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Dear Cabinet Secretary

Thank you for your time at our meeting at Monzie Farm on 2 March. It was very good to be able to meet you in a location that really illustrated the approach that future proofs Scotland's farming in combining production with nature restoration and carbon sequestration. We discussed the following topics.

(a) Future rural support payments – how these can deliver for nature and climate

We recognise that because Scotland's agricultural policy and funding arrangements are in a transitional phase, the Agriculture (Retained EU Law and Data) (Scotland) Act 2020 keeps in place the EU CAP funding arrangements until May 2026. Between now and 2026, Scotland must develop an entirely new agricultural support system with a transition to a system that delivers broad benefits for society, public health, climate and nature.

The Scottish Government's recent manifesto re-stated a commitment to retaining unconditional direct payments until 2025, after which point only half of the direct payment amount will be subject to conditions to deliver biodiversity and carbon improvements. This is a different direction to that being taken by the EU and LINK members are concerned this does not deliver the transition in agriculture that is required to meet net zero targets and restore nature. An inclusive, cross-sector approach to developing the new evidenced policy is needed to provide long-term direction and support the transformation needed. Moving towards the welcome vision you published on 2 March will require a transformation in direction and approach.

We suggest that the components of a new rural support system should include:

- 1) The bulk of funding (both public and blended) is to **support nature and climate** in the way that we manage land and provide food as a priority. This is vital to ensure value for taxpayers' money when public finances are limited.
- 2) Support to **facilitate change** to support innovation and market development, cooperation and facilitation, adding value and building shorter supply chains, amongst others. This recognises that markets are both changing and challenging and that support is required to help farmers, crofters and other land-based businesses improve profitability and enhance market returns from whatever they produce.
- 3) Investment in **supporting activities** including research, knowledge transfer, advice and training to help drive the adoption of sustainable farming practices, improve knowledge and skills and help businesses to innovate.



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(b) Advice and upskilling

Targeted advice for farmers, who are then supported with the delivery and follow through of appropriate measures, is a highly effective method for delivering on nature and climate targets in agriculture. **LINK members would like to see the following measures:**

- Enhanced package of support for farming advice in Scotland with a significant increase in budget, supporting an increase in the number of advisors.
- Upskilling of advisors to enable the delivery of whole farm management plans, incentivise advisors to increase knowledge and skills (see Irish example below) and strengthen links to Regional Land Use Frameworks.
- Accreditation of environmental advisors to deliver specialist advice.
- Investment in regional hubs to allow for region specific advice and a 'one stop shop' for farmers to receive various forms of advice.

Government funded advice to farmers is predominantly delivered through the Farm Advisory Service (FAS), part of the SRDP. Additional advice is available to farmers through a wide range of private and NGO providers. For example, RSPB Scotland delivers advice through its [farming advisory service](#), whilst the Scottish Farming and Wildlife Advisers' Group ([ScotFWAG](#)) is a professional association of advisors which promotes high quality farm conservation advice and collaborative working.

Specialist and well-funded advice is key to ensuring Scottish agriculture works in tandem with nature. A successful example of this is RSPB Scotland's work with corn buntings in Fife and Angus, where targeted advice led to a dramatic surge in both population and range. The targeted, specialist face-to-face advice given to farmers involved in corn bunting conservation was key in their recovery.

Farming advice services in Europe offer useful examples for inspiration:

- **Denmark** has a two layered service, with the research centre (SEGES) employing over 650 people and the [advisory service \(DLBR\)](#) comprising 31 local advisory services, providing a comprehensive link between research and advice with specialised departments e.g. organics.
- [Innovatiesteunpunt](#) in **Flanders (Belgium)** consist of 20 consultants who share best practice, support pilot projects and organise training days/brainstorm sessions and innovation days on topics from climate-friendly farming to sustainable energy.
- **Ireland's** extensive advisory service Teagasc has 1,100 staff (240 advisors), with 55 offices in 12 regions offering their services to Irish farmers. Services include the '[Sustainability Support and Advisory Programme](#)', a programme set up to train 30 Agricultural Sustainability Advisors who can proactively work with and advise farmers on how to protect and improve water quality sustainably.

It is essential that plans are produced to a high standard by well-qualified advisers. Improved provision of advice will require an upskilling in the current advisory sector. It is recommended that a system of accreditation of environmental advisory support is introduced in order to help ensure a high standard of advice provision and to incentivise advisers to increase skills and knowledge in this sector. For example, all members of ScotFWAG are accredited to a high standard through membership of the Chartered Institute 14 of Ecologists and Environmental Managers (CIEEM) or the Institute of Agricultural Engineers (IAgrE).

We ran out of time to discuss agroecology and organic farming. The summary below is what we hoped we might cover with you on this topic.

(c) Agroecology and Organic Farming

One way of achieving the outcomes for nature and climate that the government hopes to achieve over the next decade is by supporting the agroecological farming practices – working with nature, restoring complex ecological processes and maximising biodiversity while producing food. This can include organic farming and nature-based solutions to manage water, soils and pollution.

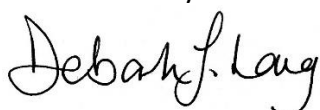
Greater research effort overall should be focused on identifying what more sustainable farming and food production systems look like and how they could be encouraged. Agroecological farming systems are often highly localised and knowledge intensive and require a holistic approach to research that breaks through disciplinary divisions and integrates more practical knowledge with science.

Organic farming is a system of farming that seeks to work with natural processes and the ecology of the farm. Its standards are under-pinned by regulation, compliance with them is independently inspected and verified and the organic logo has substantial consumer recognition. Artificial fertilisers are banned and farmers develop fertile soil by rotating crops and using compost, manure and clover. LINK members welcome the commitment in the Programme for Government to double the area of organic land in Scotland during the lifetime of the current parliament and to develop a national organic action plan in line with the EU organics strategy.

In Scotland, the area of organic land has been declining steadily in recent years and in 2017 only 2% of farmland was [managed organically](#). Increasing the area of land farmed organically, especially in the more intensive arable and dairy farming areas, and increasing the production of organic crops, fruit, vegetables and dairy produce in Scotland could yield a range of environmental and health benefits. In many other European countries, the organic sector has developed rapidly in recent years and Scotland risks lagging behind as the markets for organic food continue to grow. Austria has 19% of its Utilisable Agricultural Area managed organically, Sweden 15.7% and Estonia 14.1%. Some countries such as Denmark have set targets for organic farming in order to drive expansion; Denmark aims to reach 15% of farmland managed organically by 2020. In Scotland, support for both conversion to, and maintenance of, organic farming systems is required as part of non-competitive measures. Investing more in organic/agroecological farming will also help to match growing consumer demand for organic produce and help Scotland deliver its Good Food Nation ambition.

We would be delighted to provide more detail on any of these issues if that would be helpful. We look forward to continuing to work with you and your team for a resilient and sustainable future for farming in Scotland, with nature at its heart.

Yours sincerely



Dr Deborah Long, Chief Officer