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Gillian Martin MSP
Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs
Scottish Government

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Jim Fairlie MSP
Minister for Agriculture, Marine and the Islands
Scottish Government

Dear Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs and Minister for Agriculture, Marine and the Islands,

Thank you for your time on 17 September. We appreciated the opportunity to discuss LINK's priorities at an important time for Scotland's environment.

Our members had identified seven issues for discussion, including the upcoming budget, agricultural reform, nature and climate targets, wildfire resilience, forestry grants, public sector reform, nature finance and marine protection. We were pleased to cover public sector reform, nature targets and the Forestry Grant Scheme review in particular.

The LINK network brings together 52 organisations, supported by around 500,000 people across Scotland. Our members bring considerable expertise across environmental policy and delivery, and we welcome the opportunity to share this with you and your teams.

Public sector reform

Following your evidence to the Rural Affairs Committee and the publication of our [statement](#), we discussed our concerns about the proposed reform of Scotland's environmental agencies. We understand the financial pressures behind the proposal and the potential for greater efficiency. However, we are concerned about the scale and timing of the change, given the need to maintain momentum towards Scotland's 2030 nature and climate commitments.

We welcome your commitment that reform should not detract from essential day-to-day delivery and your intention to appoint a shadow CEO and Board at an early stage. We believe early action will be important so that the new organisation can prepare while existing agencies continue their critical work. There are also important lessons to learn from the creation of Natural Resources Wales.

For LINK, it is essential that nature remains at the heart of any new agency's remit and that it has the resources needed to meet Scotland's commitments. We would welcome the opportunity to contribute our expertise as the proposals develop, including on its remit, purpose and structure.

Nature targets

We welcomed the commitment in the Natural Environment Act to introduce statutory nature targets. These will be important for driving action and informing decisions across government, particularly on issues such as agriculture and land use.

We share the concerns raised in the [recent letter](#) from Environmental Standards Scotland and are disappointed by the timetable for setting the targets. While the targets must be robust and evidence-based, there are areas where sufficient evidence already exists to act. We would therefore encourage the Government not to wait until all targets can be introduced together.

We welcome your commitment to establish a first tranche of targets in 2027 and to avoid further delays. LINK would be happy to work with you and officials to identify those that could have the greatest impact and should be prioritised.

We will also continue to track delivery of the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy Delivery Plan through our [Scottish Biodiversity Strategy Tracker](#).

Forestry Grant Scheme

We discussed the opportunities presented by the current Forestry Grant Scheme review. Reform of land-based support will be important to delivering Scotland's nature and climate commitments, and the FGS is an established mechanism for driving change.

We see particular potential to increase support for native woodland expansion through natural processes. This could increase woodland expansion rates, reduce reliance on costly deer fencing and deliver wider benefits for biodiversity and climate resilience. There are also wider economic opportunities, including supporting a Just Transition for deer management livelihoods, developing the venison sector through measures such as public procurement, and creating opportunities for small-scale forestry businesses and local mills.

We welcome your commitment to consider how grant schemes can deliver multiple outcomes and look forward to engaging further on the review.

Next steps

We would welcome longer, separate meetings with you both to discuss issues relevant to your respective portfolios in more detail. In particular, we would welcome a meeting with you, Cabinet Secretary, in November to discuss our urgent work on the upcoming budget and the public sector reform consultation expected this autumn.

We are also working with officials to organise a farm visit with the Minister and look forward to discussing the opportunities for, and urgent need for, effective reform of agricultural support.

We look forward to hearing from your offices and continuing to work constructively with you and your teams.

Yours sincerely,
Deborah Long

Chief Executive
Scottish Environment LINK