



Political Strategy Report, Autumn 2019

1. INTRODUCTION

The PSR provides an overview of Scottish Environment LINK notable advocacy activities and engagement at different levels of government. Board members are invited to reflect on the points made below, comment and indicate agreement on planned LINK activities in *italics*¹.

A period of intense LINK advocacy across key fronts:

- ***Fight for Scotland's Nature campaign (FFSN)***: the campaign is entering a critical period as the 31st October Brexit deadline approaches. There has been strong engagement from LINK member organisations with the campaign and the campaign co-ordinator is organising a series of media articles to highlight the campaign's key asks and maintain pressure on the Scottish Government. LINK's Governance Group commissioned research from Professor Campbell Gemmill on possible post-Brexit environmental governance arrangements. This has been published publicly and shared with key contacts in the Scottish Government.
- ***Biodiversity post-2020***: LINK has been working to develop its own views as well as working with SNH and partners to develop a transparent and inclusive process for developing Scotland's future policy on biodiversity, also in terms of funding. LINK is considering how best to engage with the upcoming CoPs on climate and biodiversity which will be taking place throughout 2020.
- ***Nature-based solutions to change***: this will be the theme of LINK's next Parliamentary Reception which will be hosted by Finlay Carson MSP on the evening of 6 May 2020. Early planning for this reception is underway.
- ***Marine***: ongoing work around the designation of protected areas and development of fisheries policies
- ***Circular economy***: organising a workshop for early November to define LINK's key advocacy asks for the Circular Economy Bill. A consultation on the bill is expected to be launched in late November and LINK will be submitting a response.

LINK is utilising other opportunities, such as the UN SDG voluntary national reporting, to raise key issues with other parts of Scottish Government.

The State of Nature 2019 report was released on 4 October. There was increased engagement from the media and public than in previous years. <http://www.scotlink.org/public-documents/urgent-action-needed-to-halt-continued-decline-of-scotlands-wildlife/> A Topical Question on the report was asked by Claudia Beamish MSP with advice provided by LINK staff.

LINK is also continuing to work with civil society partners to link up the human rights agenda and call for a right to healthy environment with the FFSN campaign. LINK attended a meeting with Cabinet Secretary Michael Russell in September along with civil society partners to raise joint concerns about a no deal Brexit and its impact on environmental and human rights.

On 6 September, LINK held a workshop on environmental governance to develop thinking on potential interim arrangements that the Scottish Government could put in place should the UK exit the EU. This was attended by LINK members and officials from the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament. The initial findings of Professor Campbell Gemmill's research was presented and feedback from attendees was

¹ Please note that given focus on national developments, there has been limited engagement at the local government level and therefore the relevant section of the PSR has been removed on this occasion. However, it is anticipated that there will be some engagement with local authorities through the 'Fight For Scotland's Nature' campaign which will be detailed in that section. To ensure that the absence of references to local government in the PSR does not create gaps, this will be revisited with each PSR and activities considered ahead of the next local elections.

incorporated into the final draft of the report. <http://www.scotlink.org/public-documents/environmental-governance-effective-approaches-for-scotland-post-brexite/>

2. POLITICAL OUTLOOK AT A GLANCE

The political situation continues to be extremely fast-moving and difficult to predict. Boris Johnson became UK Prime Minister in July 2019 and tensions at both Westminster and Holyrood have been high. An attempt was made to prorogue the Westminster to prevent MPs from taking forward parliamentary business from early to September until shortly before the October Brexit deadline. This was challenged in both the Scottish Court of Session and UK High Court before being ultimately declared unlawful by the UK Supreme Court in late September. Westminster was recalled but a significant amount of parliamentary time was lost and progress towards a deal remains stalled.

This continues to be a challenging political environment to operate in. Continued divergence of views between Scottish and UK governments as well as political parties in Holyrood and Westminster on critically important constitutional issues means political tensions are high.

Brexit uncertainty continues which means that LINK advocacy continues to need to be couched in careful terms with respect to the potential outcomes while at the same time it is acknowledged that this uncertainty is also perpetuating Scottish Government reluctance to commit to actions to redress the risks of a Brexit fall-out. There is real potential that developments will occur rapidly from the 19th October following discussions at an EU summit and a final vote at Westminster.

However, it is important to note some progress in terms of the Scottish Government's commitments towards environmental protections. In its Programme for Government, it was announced that the forthcoming Continuity Bill would incorporate EU environmental principles into Scots law and set out proportionate governance measures. LINK has continued to engage with Scottish Government officials on this and to press for the Government to publish more detailed proposals. There remains a risk that, should the UK leave without a deal on 31st October, the Continuity Bill could be rapidly introduced to Parliament and some of the provisions weakened/omitted due to lack of time. On 15 October, member organisations from the Governance Group and LINK took quick action to send a private letter to the First Minister alongside other member CEOs calling for clarity and commitment on maintaining environmental standards if a No Deal goes ahead.

As uncertainty regarding the outcomes of Brexit persists, LINK continues to be alert to the need to amend advocacy or campaign approaches but has also set out contingency plans (see below).

3. SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT POLICY OUTLOOK

The Programme for Government 2019-20 was published on 3rd September 2019. The Programme is centred around responding to the climate emergency with strong rhetoric being used. However there remains significant work on policy development and delivery of action on the ground if Scotland is to achieve its new climate targets, set by the Scottish Parliament on 25th September.

More detail on the Programme for Government and key opportunities for LINK is set out in the accompanying briefing.

4. SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT ENGAGEMENT

Vhairi joined LINK as Advocacy Manager in September 2019 and is building key relationships with MSPs and party staff. LINK ran a stall at the Scottish Greens and SNP party conferences in October and will also be attending the Liberal Democrat conference in November. This was a good opportunity to remind MSPs of the Fight for Scotland's Nature campaign and to sign the campaign pledge – over 50 MSPs have now pledged to stand up for nature. <https://www.fightforscotlandsnature.scot/msp-pledge/>

Some highlights include:

- Wildlife Crime Subgroup hosted a parliamentary roundtable on the next steps to tackle wildlife crime. This was well attended by MSPs from opposition parties and Scottish Government officials.
- Finance and Constitution Committee debate on Common Frameworks highlighting key environmental governance issues. LINK's briefing was mentioned by several party spokespeople in the course of the debate.
- Parliamentary questions on the State of Nature report and on post-Brexit environmental governance arrangements.
- Scottish Labour are interested in the National Ecological Network and keen to lead a member's business debate in early 2020.
- LINK circulated a briefing on amendments to the Climate Change Bill.

New MSPs Beatrice Wishart and Sarah Boyack have been signed up to the Species Champion programme. Kate Forbes has also recently been made the Species Champion for the otter.

Advocacy will continue to focus on the FFSN campaign, post-2020 biodiversity ambitions and links to climate change as well as rural affairs. Planning for this is now a focus for the Advocacy Team. The FFSN Campaign group and the Campaign Coordinator, working with the Governance Group and the Advocacy Manager are developing short term and long term action plans for the campaign. These are in development but in outline are:

FFSN Short term: October – December

This phase depends on what happens with Brexit and as such is flexible. The focus for this is to achieve commitment to Asks 1 and 2 of the campaign, namely environmental principles and governance in legislation, through the Continuity Bill and other legislation as appropriate and an independent watchdog. Activities will focus on media work, blogs and social media.

FFSN Longer term: January onwards

Looking ahead the campaign needs to be move more effectively on Ask 3 of the campaign on targets underpinned by effective legislation. The Advocacy team is planning what this may look like and how it can be tied into 2020. This should include a revitalised Campaign group and coordinated input from across LINK Groups to identify what those targets need to look like. Advocacy on the agreed targets needs to be in a position to begin effectively from the New Year at the latest in order to build on the momentum of 2020 and the activities that will be focussed on the plans for CoP 2020 in China and Glasgow.

5. UNITED KINGDOM LEVEL

At a UK level, LINK activities continue to focus on engaging with the UK Environment Links and Greener UK to ensure a consistent approach to Brexit. Focus of activities is around SI/SSI coordination and seeking reassurances regarding the future of UK-wide work on environmental policies.

Link and GUK colleagues are exchanging views and learning from working on the Environment Bill, a draft of which was published on 15th October.

Scottish parties are beginning to select candidates for the 2021 Holyrood election.

6. EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS

Work is ongoing to ensure LINK is involved in civil society plans for the Climate Change COP, which will be held in Glasgow in December 2020, and the Convention on Biological Diversity COP which will take place in summer 2020.

7. ELECTIONS

It is possible that a snap General Election will be called in the next few weeks pending the outcome of Brexit negotiations. LINK is liaising with GUK about manifesto developments.

The cycle of elections is currently set to run as follows:

- The next Scottish Parliament Election is due to be held on Thursday 6 May 2021.
- The next General Election in the UK is scheduled to be held on 5 May 2022.
- The next Local Government Elections is schedule to be held 5 May 2022.

8. CONCLUSION

LINK staff focus is on ensuring the success of the FFSN campaign as well as progressing other linked advocacy objectives in a period of great political uncertainty.

There is a strong desire to plan advocacy activities for 2020 that link into the international COPs that will be taking place.

This, in combination with the need for LINK to develop solutions for Government for policy issues, will increase pressure on the DPF. There is ongoing work for LINK to develop evidence around biodiversity funding implications as well as campaigning for strong post-2020 biodiversity targets.

The next PSR report is due in Spring 2020.
