

**LINK BOARD 17 APRIL 2014**  
**Political Strategy Report, Spring 2014**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Items where a decision of the Board and Network are requested appear in ***bold italics***. The sections of the PSR follow the different levels of government, and our involvement in the various branches at each level.

**2. ELECTIONS**

The cycle of elections is set to run as follows.

- The next European Parliament elections are to be held on Thursday 22nd May, 2014. A LINK manifesto for these elections is being prepared.
- The next Westminster General Election is to be held on Thursday 7th May, 2015 - see below for details of the implementation of the new Non-Party Campaigners Act.
- The next elections for Holyrood will be held on Thursday 5th May, 2016 (where the new Act will also apply).
- The next local council are due to be held in Thursday 4th May, 2017

**3. PARTY RELATIONSHIPS**

Informal meetings were to be held at all party conferences to discuss European issues with candidates, spokespeople and researchers in the run up to the 2014 European Parliament elections – but these have been de-coupled from the conferences following discussion by the Parliamentary Forum. Relationships with the five Scottish Parliamentary parties are reasonably cordial and cooperative at present. The LINK Species Champion initiative has opened useful new lines of dialogue with MSPs of all parties.

- a) **Conservatives:** The Conservatives have diminished influence in times of a majority party at Holyrood. Individual relationships with MSPs have been building up, despite many of the adverse decisions of the Coalition Government at Westminster.
- b) **Greens:** Our carefully modulated relationship with the smallest Parliamentary party continues.
- c) **Labour:** Cooperation with Labour spokespeople has been fruitful in relation to a range of issues including arguments around “sustainable economic growth”, but the extent of this penetration into the party’s central economic policy thinking is unknown.
- d) **Liberal Democrats:** At a UK level the party has seen a withdrawal from environmentalist positions on energy and other issues, and at Scottish level, we await to see if this will result in similar cooling on policy on issues such as unconventional gas and renewables.
- e) **Scottish Nationalists:** The SNP are almost completely focussed on the run up to the independence referendum. In economic matters, “sustainable economic growth” remains at the heart of their thinking. Regular meetings with Ministers continue productively, and there has been a certain re-engagement, with the Cabinet Secretary, Richard Lochhead MSP, attending more meetings with LINK and members.

The Parliamentary Forum has, once again, reviewed attendances on the party conferences’ fringe. Consideration has been given to the view that it might be better to engage with audiences at alternative meetings of the policy community such as CoSLA, the STUC, CBI and others. The Woodland Trust has recently had useful experience at such gatherings. ***Would the Board and Network favour further evaluation of this idea?***

**4. LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEVEL**

Due to capacity issues and a lessening of momentum, the LINK Local Governance Task Force went into abeyance – although some limited work and thinking continues in the SOA field. The Rolling Manifesto will

still capture policy proposals at local level. The brief for an investigation of strengthening networking with independent local environmental groups is at an advanced stage of discussion. The theme of the 2013 Congress was 'Building Better Bridges' between national and local communities and we have yet to decide whether and what action LINK should take in respect of developing local links (see below).

## 5. SCOTTISH LEVEL

### 5(a) Legislative Issues

**Legislation being taken forward by the Scottish Government:** These are the Bills from the year's legislative programme which are receiving our attention to varying extents during their parliamentary passage.

- **Regulatory Reform Bill** – has been passed, including imposition of the 'sustainable economic growth' duty imposed on regulators.
- **Landfill Tax Bill** – Commitment to the continued hypothecation of this tax are being pursued through involvement in the Scottish Tax Collaborative and elsewhere.
- **Procurement Reform Bill** – Assistance is being provided to SCCS and SCVO in their work to improve this Bill with particular regard to sustainability accreditation schemes.
- **Tribunals Bill** – The passage of this Bill is being monitored by the Legal Governance Group.
- **Budget Bill** - The annual Budget Bill has been passed. LINK is working to influence the objectives of future Budget Bills through our recently extended work on economics and the National Performance Framework.
- **Revenue Scotland and Tax Powers Bill** – This Bill is being monitored through the Economics Group and in our involvement in the Scottish Tax Collaborative.
- **Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill** - Successful efforts have been made by LINK member bodies to heighten the importance of allotments, path development by communities of place and interest and green space within this Bill. Otherwise, its provisions have been limited and apply only to communities of place.
- **RCAHMS and Historic Scotland Merger Bill** – The Governance Group have discussed this Bill and support is being provided to LINK members with direct concerns. A meeting with OSCR is to be sought to discuss issues implications of the current direction of travel.
- **Courts Reform Bill** - The passage of this Bill is being monitored by the Legal Governance Group. Evidence has been given to the Justice Committee.
- **Food Standards Scotland Bill** - The Bill will set up Scotland's own food safety and standards body, Food Standards Scotland. Its primary concern will be consumer protection and as such, little attention has been given by LINK to the Bill.

**Secondary Legislation:** The Scottish Government proposes major pieces of secondary legislation in these areas and will:

- transpose, if the EU adopts them in due course, the Directive on public procurement - the Directive on procurement by entities operating in the water, energy, transport and postal services sections (Utilities Directive); and the Directive on the award of concessions contracts (Concessions Directive);
- in response to a Supreme Court ruling in April 2013 that an aspect of Agricultural Holdings legislation is non-compliant with the ECHR, bring forward a Compliance Order;
- introduce orders to implement the Scottish Rural Development Programme;
- ban the sale (and subsequently possession) of five high-impact aquatic non-native plant species;
- enable the variation of consents granted to build and operate electricity generation stations to allow some flexibility to amend developments post-consent; and
- implement primary legislation (subject to completion of its parliamentary passage where appropriate) such as the Regulatory Reform Act. ***Do the Board and Network want significant resources to be allocated to the Guidance to be developed under this legislation?***

## 5(b) Administrative Issues

LINK Task Forces are engaged in continued stakeholder engagements and monitoring of the progress of the SNP Administration, based on their manifesto commitments (together with monitoring all the other levels of government). These are largely of a tentative nature in the field of the environment – and dominated overall by a continued overarching commitment to “sustainable economic development”. The Scottish 2013/14 Programme for Government continues to be light in environmental substance.

- **Agriculture:** The Agriculture and Land Use TFs have been working on the new CAP and its implementation. A project to lay out a future vision for agriculture continues.
- **Climate Adaptation:** The Climate Change Adaptation TF has been inputting to the creation of the Scottish Adaptation Plan and pursuing its implementation.
- **Deer:** The Deer Task Force submitted evidence to the RACCE inquiry and will continue to watch the efficacy of voluntary deer management. Has published jointly with the Forest Policy Group a statement on 6 principles for effective deer management in Scotland.
- **Economics Task Force:** The Economics Task Force has been pursuing the reform of the NPF and changing attitudes towards sustainability. It has recently achieved funding from Friends Provident Foundation for a business sustainability project, and a sustainable economics policy officer is now in place, working part-time. Work on the ‘carbon bubble’ paper is proceeding and work on future Budget Bills is planned.
- **Governance:** The Governance Group has continued to work on all areas covered in Governance Matters and in particular the referendum, and the lobbying Bills at both Westminster and Holyrood.
- **Land Group:** The Land Group continue to seek to influence the Land Reform Review Group and the SAC inquiry at Westminster. The LRRG report’s is expected in April.
- **Landscape:** The TF continues to monitor and intervene in the development and implementation of policy. The hill tracks campaign continues (in conjunction with the Planning Task Force).
- **Legal Governance:** The Group has been inputting to and monitoring the various pieces of legislation affecting the courts and continues to pursue a consultation paper on environmental courts. LINK has been asked to provide the Minister with evidence of these working effectively in other administrations.
- **Marine:** The TF continues pursue the implementation of the Marine Act and has recently achieved an extension of the funding for the two policy and advocacy posts. The TF is working with the other Links at the UK level on related issues.
- **National Parks:** The Task Force has provided backing to the calls from APRS and SCNP for additional national parks.
- **Planning:** The TF has been focussed on the draft National Planning Framework 3 and the Scottish Planning Policy.
- **Wildlife:** The Forum has focused on the review of the Biodiversity Strategy.
- **Wildlife Crime:** The Task Force will soon publish a review of our position on wildlife crime and will draw up a full strategy to pursue its recommendations.
- **Woodlands:** The TF continues to monitor and intervene in the development and implementation of policy. Papers are being prepared to contribute to the debate about the future shape of forestry and natural heritage public bodies.

In discussion with the Governance Group it has been agreed to run a workshop for members this June to develop LINK thinking on structural reform, and promote that ahead of the Scottish Referendum in September.

LINK has continued to commit attention to the following public policy areas but has no formal mechanism for their discussion.

- Waste:



- Energy:
- Food:
- Transport:

#### **5(d) Judicial Issues**

The Legal Governance Group is dealing with legislation and consultations arising from the several reviews of legal procedures in Scotland. Continued slow progress is being made on several fronts and in particular with regard to Protected Expenses Orders, legal standing and other aspects of Aarhus Convention compliance.

#### **5(e) Civic Issues**

LINK continues its involvement in SCVO and many LINK members are widening the field of their co-operation with others in the civic sector as part of identifying allies within their advocacy strategies.

- Working in co-operation with other groups in the policy community has proved fruitful, as in the informal alliance built in opposition to including the duty to promote “sustainable economic growth” in the Regulatory Reform Bill and the reform of the National Performance Framework.
- LINK is assisting the Electoral Commission in the development of guidance arising from new lobbying legislation.
- LINK has received a negative response to our proposals from SCVO’s Governance Review.

#### **5(f) Political Horizon**

Responses to our Referendum Challenge leaflet, published in June 2012, setting out our position on the dominant political issue of the day, have been published, and public debates on aspects of environmental interest have been held including LINK’s own successful February debate with the two campaigns. The LINK Governance Group has recommended curtailing our further participation in the referendum in favour of concentrating on core environmental issues and priorities. The continuing contribution of fossil fuels to the Scottish economy and budget has been featured within the overall debate – with growing awareness of energy and climate change as issues.

After September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2014, political attention will remain on constitutional issues to a greater or lesser extent, dependent on the result.

- In the event of a Yes vote, negotiation with the rest of the UK and EU will be a dominant political concern, and the writing of a new constitution will have a long-term effect on normal policy development. In the shorter term, there will be little space for new policy initiatives, and the UK general election in 2015 might provide an important dress-rehearsal, in terms of the party manifestos in the 2016 Scottish elections.
- In the event of a No vote, attention will be focussed on increased powers for the Scottish Parliament. In the shorter term, The SNP administration in Scotland will have 18 months in which new policy directions might be open to discussion. The 2015 Westminster elections will focus on the constitution (both devolution and the EU) and the economy, and the 2016 election manifesto preparations will take place in a devolved context.

The Governance Group recommends that LINK hosts a second discussion day for members (including colleagues from across the UK) in January 2015 to consider the implications of the result, and agree any action which NGOs should take forward. Should particular issues need discussion sooner, LINK’s autumn gatherings will allow scope for that.

***Are the Board and Network content with the Governance Group’s recommendations for pursuing our core objectives in this period?***

## 6 UNITED KINGDOM LEVEL

The UK Government continues to take an all-out approach in pursuit of economic growth. The attention of the Coalition to environmental issues appears to be stymied by the almost total focus of the Treasury on purely economic matters.

The energy market, policy and prices have emerged as an area of acute debate between the parties. This has thrown discussions of cutting the subsidy for 'renewable' energy, nuclear developments and exploitation of unconventional gas 'resources' into sharp relief as we are now one year before the Westminster general election. The large bulk of this area of public policy is covered by powers reserved to Westminster, with no devolved control over taxation or the direction of energy subsidy. ***Do the Board and Network wish to develop a shared position that might be taken with the other LINKs across the UK – and if so might this be started from our 'carbon-bubble' work?***

Contact between the LINKs continues, and a joint meeting is planned the Autumn of 2014.

## 7. EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS

Issues of interest to LINK at present include the following.

- LINK members are following the developments in the UN Climate Change process, principally, but not exclusively, through involvement in SCCS.
- LINK members continue to pursue Rio+20 through the Flourishing Scotland alliance.
- LINK members are closely following the implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive and the debate around the Industrial Emissions Directive (which has particular importance with regard to CO2 emissions).
- Increasing attention is being paid to the negotiation of new trade agreement between the EU and the USA.
- Attention is continuing to be focussed on the possibility of the Commission introducing a draft Directive on Sustainable Procurement and Non-Native Invasive Species. A joint LINK's response is in preparation.
- The EU Common Fisheries Policy is almost completed. Actions continue to be pursued to influence the process.
- The EU Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) review in the light of the 2014 EU budget is all but complete. Historic production still dominates rather than sustainability thinking and measures.

There are plans to assess the potential for LINK (together with WCL and other UK interests) to maximise inputs to the EEB, within our limited resources. This will be a focus over the coming six months. LINK continues to support the IUCN Peatlands work, which has an administrative base in our Parliamentary office.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Many important areas are covered in this PSR and large strategic issues are discussed. ***Are there any of these areas, or other fields of policy, that the Board and Network wish to concentrate on in the next PSR?***