver the RPP though noted the difficulty of direct comparison between the RPP and the budget process and the need for a new RPP to 2027. There were differences of process to taken into account including understanding what can and can not be done, different proposals that will be introduced while others are dropped. Ministers were discussing with officials how to show this more clearly, especially looking further ahead where there were genuine unknowns eg of what would get us to 42% by 2020 and 60% by 2030. Even though Scotland was currently ahead (UK CC figures), because economic activity was down, the Minister did not believe we would return to previous levels when economic activity rose again.

LINK was aware of doubling of abatement in some areas but concerned at the lack of measures ... double funding..... The Minister cited peatlands, starting to come into the numbers at £1-2,000 per acre, which will provide a 5% percentage point in our emissions reductions.

LINK pressed for Scotland to follow up its ground-breaking targets with equally bold delivery plans. **The Minister noted areas, where ENGO campaigning could help, where big benefit could be delivered for low outlay, and cited the speed limit debate, noting that Scottish Government would consider a drop to 60 but would need the help of NGOs, the 2020 group and others to campaign, consult and engage the public around the issues and the benefits.** LINK asked if Government would entertain the suggestion of a drop to 50mph on dual carriageways; the Minister felt this was possible, again, with help to encourage public understanding and create space where all political parties are persuaded of the benefits. HZ noted that the health lobby would be onside in relation to lowering speed limits. The Minister felt there were other such issue where civic groups were starting to press, but politicians of all parties had genuine difficulties. LINK recognised the importance of support and the role of ENGOs in relation.

DL hoped the meetings with LINK provided space for this kind of discussion and indicated that LINK would appreciate a longer meeting, on the next occasion.

The meeting closed just before 3pm.