



Scottish
Environment
LINK

Nature Champions

Guide for LINK Members



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This document provides a background to the Nature Champions initiative and information around what being a Nature Champion entails. It suggests how you should initially engage with your champions, the sort of information that is useful to communicate to MSPs, how to plan engagement activities, and how to make the most of your Nature Champion.

This document is also a useful reference guide for existing Nature Champions too. It can help identify where your MSPs are in terms of engagement and where to go from there. You should always aim to be familiar with each of your champions, their interests and their needs, and this document can provide some of the guidance necessary to help organisations re-engage your MSPs.

If you have any questions or concerns, then please contact the Nature Champions Coordinator, Andrew (Andy) Marks at andrew@scotlink.org.

1. What is the Nature Champions initiative?

The Nature Champions initiative, launched in June 2021, has been developed by Scottish Environment LINK to encourage Members of the Scottish Parliament to champion endangered or iconic species and habitats. Through doing so, MSPs are able to raise awareness and promote action to restore and safeguard Scotland's environment. With 1 in 9 species at risk of national extinction, political support for restoring and protecting our natural environment has never been more critical.

We have developed Nature Champions to refresh our award-winning project, Species Champions, and to ideally provide more benefits to members and achieve better policy outcomes for the environment. Since its launch in 2013, the Species Champions initiative went from strength to strength: at the start of the current parliamentary session in 2016, 56 MSPs were signed up to the scheme; at the end of the session in 2021, there were 105 MSP champions, representing 80% of the Chamber. It has inspired similar programmes in Wales, Northern Ireland and England as well as Scottish local authorities.

Nature Champions takes on a similar format to Species Champions. Like the Species Champions initiative, MSPs are supported by a LINK member 'host' organisation to get to know their habitats or species and the key issues affecting them.




Sandesh Gulhane MSP
Nature Champion for Paths

2. What does the Nature Champions initiative offer to MSPs?

The Nature Champions initiative offers MSPs the opportunity to get out of the office and experience Scotland's nature in person. Nature Champions can visit their habitats or meet their species, participate in conservation work, research, and engagement activities in locations across Scotland. Through doing so, MSPs are able to gain an in-depth understanding of what conservation entails 'on the ground' and how different policies impact Scotland's species and habitats.

By engaging with LINK member organisations and their community-level conservation efforts, Nature Champions are able to develop relationships with those in the community who are working hard to protect threatened species and habitats. It is for this reason that many MSPs choose to champion species or habitats that are present within their constituencies.

The knowledge and direct experience of conservation that is fostered through the Nature Champions initiative allows MSPs to more proactively support their species and habitats. The first-hand experiences of MSPs are frequently brought back into Parliament, where Parliamentary questions, motions and debates are used to promote action and push for positive environmental change.

A large basking shark is seen swimming in the deep blue ocean. The shark's long, thin body and distinctive dark stripes along its side are clearly visible. The water around it is slightly turbulent, suggesting movement.

"The Basking Shark and our aquaculture as a whole have a part to play in introducing new and more people to our marine offering and to our coastline. The Basking Shark is a fabulous creature and indeed it's the friendly shark. More people seeing it can have a positive effect on our marine tourism sector."

Stuart McMillan MSP, Nature Champion for Basking Shark

3. What is expected from MSPs and LINK host members?

The Nature Champions initiative has been designed to fit around the commitments and capacities of all MSPs. At its core, the initiative is a light-hearted means for MSPs to learn more about Scotland's rich natural heritage and meet those people who are engaged in its conservation 'on the ground'. As such, we hope that Nature Champions are able to act as sincere ambassadors for their species or habitats in Parliament and to be appropriately engaged with their partnering host members.

If they wish to do so, Nature Champions can expect to participate on one or more site visits each year with LINK host members. LINK host members will also be available to MSPs for advice and support on matters relating to their species and/or habitats.



Jenni Minto MSP
Nature Champion for Scotland's Rainforest

4. Selecting Nature Champions species and habitats

Before the beginning of each Parliamentary Session, the Nature Champions Coordinator and LINK members will review the available list of species and habitats that structure the Nature Champions initiative.

There are a few criteria that are considered when planning which species and habitats will be included in the initiative:

- What is the geographic distribution of the species/habitat across constituencies or regions?
- Is a species or habitat threatened or affected by a key issue that MSPs can help with or does a species/habitat represent a particular environmental issue?
- Does a LINK member have the capacity to host an MSP champion and can they continually engage the MSP over the current Parliamentary session?

The shared Nature Champions Record & Actions [Google Spreadsheet](#) includes an updated list of species and habitats. It also lists each MSP champion, the actions MSP champions have taken, a list of MSPs not involved in the initiative, and species and habitats in need of a champion.

5. Species and habitat Fact Sheets

A Fact Sheet for each species and habitat will be constructed either by Scottish Environment LINK (and subsequently reviewed by the host organisation) or by the host organisation. The Fact Sheets usually include a short background description of the species or habitat, threats the species or habitat face, and a few sentences on Nature Champions suggested actions. This information will then be copied over onto a species profile on the LINK [Nature Champions](#) webpage.

Once an MSP has confirmed that they will become a Nature Champion, a Fact Sheet will be sent to them as part of the introductory email by the Nature Champions Coordinator (see 9. Getting started with your Nature Champion).

Species and Habitat Fact Sheets can be viewed and updated on the [LINK shared Google Drive](#). Please contact the Nature Champions Coordinator if you have made any changes so that these can be mirrored on the website.



6. Co-hosting species and habitats

The hosting of some species and habitats are shared amongst LINK members. Co-hosting was agreed to be a way of maximising capacity with engaging MSPs. Members should keep each other in the loop with site visits or any actions they want the Nature Champion to carry out in relation to their species/habitat. A lead point of contact should be agreed prior to contacting an MSP.

7. Recruiting a Nature Champion

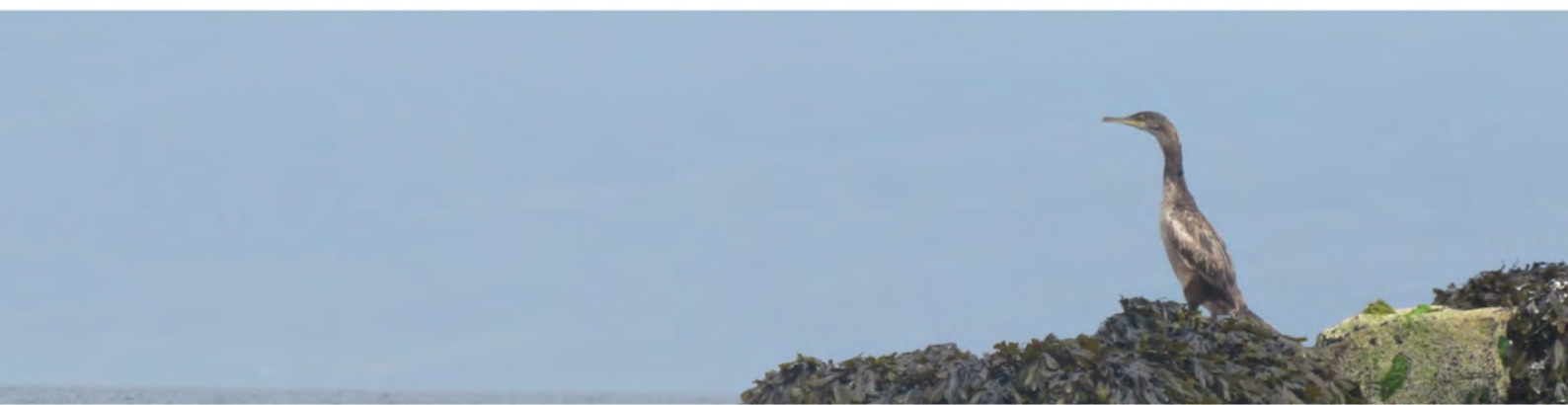
The recruitment of Nature Champions is a collaborative endeavor between the Nature Champions Coordinator and the LINK member host organisation(s) for the species/habitat.

The Nature Champion Coordinator will discuss the type of champion needed with the host organisation(s) and this will usually be directed by the following questions:

- Can the species or habitat be found within the MSP's electoral constituency or region?
- Does the species or habitat fit in with the portfolio or personal interests of an MSP?
- Does the required level of commitment to a species or habitat match the expected level of commitment of an MSP? A contentious/rare/threatened species or habitat will require a lot more work than others!
- Does the MSP have an appropriate voting/professional history to be able to sincerely champion this species?

In most cases, the Nature Champions Coordinator will approach the MSP by email, formally inviting them to the initiative and cc'ing the host organisation(s). Organisations may already have had conversations with individual MSPs, however this step is carried out so the link is made between LINK, the MSP, and the host organisation.

If an MSP declines, a decision must be made whether to try and convince the MSP to say yes, for example by highlighting the good things about their species or habitat, or to search for a new MSP. Information on MSPs, including who is not involved in the initiative, and if there are any reasons they are not involved, can be found on the shared Nature Champions Record & Actions [Google Spreadsheet](#).



8. What happens once an MSP agrees to be a Nature Champion?

If an MSP accepts the invitation, the Nature Champions Coordinator will tweet about it from [@NatureChampions](#) and upload the MSP profile onto the [LINK Nature Champions webpage](#). Usually, the next step is for the host organisation(s) to set up an initial meeting with an MSP champion (see Getting Started with your Nature Champion), to discuss how they can be involved with their given species or habitat. A plan of engagement being drawn up is strongly recommended and LINK staff can help with this.

The Nature Champions Coordinator will ensure MSP engagement activities are logged and will work with the host organisation(s) on advocacy ideas and any LINK-wide advocacy involving the MSP champion. If any relevant LINK material is to be sent out to Nature Champions, this will be done by the Nature Champions Coordinator and can be tailored or sent with a cover letter to explain the relevance to individual Nature Champions. You may also be required, by law, to record your activities on the Lobbying Register, both as an organisation and/or as a LINK representative. For more information on this, please see the [LINK guidance on the lobbying register](#) or contact the advocacy office who will be happy to assist.



Rachael Hamilton MSP
Nature Champion for Riparian Woodland

9. Getting started with your Nature Champion

So... the Nature Champions Coordinator has sent an approach email, asking the MSP to be champion. You've been cc'd in and the MSP has accepted!

The Nature Champions Coordinator has got back to the MSP with a thank you email, and has outlined that you, as their host organisation(s) will be in touch to discuss next steps. What happens next?



1

MSP becomes a Nature Champion and receives a species/habitat Fact Sheet and Welcome Guide from the Nature Champions Coordinator.

2

Send a welcome email from your organisation(s)

This should explain that you are the lead contact at their host organisation, give a little background to the species, and ask if you can meet up with the MSP to discuss their involvement further. Make sure the email is short as MSPs are busy and will probably be reading the email on the go.

Be prepared to wait a couple of weeks as MSPs inboxes get full, but don't be afraid to send a reminder, things can easily get lost in the inbox. If you're still waiting then try calling their office.

When requesting an in-person meeting, it's important to be mindful of their location. Most MSPs have a Parliamentary and constituency office. It's most likely you will meet them in Parliament, therefore ensuring you ask for a meeting on Tuesday/Wednesday/Thursday is important as these are the sitting days. Also be mindful of when Parliament is in recess.

3

Tweet about your new Nature Champion

Scottish Environment LINK will have already tweeted about the new Nature Champion from @NatureChampions. Send out a tweet from your organisation account explaining that you are looking forward to working with the MSP, outline their species or habitat, maybe a couple of action points/threats and a photo/video of their species or habitat.

4

Arrange, plan and attend a first meeting

This meeting should be intended as a light introduction to their species or habitat. Perhaps use the factsheet as structure to speak about their species/habitat, how it's threatened and what action is needed in its conservation. Relate this to wider biodiversity issues too if possible. Bringing Nature Champions something they can have/hang up/have on their desk/wear is always appreciated, and they can tweet about it too!

The central aim of this initiative is increasing the understanding and promoting action on biodiversity. A brief overview of biodiversity, its wider importance and how an MSPs individual species contributes over a wider context is crucial to communicate to new MSPs. Don't assume they know about biodiversity and the nature crisis in depth. Discuss how you as an organisation seek to conserve this species, and if there are individual projects your organisation is involved with, mention these too.

The Nature Champions initiative supports LINK advocacy work, therefore an overview of how LINK works and some of its priorities at the time would be appreciated, and guidance on this can be given by the LINK advocacy team. A member of the LINK advocacy team, whether this is the Nature Champions Coordinator or Advocacy Officer/Manager, would be happy to also attend this meeting.

End the meeting by agreeing on how frequently the MSP would like to be contacted and by discussing your next steps - is there a task they can do straight away? Perhaps communicating a project on social media, or endorsing some new research, anything light and easy just to get the ball rolling. This will all depend on how much capacity your Nature Champion has, so be considerate and don't overwhelm them. Find out how they would be willing to support your/LINK's work going forward and if they are happy to lodge motions and Parliamentary questions in future, and whether they would benefit from briefings on their species as and when opportunities to stand up for it arises.

Make sure you follow up, ideally within a week of meeting, something easy summarising what was discussed. Those who initially engage their MSP early on are more likely to get future support, our most active MSPs all know individuals from their host organisation well and have a good relationship.

5

Plan your first engagement activity

The best way to engage with your Nature Champion is to get them out on site to see their species or habitat and the challenges it faces in person. Ideally, you will already have a site in mind within their constituency where they can see their species/habitat. Get in touch with the MSP and try and organise a visit with their office staff as early as possible. Remember that it'll need to fit in around Parliamentary business, so potentially Mondays or Fridays may be better if Parliament is in session. The Parliament is closed during recess, so members are more likely to be active in their constituencies. The more notice you give MSPs when offering a site visit, the more likely they will be available!

Politicians love a publicity opportunity so consider beforehand whether the local newspaper, radio or TV might be interested in the visit. Is there something topical that you could tie in? Can you make the species/habitat part of something much bigger? Don't underestimate the importance of doing something local with your Nature Champion. They are far more likely to engage with publicity if it is relevant to their constituency. It can be particularly useful to build a relationship with your Champion's assistants and office staff, so try to involve them as well with activities.

If it's appropriate to do so, consider asking if they would be willing to lodge a relevant motion or ask a Parliamentary question. If you do so, perhaps offer a more comprehensive written briefing on their species/habitat beforehand or to draft the motion/question yourself.

Activities can come in all shapes and sizes but usually a standard site visit/conservation work is most effective as a first engagement activity. For more ideas, see 12. Engaging your Nature Champions in creative ways.

6

Make a Plan of Engagement for your Nature Champion

So you've emailed them, met with them, shown them their species/habitat and established a relationship. The best thing to do now is set out a plan which maps out further opportunities for both you and MSP. This doesn't need to be definitive, but it gives you a plan to refer to and build upon.

Keeping an MSP engaged and in contact with you increases the likelihood of them lending a hand in future. If an urgent issue comes up and you need to respond reactively, an MSP will be more likely to do this at short notice if they are already involved with their species and the initiative.

Plan a brief programme of events or targets, this can be simple and based over a year/two years. List the issues that you would like to convey to your MSP champion, please consider conveying LINK-wide messages too and please involve LINK advocacy staff if you would like help with this. Work out how much time you can give to engaging your champions, how much time they have available, and whether there are any projects internally that you can engage them with. Plan ways in which MSPs and their teams can be engaged on social media - do you have an upcoming digital campaign? Consider utilising Parliamentary mechanisms and map out where the MSP can be used in any pre-existing advocacy planning, including in LINK group work. Once again - LINK staff are there to help.

7

Keep in touch with your Nature Champion

Finally, remember to keep your Champion informed of any new information about their species/habitat. For example, have we found out something new about it? Has it been found somewhere new? Have there been new impacts on the species from development, climatic events, etc.? If your organisation is issuing a press release on an issue that your Nature Champion might be interested in, remember to let them know in advance and give them the opportunity to contribute a quote in the story.

Work through any plan draw up and make changes to suit, your engagement will be both proactive and reactive, MSPs are of more use reactively if they have been engaged proactively beforehand. However, be respectful of boundaries and that MSPs have many competing concerns - you don't want to overwhelm your Nature Champion!



Make use of your Nature Champion in Parliament!

Once you've engaged and informed your Nature Champion the next step is to start to use them to influence policy to benefit your species/habitat. The key here is to know what is coming up in Parliament and seeing whether your Nature Champion can contribute on behalf of your organisation.

Take a look at what is happening in Parliament to see what opportunities are coming up that may be relevant to a Nature Champion's species or habitat. If you spot something you can prepare a specific briefing for the topic, then ask if the MSP would be interested in this; however, this briefing should be tailored to the topic of the debate/meeting and avoid being too general.

You can also get your Nature Champions to raise issues in Parliament and there are two ways to do this:

- Firstly, MSP Nature Champions can ask written questions which will be answered by the relevant Minister.
- Nature Champions can also table motions on issues for debate; however, very few are actually debated. Members can show their support for the motion and if sufficient cross-party support is forthcoming, then the motion may be selected for full debate.

LINK advocacy team can help with advocacy planning and also Nature Champions can be considered in advocacy work at a LINK group level too.



10. Three things to consider when hosting Nature Champions:

1. Reporting Engagements

Please remember to report any engagements you have with the Nature Champions Coordinator. This is important for measuring the performance of the initiative, for forward planning and for spotting gaps and opportunities. This can be done by emailing the Nature Champions Coordinator or by filling in the [Nature Champions Record & Actions shared document](#).

You may also be required, by law, to record your activities on the Lobbying Register, both as an organisation and/or as a LINK representative. For more information on this, please see the [LINK guidance on the lobbying register](#) or contact the advocacy office who will be happy to assist.

2. Involving the Public

Some organisations may want the public to contact MSP champions on particular issues and if used well it can be effective, however there are some considerations to keep in mind:

- The initiative relies on a strong relationship between the MSP, LINK and the host organisation. If MSPs are bombarded with vague/irrelevant emails from constituents then this could test any relationship everyone has worked hard on building up.
- MSPs are bound by Parliamentary conduct to not comment on some cases including on reserved matters or those not relevant to their constituency.
- The most effective way to involve the public is through practical engagement; for example, Bat Conservation Trust helped Fulton MacGregor MSP run a bat walk for his constituents.
- If you want to involve the public with Nature Champions, please speak to the LINK advocacy team and together we can come up with a plan.

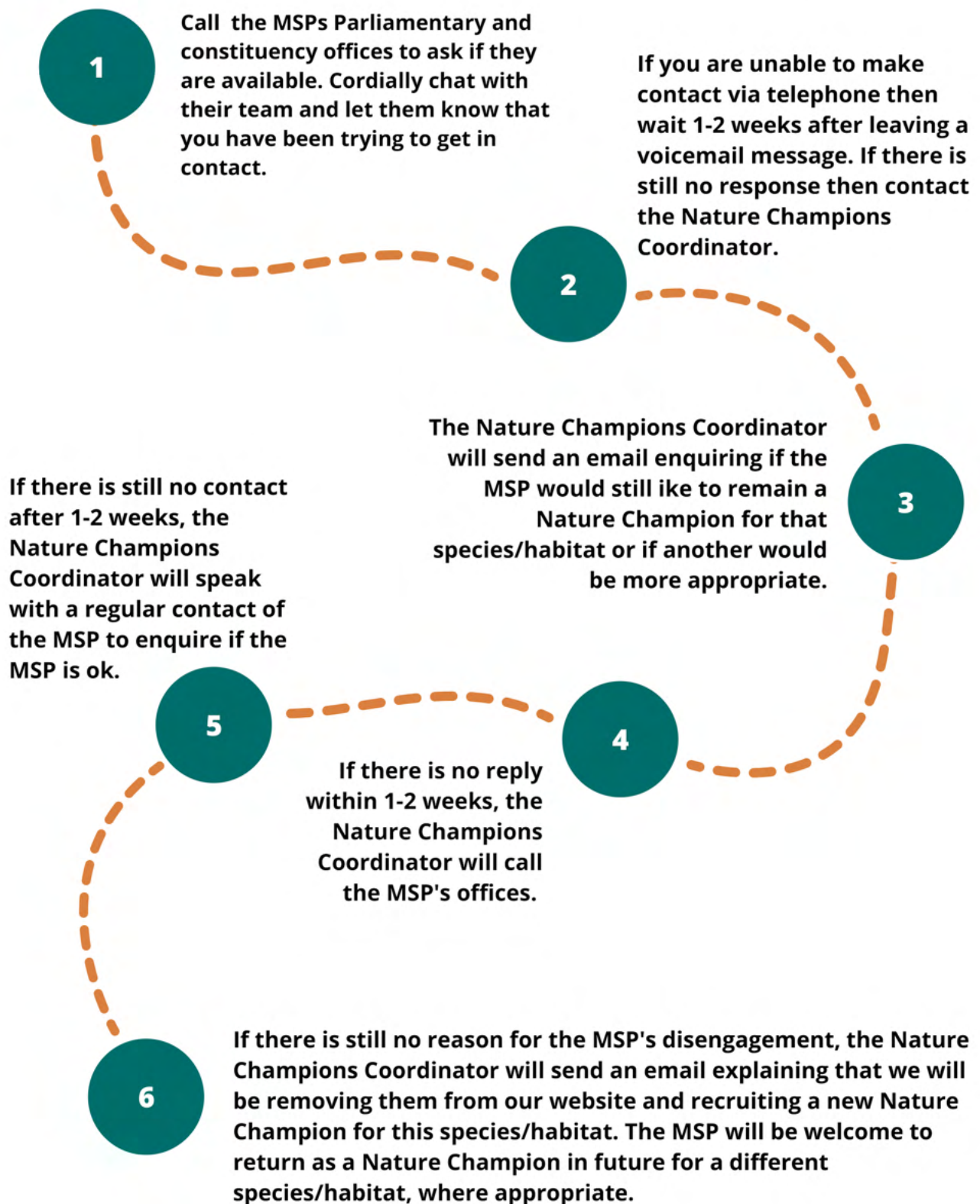
3. Using Social Media

Everyone knows MSPs love Twitter. Getting Nature Champions involved with their species or habitat on Twitter is an easy win. Highlight any news coming from your organisation on their species/habitat and tag them in or get them to try and take a selfie with their species/habitat. Easy stuff but it generates publicity and also keeps MSPs on side and engaged.



11. What to do if a Nature Champion is not responding?

MSPs are very busy people. Even when an MSP first becomes a Nature Champion, you can expect that things may go quiet after the initial introduction; however, it's important that your Nature Champion still engages from time to time. If your Nature Champion has not responded to your emails within 12 weeks (excluding within an initial 6 month grace period from their becoming a Nature Champion) and you have sent a couple of follow-up emails within that time, then follow the escalation pathway below for guidance.



12. Engaging your Nature Champions in creative ways



Use your Nature Champion to host/facilitate a meeting

Colin Smyth MSP, Nature Champion for the Badger, chaired a meeting between Scottish Badgers and the National Farmers Union. By acting as a neutral party, Colin supported Scottish Badgers to engage with the NFU around a variety of contentious issues.



Use your Nature Champion to highlight an awareness-raising week

Gordon MacDonald MSP, Nature Champion for the Swift, joined RSPB Scotland for Swift Awareness Week to look at some of the swift boxes created by residents in his constituency. Gordon lodged a motion to recognize the week in Parliament and highlight their rapid decline in the UK.



Use your Nature Champion to launch a public event

Lorna Slater MSP, Nature Champion for the Golden Eagle at that time, joined SRSG, JMT and RSPB at the UK's first ever Golden Eagle Festival in Moffat. Lorna unveiled a bench specifically made for the town in honour of its new 'Eagle Town' status and awarded trophies to the winners of the events' 'Eagle Hill Fen Run'.



Take your Nature Champions on a group site visit

Annie Wells, Finlay Carson and Fulton MacGregor joined Bat Conservation Trust for a late evening group Bat Walk around Holyrood Park. By hosting the event right next to the Scottish Parliament when it was in session, BCT were able to gather three Nature Champions for a memorable evening of awareness-raising and encourage cross-party support for bats. Consider locations which don't require significant planning to accommodate different schedules.

13. Planning a Site Visit

Site visits come in all shapes and sizes - from local walks with just yourself and the Nature Champion, to remote group trips with many Nature Champions present. As we have discussed earlier in this document, site visits are excellent opportunities to help develop an attachment between MSPs and their species and habitats. They can also show MSPs what conservation looks like 'on the ground' and bring clarity to challenging ideas and issues. They are fantastic opportunities to develop relationships with host organisation teams but they do require careful planning. Any site visit should be considered and well-planned to ensure that your engagement has the best chance of becoming a meaningful encounter. Here are a list of important things to consider when planning a site visit.

Why a site visit?

Why have you chosen to meet up with your Nature Champion? MSPs are very busy and their time is precious. If you suggest a site visit, you should have a sound understanding why this would be more beneficial than, say, an in-person meeting.

Where?

This question follows the previous question and depends on what it is that you want to achieve. If, for instance, you want to raise awareness of a widely distributed species or habitat, is there somewhere closer to Holyrood that would work, like a walk around Holyrood Park? Would the Nature Champion instead prefer to visit the species or habitat (if applicable) within their constituency, where they can form a more local attachment to the species or habitat and possibly meet constituents? It's important to consider the visitor experience in its entirety: does the site have a café where you can get a cuppa? Does the site have quiet spaces for discussion? Are you familiar with the site? If you do not see their species, are there other discussion points to make it worthwhile? Are there any risks that need to be considered about different sites?

When?

When is the best time to visit your Nature Champions species or habitat? What can you see at different times of the year and how does this relate to your any asks or discussion points that you may have? How does this fit with your Nature Champion's calendar? Will this take place in recess or when Parliament is in session? The more notice that you can provide, the more likely that MSPs will be available to join - particularly if it is a group site visit that you are planning.

Invitations and communication

It goes without saying that the earlier you contact your Nature Champion about a site visit, the easier planning will be. It may be helpful in your initial meeting with your Nature Champion to explore what they would be most interested and excited to see as part of a site visit; i.e. to meet their constituents, to do something locally or to join other MSPs who may be interested. Once a date has been agreed, it will be important to consider what the MSP needs to know in advance of the visit, including how to get there (will you be providing transport?), what are the parking details, what to wear, where to meet on the day, to gather any dietary considerations or if any staffers are attending, and to provide contact numbers for the day. It is always nice to send a formal invitation with all of the information gathered in one email with at least a week's notice.

What is the dress code?

MSPs may not be familiar with what is appropriate to wear in different sites and it's helpful to not assume that they will know. Suggest what you think they will need to wear/bring in the invitation and feel free to send an updated suggestion if the weather forecast looks sunny/rainy the day before.

Who is attending from your organisation?

How many people need to be at the site visit? This will depend on the types of topics that will be discussed although it is fairly certain that the site manager will need to attend and at least one representative from the host organisation – preferably the lead contact for the relationship. If there is just one MSP, then you don't want too many people to attend and to be competing for discussion time. On the other hand, you want those experts present who are able to explain the issues at hand to the MSP.

Are your Nature Champions attending with their team?

It is important to build a good relationship with a Nature Champion's team members. They arrange the MSP's schedule and are critical in ensuring an MSP is kept on top of different issues. If the space allows for it, then ensure the Nature Champion is aware that their team is also invited.

What is the itinerary?

What is going to happen when they get to the site? Who will greet the MSP? Where will you go? Individual site visits (depending on where they are taking place) tend to take around 1.5-2 hours and you'll want to ensure that there is a good opportunity for conversation depending on what you're hoping to discuss. Having clear timings ensures that the MSP doesn't leave thinking that you've wasted their time or you've forgotten to raise topics you'd wanted to address.

What will you discuss?

Whilst it's impossible to plan every moment of your discussion, it's good to have a rough list of topics that you want to bring up in the site visit. Whether it's a broad discussion of the species/habitat and their threats, specific issues with funding, issues with a particular bill/policy or a request for a related motion, having an agenda ensure that issues are discussed promptly and whilst you have the opportunity. Due to their busy schedules, you may not get another opportunity to raise topics in person within weeks/months and so take advantage of the time you have available.

Do you need a risk assessment or permissions?

This will depend on your organisation's policies and/or the site you are visiting, but it is helpful to prepare a risk assessment in advance of a site visit and to make this available to an MSP's staff or other attendees before the day. Within this, it may be helpful to consider any additional security concerns that an MSP may have. As with a risk assessment some sites will require different permissions than others. For example, if you are planning on an engagement event in Holyrood Park, then you will likely need permission from Edinburgh Council and Historic Environment Scotland to do so. It is important that you look into this and seek the relevant permissions before the invitations are shared as the process can take weeks and there may be other conflicting events taking place.

Press and social media

Depending on the site visit, there may be an opportunity to share images and footage of the visit on social media. MSPs love Twitter and so be sure to tag them in tweets. The @NatureChampions Twitter account will also help to raise awareness of your engagement. Only post details of a site visit after the event has taken place for security reasons. There may also be an opportunity to share a press release of the visit with the press. Consider the 'hook' of the piece and create a press release accordingly, before sharing it with the MSP's team to check they're happy with it. Always check that you have permissions for any images that you use. If you don't think the site visit is press-worthy, then consider writing a blog post about your visit and share this instead!



Mercedes Villalba

Nature Champion for Road Verges



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www.scotlink.org



[@NatureChampions](https://twitter.com/NatureChampions)