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Dear John

Thank you for meeting with my officials on Wednesday. I wanted to follow that up with some further explanation of our intentions around Ramsar sites, particularly through Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) and the next National Planning Framework (NPF4).

Our long-standing policy position recognises that Ramsar sites are an important part of our unique environment in Scotland and provides them with a high level of protection through co-designation as Natura sites and/or SSSIs. I would, however, agree there is a good case that we should consider further what else could be done to protect these important sites within the planning system. That is why I gave you my support for the principle of your amendment at Stage 2. However, the proposed amendment as drafted would have been challenging to operate given the form of Ramsar designation, and could have unintended negative effects on other parts of the protected area regimes. While I do not believe that an amendment to the Bill on Ramsar is required, this issue could be much more effectively explored and covered through the future SPP and NPF4 and I can give you my commitment to doing that.

The Bill will make some substantial changes which will strengthen the role and effect of national planning policy. The next iteration of the SPP will be incorporated into NPF4, and it will have an enhanced status as part of the statutory development plan – so be central to decision-making on planning applications. NPF4 and future iterations of the NPF will also be subject to a parliamentary approval process, so ensuring members will have meaningful input to its terms. We are ready to get started on NPF4 and will do so as soon as the Bill is complete and the new provisions for the NPF are clear.

Crucially, handling the review of how Ramsar sites influence planning decisions through the NPF4 will allow us an opportunity to consider, through wide public consultation, if any additional protections might be needed, within the broader regime of protected areas. That means we can also ensure we properly and fairly consider wider, potentially sensitive issues, such as any potential impact on land owners. This would be an opportunity to consider an approach that continues to provide appropriate protection of Ramsar sites and offers those affected the opportunity to put their own views forward.

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I hope this reassures you that we remain committed to providing strong and appropriate protection to Ramsar sites and to exploring through the development of SPP and NPF4 whether any adjustment of the policy is needed. I would of course be very happy to talk this over with you if you like.

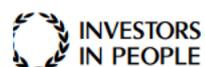
Kind regards



KEVIN STEWART

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