

Environment Bill

Law Society of Scotland briefing for second reading

October 2019



Introduction

The Law Society of Scotland is the professional body for over 12,000 Scottish solicitors. With our overarching objective of leading legal excellence, we strive to excel and to be a world-class professional body, understanding and serving the needs of our members and the public. We set and uphold standards to ensure the provision of excellent legal services and ensure the public can have confidence in Scotland's solicitor profession.

We have a statutory duty to work in the public interest, a duty which we are strongly committed to achieving through our work to promote a strong, varied and effective solicitor profession working in the interests of the public and protecting and promoting the rule of law. We seek to influence the creation of a fairer and more just society through our active engagement with the Scottish and United Kingdom Governments, Parliaments, wider stakeholders and our membership.

This briefing paper is intended to inform MPs of our comments on the Environment Bill for the second reading debate on 28 October 2019. Our comments are high level at this stage.

If you would like to discuss this paper, or if you would like more information on the points that we have raised, please do not hesitate to contact us. Contact details can be found at the end of the paper.

General remarks

Various parts of the Bill extend and apply to different parts of the UK and therefore our comments in this briefing are restricted to those parts which extend to and apply to Scotland.

Matters relevant to devolution

We note the work undertaken in Scotland by the Roundtable on Environment and Climate Change. The report of the Roundtable¹ considers a variety of options for environmental governance following the UK's withdrawal from the EU. The Scottish Government consulted on environmental principles and governance in Spring 2019² and committed in the Programme for Government 2019 – 20 to take forward any legislative measures required in the Continuity Bill.

We consider that strong collaboration between the UK Government and devolved administrations is essential. This is particularly significant given the transboundary effects of environmental impacts. We consider that the Bill should provide for a power to the Office of Environmental Protection (OEP) to share information with and work with relevant bodies in devolved administrations where necessary. Coherence in the manner in which principles are applied will be of benefit in ensuring that international environmental obligations are met and avoiding 'environmental regulatory tourism'.

¹ <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0053/00536067.pdf>

² <https://consult.gov.scot/environment-forestry/environmental-principles-and-governance/>

The Cabinet Office published in late 2017 a list of 111 points where EU law intersects with devolved matters. This has been supplemented by the publication of the *UK Government's Frameworks analysis: breakdown of areas of EU law that intersect with devolved competence in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland* on 9 March 2018. 24 of the policy areas in question were identified as being subject to more detailed discussion to explore whether legislative common framework arrangements might be needed, in whole or in part. The Cabinet Office published in April 2019 a *Revised Frameworks Analysis: Breakdown of areas of EU law that intersect with devolved competence in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland*³. This revised analysis has reduced the number of policy areas where legislation common frameworks may be required to 21, and includes a number of matters relating to the environment.

The Scottish Government has consented to regulations on a variety of environmental matters which have been, or are due to be, laid in Parliament in preparation for the UK's EU exit⁴. To date, these regulations cover: ionising radiation; emissions trading; health and safety in connection with genetically modified organisms, control of major accident hazards; water environment and environmental policy; persistent organic pollutants; control of mercury; animal health; nuclear reactors; fluorinated greenhouse gasses and ozone-depleting substances; waste management; Nagoya Protocol; air quality carbon capture and storage; marine environment; import and trade of animals and animal products; registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals (REACH); genetically modified organisms; and animals and food.

Comments on the Bill

Office of Environmental Protection - Clauses 19 – 41 and Schedule 1

Clause 19 of the Bill provides for the establishment of an Office of Environment Protection (OEP), with much of the detail provided in Schedule 1. It is important that the new OEP is able to hold Ministers of the Crown and public bodies to account. This requires the body to be independent and able to apply sanctions that will have sufficient deterrent effect on the acts of Ministers.

We note concerns regarding the extent of discretion given to the Secretary of State in Paragraphs 1 - 3 of Schedule 1 to the Bill in relation to constitution of the OEP and appointment of members. The wide scope of these powers may impact upon the OEP's independence from Government.

Provision is made in paragraph 4 of Schedule 1 about terms of appointment of an OEP member. We are supportive of the requirement for non-executive members to be appointed for a fixed term. We suggest that the relevant term is set out in the Bill to reinforce the independence and impartiality of the OEP so that the duration of service could not be subject to Ministerial discretion. While the OEP will cover UK functions, we suggest that the Secretary of State should nevertheless consider the devolved administrations as having a

³ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/792738/20190404-FrameworksAnalysis.pdf

⁴ Further information about the Scottish Parliament's consideration of these instruments can be found here: <https://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/109366.aspx>

stake in the appointment process, or be subject to a duty to have regard to the need for consistency and coordination with the approach in devolved administrations, due to the potential effects upon devolved matters.

We note the provisions of paragraph 4(6) which provides for a non-executive member to be removed from office in certain circumstances. We suggest this provision be subject to a requirement for the Secretary of State to consult with the Chair. We also propose that a definition of “unable or unfit to carry out the member’s functions” is provided within the provisions and suggest the following wording:

A person shall be considered unable or unfit if the Chair is satisfied as regards any of the following matters –

(a) That the member becomes insolvent;

(b) That the member has been convicted of a criminal offence;

(c) That the member is otherwise unable or unfit to discharge the functions of a member or is unsuitable to continue as a member.”

We note the terms of the Environment Act 1995, Schedules 1 and 6 which contain provisions on membership of the Environment Agency and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency respectively. We consider there is scope for additional safeguards to be made in this Bill to ensure the independence of the OEP.

We have previously highlighted that it is crucial that the new body is properly resourced and staffed. By way of comparison, we understand that the EU’s Directorate General for the Environment has approximately 500 staff members and shares around 90 staff with the Directorate General for Climate Action. There are various other European Directorates relevant to the environment - Energy, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, and Health and Food Safety.

The body needs to be properly and independently funded. This will be key to the body’s ability to effectively scrutinise the Government. Paragraph 11 of Schedule 1 provides that: “The Secretary of State must pay to the OEP such sums as the Secretary of State considers are reasonably sufficient to enable the OEP to carry out its functions.” We are concerned that if the body is not funded with some independence from Government, there is the potential for funding to be reduced, thereby affecting the body’s functions as an independent entity. We therefore welcome the new duty on the Secretary of State, in exercising functions in respect of the OEP, to have regard to the need to protect the OEP’s independence (Schedule 1, paragraph 16).

Clauses 20 and 21 set out requirements for the OEP’s strategy. We welcome the requirement for this to be kept under review (clause 21(3)) and the requirement on the OEP to consult with such persons as it considers appropriate before preparing, revising or reviewing the strategy (clause 21(5)).

We anticipate that the provisions of clause 22 relating to co-operation will assist the OEP in their enforcement actions.

The OEP’s monitoring and reporting powers in clauses 23 and 24 will cover environmental law which is not devolved but may impact upon devolved administrations. As noted above, it is important that the OEP

works alongside other relevant bodies, in particular, the Environment Agency and Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA).

In relation to the OEP's advisory role (clause 25), we note the importance of the OEP being able to provide advice to a Minister of the Crown on proposed changes to the law or on other matters relating to the natural environment which may take place in one jurisdiction but which by virtue of the connectivity of our land, water and air, impact the environment in another geographical area.

The enforcement powers of the OEP are set out in clauses 26 to 36 of the Bill. It is important that a comprehensive system of enforcement is available.

We consider there is benefit in the OEP having powers to investigate complaints and to carry out an investigation without having received a complaint (clause 28(2)). We welcome the discretion which is given to the body in this regard. We note that one of the conditions for the OEP to carry out an investigation is that the failure to comply with environmental law "would be a serious failure" (clauses 28(1)(b) and (2)(b)).

We welcome the provisions in relation to information notices (clause 30) and decision notices (clause 31), however, the extent to which the OEP will be able to compel compliance is unclear. The Bill does not provide for any further sanctions following an investigation, for example, fines. We recognise, however, the potentially circular nature of enforcement against public authorities by way of fines, which may result in reducing the budget available for compliance in the future.

It is appropriate that a review application may be made by the OEP (clauses 33 and 34) and we note the bespoke procedure which is provided under clause 33 for an environmental review. An environmental review is only possible where a decision notice has been issued by the OEP to the public authority (clause 33(1)) and does not appear to be a process open to the public at large. We consider that provision should be made for the public to prompt a review to ensure swift action can be taken where necessary and to ensure access to justice. We note that the Upper Tribunal is to apply 'judicial review principles' (clause 35(5)). The effect of the statement of non-compliance (clause 33(6)) is unclear and we note the restrictions on the remedies which can be granted by the Upper Tribunal (clause 33(8)). In order for the process to be meaningful, the Upper Tribunal must have the authority to grant effective remedies. In relation to judicial review, we note the limitations placed on the OEP's powers under clauses 34(1) and (2).

Waste and resource efficiency

Clauses 44 – 48 and Schedules 4 – 8

We welcome the provisions focussing on waste reduction and resource efficiency. The provisions relating to producer responsibility for disposal costs and resource efficiency information and requirements (schedules 6 – 8) are enabling provisions and much of the detail of these regimes is not yet clear. We consider it appropriate that regulations under schedules 6 - 8 are subject to the affirmative procedure and welcome the consultation requirements found in schedule 6, paragraphs 10 and 18; schedule 7, paragraphs 5 and 14; and schedule 8, paragraphs 5 and 14.

Electronic waste tracking (clause 54) and transfrontier shipments of waste (clause 58)

The provisions in these clauses are enabling provisions. We note the provisions detailing when the regulations under clause 54 will be subject to affirmative procedure. We consider, across these clauses, that it would be appropriate to require the relevant authority to consult with relevant persons before making the regulations.

Air quality - clauses 67 – 72

Clauses 69 - 72 relates to the environmental recall of motor vehicles. These are enabling provisions which are wide in scope, with much of the detail to be provided in regulations. We consider that such regulations should be subject to the affirmative procedure and be subject to consultation before being laid.

REACH – clause 122 and schedule 20

Schedule 20, paragraph 1 gives the Secretary of State the power to amend the REACH Regulation (Regulation (EC) No 1907/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council concerning the Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH), establishing a European Chemicals Agency). Paragraph 2 gives the Secretary of State the power to amend the REACH Enforcement Regulations 2008.

The powers conferred on the Secretary of State by this schedule are wide reaching, although certain provisions are deemed to be protected and not subject to regulation under the schedule. Regulations made under the powers could reduce the level of protection from hazardous chemicals and therefore it is important that safeguards are in place.

We note that regulations under both paragraphs 1 and 2 are subject to the affirmative procedure. Schedule 20 provides that regulations can only be made if they are consistent with Article 1 of the REACH Regulation. Paragraph 1(6)(b) provides that the Secretary of State must, before beginning consultation on any amending regulations, publish an explanation of why they are consistent with Article 1.

The power of the Secretary of State to make regulations is subject to the consent requirement in Article 4A of the REACH Regulation which provides:

- “1. Where any provision of this Regulation states that a function is subject to the consent requirement in this Article, the function may be exercised in a particular instance only if the person exercising it has obtained the consent or consents (if any) required by paragraphs 2 to 4.
2. The consent of the Scottish Ministers is required if, or to the extent that, the exercise of the function is within devolved competence (within the meaning of section 54 of the Scotland Act 1998(10)), whether or not the exercise of the function also relates to a part of the United Kingdom other than Scotland.”

Consultation provisions are contained in paragraph 5. Given the wide scope of the powers and the potential impacts of any changes, we consider broad consultation to be necessary before the laying of any regulations.

For further information, please contact:

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