

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 outcome of the EU referendum and subsequent developments at UK level, the SNP has initiated processes in the Scottish Parliament to hold another independence referendum to “give Scotland a voice” once the terms of Brexit are clearer. According to FM Nicola Sturgeon, an independence referendum is likely to be held between autumn 2018 and spring 2019. The Scottish Government has also produced a paper on Scotland’s position in Europe to input into the UK negotiations. This argued for the UK to remain in the Single Market and failing that for Scotland to be allowed to do so. In such a scenario, Scotland would not be part of the EU’s CAP and CFP policies but it will retain the EU’s environmental acquis. *LINK’s Governance Group will be deliberating on action once a referendum is confirmed.*

At a UK level, the government, having lost the legal case in the Supreme Court, put the triggering of Article 50 to a vote in Parliament and subsequently triggered article 50 on 29 March 2017. It also issued a White Paper on Brexit which outlined the government’s negotiating position and confirmed that all EU law would be transposed to UK law to ensure continuity following the two-year negotiating timeframe. The UK would be seeking a comprehensive trade deal with the EU.

Since then, the Prime Minister called for snap general elections to be held on 8 June emboldened by recent polls giving her a strong lead; a larger Conservative majority would allow her more leeway during the Brexit negotiations. Purdah for the general elections is starting on Saturday 22 April 2017. *LINK’s Governance Group will deliberate on an approach to the general elections, assessing also options for coordination with other stakeholders and environmental coalitions. It is estimated that the focus of the elections will be parties’ views on Europe and Brexit.*

As envisaged, a substantial part of LINK resources are being devoted to following and being active on “Brexit”. Some progress is being made in terms of linking up the work of the Links with that of Greener UK.

Local council elections are taking place on 4 May 2017. Following the SNP’s performance in the 2016 Scottish elections, a key question will be whether the party can also erode Labour’s majority administrations at local authority level and whether Conservatives will continue gaining in popularity. The Scottish Greens are mounting their biggest ever Council campaign, with a record 218 candidates across the country. *LINK’s Governance Group has agreed that LINK will limit activities to developing an article for how local councils are central to implementing environmental policies and how adequate resources are needed to do that.*

Given the ongoing discussions on Brexit and in the shadow of further constitutional debates, some policy proposals have been slightly delayed. It is estimated that a new Climate Change Bill consultation will be launched over the summer while work on items such as the circular economy and good food nation bill

will only be dealt with after the second half of the parliamentary term. The government has however published its Climate Change Plan and views on a modest Planning Reform. LINK is currently engaging with Government on a proactive basis seeking to influence views on items relevant to Brexit as well as political priorities such as biodiversity. Work is also ongoing to line up LINK work ahead of the Climate Change Bill.

LINK's species champions initiative was also successfully relaunched.

3. SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT POLICY OUTLOOK

Relationships with key cabinet members from the party in government have continued: there is regular dialogue with the ECCLR Cabinet Secretary and her SPAD; meetings are being pursued with the REC Cabinet Secretary and the "Brexit" Minister.

LINK has made good progress with the REC Committee, after reaching out to Mike Rumbles MSP, in relation to post-CAP agriculture policies. In particular, Mike Rumbles picked up LINK's ask for a Commission to identify policy principles for farming and sustainable rural land management. LINK was also invited to submit evidence at a REC evidence session. LINK has finalised its position on the topic and is currently liaising with stakeholders on this issue. One of LINK's key goals is to seek to engage the REC Cabinet Secretary.

LINK has also worked on a position paper on marine and fisheries policies which the Marine Group is sharing with Scottish Government. Industry stakeholders are regularly referencing the "Norwegian fisheries model" as a stellar policy framework combining sustainability and profitability. LINK is liaising with Norwegian policy officers and NGOs to better understanding the Norwegian fisheries regime.

LINK has responded to a number of public consultations including for the Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement, potential electrofishing proposals, special protected areas for seabirds and the Planning Reform White Paper as well as preparing for upcoming consultations such as the second tranche of MPAs.

On Brexit, LINK members and LINK continue to be engaged in 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 and the Human Rights Consortium). LINK has also established contacts with leading Scottish academics which resulted in the publication of a comprehensive report which has been used by Scottish Parliament and government. From different agency contacts, it appears that agencies such as SEPA are not active on Brexit waiting until the situation settles before putting in a lot of resources into this; we understand however that SNH are becoming more active by for example also holding an internal workshop on post-CAP agriculture.

4. PARTY RELATIONSHIPS

LINK continues to pursue contacts with key members of the Scottish Parliament. LINK was an observer to the SNP, Green and Lib Dem conferences that took place this spring.

- **SNP:** ECCLR Committee Convenor Graeme Dey has been supportive of LINK and particularly in terms of the Species Champions programme. Discussion is ongoing with Graeme to get his support on policies regarding biodiversity.
- **Conservatives:** contacts with Maurice Golden MSP have continued. Maurice seems supportive of LINK initiatives such as the concept of a National Ecological Network.
- **Labour:** relationships have resumed with MSPs members of the ECCLR and REC Cttees, in particular Claudia Beamish MSP, the Labour environment spokesperson, and David Stewart.
- **Greens:** good contacts established with Mark Ruskell and other Green MSPs.

- **Liberal Democrats:** MSP Mike Rumbles has been helpful in terms of flagging LINK's post CAP agricultural asks. LINK is considering launching a party motion/resolution on environment for the next party conference.

The overview below does not provide an account of the interactions that have been occurring in the context of the relaunch of Species Champions.

5. LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEVEL

LINK is monitoring and promoting activities on LINK Local; membership is now close to 50. Regular updates are being provided to LINK Local members via social media and a first newsletter was developed. However, there are constraints on LINK staff time to do more.

6. ELECTIONS

The cycle of elections is set to run as follows:

- The next local council elections are due to be held on 4 May 2017. LINK decided to draft a blog/Friends of the Scotsman article on issues facing local councils particularly in terms of resources needed for implementing environmental policy.
- Snap general elections will be held on 8 June 2017.
- 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.

7. UNITED KINGDOM LEVEL

At a UK level, LINK activities are focusing on engaging with the UK Links and Greener UK to ensure a consistent approach to Brexit and in particular the Great Repeal Bill. There has been already some collaboration in terms of joint input to consultations on how Brexit will affect devolution. Defra's 25-year plans for the environment and that for food and farming remain unpublished. As such, Greener Alliance and WCL will be launching a campaign on the Great Repeal Bill. LINK has been in regular contact with WCL to ensure that the e-actions or other materials are devolution-proof and work for Scotland.

Given the announcement of the 8 June general elections, it is expected that focus will now switch to working on effective election campaigns and asks.

8. EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS

LINK will be hosting the annual EEB conference in Edinburgh on 6 November 2017. 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. The government has verbally committed to some funds, these still need to be confirmed. We understand from SPAD David Miller that this will be an interesting event not only for the ECCLR Cabinet Secretary but also for the FM.

LINK staff proposes to review engagement within IUCN and other international avenues later this year.

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. LINK is engaging on the high-level principles but also seeking to make policy-specific contributions taking into account activities in both Scotland and the UK. The next PSR report is due in Autumn 2017.

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