

Political Strategy Report, Spring 2016**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. Board members are invited to reflect to the points made below and indicate agreement on planned LINK activities in *italics*. Specific questions for which Board input is required are included in ***bold italics***.

2. ELECTIONS

The cycle of elections is set to run as follows.

- The next elections for Holyrood will be held on Thursday, 5th May, 2016. Detailed updates on completed and ongoing activities are included below including planning post-election activities.
- A referendum on the UK membership of the EU may be held on 23 June 2016. Further information on LINK activities included in EU section.
- The next local council are due to be held on Thursday, 4th May, 2017. LINK will further deliberate on activities ahead of local council elections following Holyrood May elections and June EU referendum.
- The next European Parliament elections are to be held in May/June, 2019.
- The next Westminster General Election is due to be held on Thursday 7th May, 2020.

3. PARTY RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships with the five Scottish Parliamentary parties have continued throughout the first few months of 2016. However, interactions have not been extensive given limited parliamentary activity with the exception of debates on Marine Protected Areas, Land Reform and Scottish Environment Festival workshops. Scottish Environment Festival was a good opportunity to connect with MSPs and celebrate the much appreciated LINK Species Champion initiative.

In addition, LINK set up meetings with the officials responsible for drafting party manifestos and attended political party conferences. Overall, political parties were open to meeting with and hearing LINK views. While the majority of parties feel that LINK manifesto positions are in line with theirs, there has been little commitment to take LINK manifesto asks forward. This is a point that merits further consideration and which needs to be addressed with the new Parliament and government. See document entitled "Taking forward LINK's Social Justice agenda: a proposal" for more.

In greater detail:

- a) **Conservatives:** differences in policy approach continue with the Scottish Conservatives, as expected. There has been open dialogue on the Conservatives' policy priorities and while key LINK manifesto asks may not be amongst them, it is good to see commitments on issues such as energy efficiency. It will be interesting to continue discussions as activities on food, farming and agriculture progress.
- b) **Greens:** Scottish Greens have picked up most LINK manifesto [asks](#) which while encouraging is not sufficient for progress from an advocacy point of view given their low numbers.

- c) **Labour:** Scottish Labour representatives have indicated that they fully support LINK's positions but have not committed to taking up LINK manifesto asks. There seems to be agreement on the need to integrate the environment dimension in the social justice discussion. It is yet unclear to what extent Labour will take this point forward.
- d) **Liberal Democrats:** The Scottish Liberal Democrats have indicated clear resource constraints and seem to focus discussion of environmental matters on very specific issues: climate change, fracking, neonicotinoids etc rather than pursuing wider issues such as sustainable development.
- e) **SNP:** SNP as a whole do not seem to consider environment as a key pillar of their policy priorities. Social justice and fairness seem to figure more prominently particularly insofar as they can deliver better jobs, welfare and reduce inequalities.
- f) **Other Parties:** there has been no interaction with other parties, however, candidate lists and election outcomes will be closely monitored.

4. HOLYROOD 2016 ELECTIONS PREPARATION AND FOLLOW-UP

Ahead of the Holyrood 2016 elections, LINK published its manifesto outlining 6 Steps towards a Sustainable Scotland. This has been shared with journalists and political parties. Media outreach resulted in the LINK manifesto being picked up by the [Scotsman](#); the focus of the article was LINK's request for introducing an "Ending of Environmental Poverty Act". In addition, TFN featured a blog [post](#) summarising LINK's manifesto. On 13 April, LINK is organising its national hustings event "Environment Matters". This includes speakers from all parties represented in the Scottish parliament. This will be a further opportunity for LINK members to voice their concerns and ask candidates questions about environment policy in Scotland.

In parallel, LINK Groups and subgroups have also been coordinating on pre-election activities:

- Economics Group reached out to other stakeholders liaising with them with a view to publishing a joint statement in support of some of the LINK manifesto asks.
- Marine Group published blog post and sent letter to key political figures through Save Scottish Seas. [Nick to confirm]
- Wildlife Subgroup launched the Wildlife Proclamation as a tool for getting candidates to commit to working for Scotland's nature in the new parliament.

LINK is already making plans for activities following the elections as a new set of MSPs and different ministers and cabinet secretaries will assume office. *Activities currently envisaged:*

- *Letters of congratulation to MSPs and key government ministers/cabinet secretaries/first minister*
- *Developing background information and prioritising MSPs for introductory meetings (intention is to make links with MSPs beyond RACCE)*
- *Launch event on Species Champion in September/October, also linked to biodiversity policy status*

Key to successful engagement is the development of an effective LINK narrative and asks for the new government and parliament. In building this narrative we must take into account the lessons learnt from the elections (ie. limited traction of LINK manifesto asks). *Given this, it is proposed to enhance the links between environmental asks and social justice benefits and ensure we have a concrete policy ask developed. The LINK Advocacy officer will ensure all Groups and Subgroups feed into this process and coordinate interactions with MSPs and government.*

In addition, LINK will need to clarify with relevant government officials including ministers and cabinet secretaries concerns regarding access and the perceived importance ascribed to environmental concerns versus business and other interests. *Specific language to that effect can be included in the letters of congratulations and our concerns expressed in meetings, as appropriate.*

5. LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEVEL

The LINK Local pilot project has been launched. Its key priorities are to reach out to potential member organisations directly or via raising the profile of LINK Local through the right channels. We will provide further status report every few months, starting in June when Syd Chandler (LINK Intern on the project) finishes her contract.

6. SCOTTISH LEVEL

6(a) Legislative Issues

The last legislative programme of this term of the Scottish Parliament has been introduced and contains only two Bills of major interest to LINK.

- The **Land Reform Bill** was passed on 16 March. LINK managed to table several amendments which were taken up in the deliberations. More discussion is envisaged once the new parliament resumes. LINK needs to start preparing its strategy and advocacy building on the success so far.
- The Scottish **Lobbying Bill** was passed on 10 March. The Bill differentiates between contacts on local/constituency matters raised with constituency MSPs and it also exempts smaller organisations that have less than ten 'full time equivalent' paid employees. A guidance to help organisations register will be developed and issued following the elections.

6(b) Policy Issues

LINK Groups and Subgroups have been focusing on aligning themselves with the new LINK structure. As such most effort has focused on developing Group and Subgroup priorities for the foreseeable future. These are outlined in Board paper 5.4A.

In parallel, Groups and Subgroups have also continued policy activities on legal strategy and environmental courts, MPAs, the circular economy and others.

LINK has continued exploring ways in which it can credibly engage in the Social Justice agenda. Following a recent meeting of LINK members interested in Social Justice, it was agreed to request member feedback on the links between environment policy objectives and social justice/fairness. On this basis, a document will be prepared and presented at the May Networking meeting capturing the links between the two agendas. This will be used to engage with the new government and parliament. More information on the benefits of this approach are included in the document entitled "Taking forward LINK's Social Justice agenda: a proposal". ***The Board on 21 April agreed that this proposal is an acceptable path forward in terms of a) creating a coherent narrative for LINK, b) developing a concrete policy campaign for LINK for the benefit of all members and c) helping LINK asks hook into Scottish policy priorities. Views of members are welcomed at / in the lead-up to LINK's 19 May network meeting.***

Statement on energy. Now finalised, with high level of LINK member sign-up, confirming the benefits and value to all involved of investing in consensus-building. The statement offers a framework for Groups' and Subgroups' related work (outputs) as well as potential for an external position.

7. UNITED KINGDOM LEVEL

Attention is now focusing on the upcoming June EU membership referendum. It has not been possible to develop a UK wide position through sister LINKs as was the original intention. WCL have decided not to be active on the EU referendum. As such, Scottish LINK is pursuing activities on its own as outlined in the email of 23 February with LINK members are signing up to a Scottish EU referendum challenge. There has

been discussion on organising an event to feed into the public debate in Scotland on the EU referendum which the Governance Group will return to at its meeting later in April.

8. EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS

LINK will be hosting the annual EEB conference in Edinburgh in 2017. This is a great opportunity for LINK and its members as it coincides with the UK Presidency of the EU. A teleconference is being set up for end April with EEB and the UK representative to discuss practicalities. In parallel, LINK will set up a steering group to develop ideas and a forward plan for the conference. The aim is to organise a high level conference which will position LINK as a relevant stakeholder in Scottish and UK environment issues but also a valuable resource for relevant EU discussions. Some groups have already expressed an interest in providing input, namely the Agriculture Subgroup would like to include a focus on agriculture/CAP given EU plans to launch a review of CAP in end 2017. *The LINK Advocacy Officer will report back to the Board and Network on the preparations for this conference.*

The EU REFIT exercise of the Birds and Habitats Directive is continuing. The publication of the Commission report on the results of the Fitness Check is expected in the coming months. Further coordination with sister Links and the UK representative at the EEB will be needed at that point. *The LINK Advocacy Officer will present potential activities in view of the publication of the Fitness Check results.*

Summer of 2016 will mark the one year anniversary since Scotland, under the SNP, signed up to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. *LINK will explore how this can be leveraged in our advocacy efforts.*

9. CONCLUSION

Several political milestones are ahead of us which will impact LINK's activities for at least the rest of 2016. At the moment, a key focus for activities is to ensure that LINK is fully prepared to engage with the new government and parliament. The Spring 2016 PSR offers a number of alternatives for doing so. These will need to be taken forward in a timely and coordinated manner to increase LINK's advocacy impact. The next PSR report is due in Autumn 2016. If taken forward, it is expected that the PSR will also include a review of the new approach on social justice and how LINK has fared in this respect.

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