



Political Strategy Report – Spring 2020

8th April 2020

1. INTRODUCTION

The PSR provides an overview of Scottish Environment LINK's notable advocacy activities and engagement at different levels of government over the past 6 months.

This has been a period of increasing political uncertainty, with Brexit largely dominating the political agenda until late January 2020 and with a snap UK General Election and newly elected UK Government making changes to planned legislative and policy timelines. From mid-March, the rapid escalation of the threat the COVID-19 pandemic to public health has necessitated an unprecedented reprioritisation of government and parliamentary work to focus almost exclusively on the emergency response and post-pandemic recovery.

Despite this shifting landscape, LINK has been able to make good progress in advocacy priorities since autumn 2019, including:

- Continued public and political engagement in the FFSN campaign, including several feature articles in national newspapers and a [photo call at the Scottish Parliament](#) in November 2019, with 6 additional MSPs signing up bringing the total to 58.
- Good government engagement on environmental principles and governance asks, including one ministerial meeting, three LINK representatives attending a government roundtable event and a commitment from government that environmental principles and a new watchdog will be addressed in upcoming legislation. LINK has also presented evidence to Holyrood's ECCLR Committee and Westminster's Environment Bill committee.
- LINK recommendations to improve the Agriculture (Scotland) Bill have been adopted by the REC Committee in their Stage 1 report following LINK presenting written and oral evidence to MSPs.
- LINK presented oral and written evidence to the ECCLR committee on the Animals and Wildlife (Scotland) Bill.



- Publication of the Deer Group's *Managing Deer for Climate, Communities and Conservation* report which received good coverage in the media. The report was covered in [The Guardian](#) and [The Ferret](#).

Looking ahead, the impact of COVID-19 poses new challenges to LINK's advocacy work with a pause on face-to-face meetings and a remapping of the political agenda to respond to the health and economic crises. LINK will continue to make the case for robust action in response to the climate and nature emergencies in a way best suited to this emerging and changeable political context.

2. POLITICAL OUTLOOK AT A GLANCE

Responding to the health and economic consequences of the COVID-19 will be the chief focus of UK administrations and governments around the world in the coming months. The Scottish Parliament has broken up for its Spring Recess, returning to a limited business timetable on April 21st. The Parliament will focus on emergency legislation required for the response to the pandemic.

To free up the Scottish Government's capacity to prepare emergency legislation and bring forward support packages, bills currently being scrutinised in Parliament have been paused and unpublished legislation is now not expected to be brought forward before the Holyrood 2021 election. This includes a pause on the Continuity Bill, which would have included environmental principles and governance measures, and a shelving of the anticipated Circular Economy and Good Food Nation Bills. A number of planned marine consultations have also been postponed, including the Scottish Seabird Conservation Strategy, and announcements on the designation of 4 new Marine Protected Areas.

Westminster has also paused several bills, including the Environment Bill. Both Parliaments are exploring options for remote working to allow essential business to continue.

It now appears likely that the Brexit transition period will be extended beyond the 31st December 2020 as key negotiations have been postponed. [SPICe researchers](#) have detailed the disruption to negotiations due to the pandemic and experts' views that the UK Government now faces an almost impossibly tight window of time to agree a deal if it does not agree to an extension.

The crisis has also affected international events, with COP26 (climate) and COP15 (biodiversity) summits postponed until 2021. Despite these circumstances environmental issues continue to be discussed in the media with many commentators drawing attention to improvements in air quality



and some wildlife populations as countries enforce a lockdown on travel and normal economic activity. Many are also recognising the benefits of spending time in nature for physical health and mental wellbeing. There is an opportunity to build upon these positive stories to ensure environmental issues remain on the political agenda in the wake of the current COVID-19 crisis, LINK has begun this using the [LINK Thinks blog](#).

3. SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT ENGAGEMENT

Relationships with key Scottish Government Cabinet Ministers as well as senior officials have continued positively:

- Governance Group members met with Roseanna Cunningham in November to discuss environmental governance matters, following a positive meeting with Michael Russell the previous month.
- In February, LINK members were invited to a roundtable on Brexit and the Environment chaired by Roseanna Cunningham.
- Food and Farming Group members met with Kate Higgins, Rural Economy SPAD, to discuss the Agriculture (Scotland) Bill. Discussions are continuing with Kate to agree an amendment to the Bill to set out criteria for the payment of future agricultural subsidies.
- Governance Group members met with new environment SPAD, Màiri McAllan to introduce the work of LINK.
- Governance Group members have had regular positive meetings with Charles Stewart Roper and Katriona Carmichael of the Scottish Government to discuss environmental governance and the Continuity Bill. This has allowed LINK to remain up to date with the Government's latest plans for responding to the environmental threats posed by Brexit.
- Members of the Economy Group met with Roseanna Cunningham in March to discuss strengthening proposals for the Circular Economy Bill. The Cabinet Secretary is not inclined to accept LINK's call for targets to be included in the Bill but offered an opportunity for LINK to share thinking at an upcoming working group (though timescales for this will now be much longer).

Areas where LINK members would like to see the Scottish Government make more progress include:

- Setting a purpose for the allocation of future agricultural support in the Agriculture (Scotland) Bill.
 - ❖ Food and Farming Group are preparing amendments and an advocacy plan to engage with MSPs in May/June.



- Development of Rural Land Use Partnerships.
 - ❖ Land Use Group will feedback ideas by mid-April to the Scottish Land Commission which is taking forward this work on behalf of government.
- Commitment to a Circular Economy Bill for the next parliament.
 - ❖ Phoebe and the Economics Group are planning a new approach for the campaign now legislation for this parliament been postponed.
- An ambitious National Planning Framework 4.
 - ❖ The Planning Group has gathered feedback from across LINK for a consultation response due by end of April.
- Setting targets for nature recovery.
 - ❖ Governance Group is preparing a DPF bid to produce a report to evaluate progress on existing environmental targets and suggest options for improved targets.

4. SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT ENGAGEMENT

Relationships across the political spectrum are progressing well. LINK members have been invited to give evidence at 3 Holyrood committee sessions (ECCLR and REC) and MSPs have engaged with LINK activities, from responding to the State of Nature report, signing the FFSN pledge to lodging parliamentary questions and motions to further our work. LINK members have met with representatives from all parties over the past six months and hosted a stall promoting the FFSN campaign at the Green and SNP Autumn Conferences. Follow-up engagement was being planned for Spring Conferences which have now been cancelled.

There are a number of policy areas where LINK is engaging with MSPs:

- Animals and Wildlife Bill – engaging with MSPs from Labour and the Greens about increasing penalties for wildlife crime, including vicarious liability.
- Support for strengthening government proposals for environmental governance and a Scottish watchdog in the Continuity Bill, including meetings with Patrick Harvie MSP, Annie Wells MSP and SNP researchers.
- Gaining broader support for an Environment Act and nature recovery targets through the FFSN pledge, with 58 MSPs pledging their support.
- Improving deer management following publication of the Deer Group's *Managing Deer for Climate, Communities and Conservation* report.



- Proposals for a strong Circular Economy Bill following a LINK briefing event in January hosted by Angus McDonald MSP. MSPs from all parties attended and engaged in a lively discussion, including the Convener of the ECCLR Committee, Gillian Martin MSP.

Looking ahead, despite current uncertainty around parliamentary workstreams, LINK is planning further engagement on:

- Amendments to the Agriculture (Scotland) Bill at Stage 2.
- Amendments to the Animals and Wildlife Bill in preparation for the Bill's return later in 2020.
- A potential online engagement event with MSPs in June to refocus minds on environmental issues in the new economic context. This is dependent on MSPs' capacity to engage in such an event which is being closely monitored.

Over 100 MSPs are now signed up to the Species Champions initiative. LINK's new Species Champions Coordinator, Juliet, has engaged Champions with a parliamentary motion to celebrate World Wildlife Day in March and urged Champions of species affected by wildlife crime to take part in the recent debate on the Animals and Wildlife Bill. A spring newsletter has been prepared (to be sent late May) and blogs highlighting the initiative have been published on LINK's website (see [here](#) and [here](#)). Though planning had begun on a programme of group site with Champions over the summer, we are now investigating ways to provide MSPs with a digital update on the species and sites they have visited in the past, should social distancing restrictions still be in place in summer.

In terms of party relationships, there has been good engagement with the Conservatives, with both Annie Wells MSP and her researchers being new to the portfolio. Relationships with the Greens are strong and we continue to work frequently with Labour, particularly Claudia Beamish MSP and Colin Smyth MSP. Engagement with SNP backbenchers and Liberal Democrats will be prioritised in the coming months. As attention turns to party manifestos SNP and Green manifesto teams have been contacted to scope opportunity for LINK engagement and a written response to the first round of the Labour manifesto process was submitted earlier in 2019. Conservatives have also extended an invitation for LINK to contact about manifesto work during summer recess.

A timeline for LINK's own manifesto process is currently being planned. The expectation is that a skeleton manifesto, drafted with input of Governance Group members will be drafted across April and circulated with other working groups for input from May-June. This manifesto with detailed policy



asks will be finalised by August and ready to share with members and MSPs for the return of Parliament in September. A shorter ‘glossy’ version will be prepared for launch in January and available to the general public at the time when attention turns to the election. LINK’s Marine Group is also planning a complementary *Manifesto for Ocean Recovery* which will follow a similar timeline.

5. LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEVEL

No updates at this level, but will consider how we can engage with local authorities once business returns to a normal level and in the lead up to 2022 local elections.

6. UK LEVEL

At a UK level, LINK activities continue to focus on engaging with the UK LINKs and Greener UK to ensure a consistent approach to Brexit. This has focused on a joint report on common frameworks for environmental principles across UK administrations (this has not been published but Vhairi can provide a copy on request) and recommendations for independent watchdogs in each of the four nations. Vhairi met with Greener UK colleagues in London in February.

As with Holyrood, Westminster has postponed several pieces of upcoming legislation including the Environment Bill which had just reached the committee stage. Lloyd Austin represented LINK at the public bill committee in March, giving evidence on the impacts of the UK Bill on Scotland and the need for a common approach to environmental governance and the application of environmental principles across the four nations. An update on the status of the Environment Bill is expected during the week of 20th April.

Following the UK General Election, LINK sent a welcome letter to all Scottish MPs highlighting LINK’s work and offering to provide advice on matters affecting Scotland. Following this, Tommy Sheppard MP requested a meeting and Vhairi and Lloyd met him to discuss the UK Environment Bill and progress on governance issues in Scotland.

7. EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS

The European Parliament is also taking an extended recess due to COVID-19, with the next sitting scheduled for early May.



Engagement continues with the EEB, with Deborah attending the AGM in Berlin in November. Phoebe Cochrane had been planning to host an EEB in Edinburgh on new EU waste directives, due to be implemented by the Scottish Government.

COP26 (climate) and COP15 (biodiversity) summits have been postponed until 2021.

8. ELECTIONS

The cycle of elections is set to run as follows:

- The next Scottish Parliament election is to be held on 6 May 2021
- The next Scottish local elections are due to be held on 5 May 2022
- The next UK General Election is due on 2 May 2024

In January 2020 the UK ceased to be members of the EU Parliament, with no MEPs representing UK interests.

There has been some speculation about the Holyrood 2021 election being pushed back as some parties have postponed their candidate selections during the lockdown. On 1st April, Minister for Parliamentary Business, Graeme Dey MSP, informed the Parliament that the Scottish Government has not considered postponing the election but it would be reviewed in October when the Coronavirus emergency legislation is reviewed.

9. CONCLUSION

This has been a period of heightened political uncertainty in Scotland and the UK, from Brexit and the UK General Election to the unprecedented emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While timelines appear uncertain at this moment, LINK will continue to promote the importance of nature to our wellbeing and in building a more resilient green economy in the weeks ahead. Work continues on agriculture, planning and manifesto preparation while clarity on new political priorities emerges.

Vhairi Tollan
8 April 2020