

The Baroness Young
Chief Executive
Environment Agency,
Rio House, Waterside Drive,
Aztec West,
Almondsbury
Bristol
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18th May 2007

**Re: Wildlife and Countryside Link response to the Environment Agency's
Working Together consultation document**

Dear Lady Young,

At the meeting between you and representatives of the Blueprint for Water coalition on Tuesday 10th April, you requested written clarification of the points raised in the Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) response to the Environment Agency's *Working Together* consultation document.

As we agreed at our meeting, we will all need to work in new ways if the objectives of the Water Framework Directive (WFD) are to be achieved. It was also clear that we share a belief that we must focus on outcomes, not process.

That said, there has been on going concern amongst Link members that the current approach to implementation is failing to harness support from those with the ability to help deliver WFD objectives. This was evident at a recent meeting of River Basin District (RBD) Liaison Panels environmental representatives, many of whom expressed concerns and confusion about the process of identifying Significant Water Management Issues.

Our central concern is that WFD objectives will only be met in a cost-effective way if stakeholders who could help identify, prioritise and tackle pressures on water body status are engaged at a scale that is meaningful to them. But before developing this idea any further we would like to take this opportunity to clarify, in writing, two of the issues which we discussed at our meeting.

Firstly, we refer in our consultation response to structured 'local' engagement. When we use 'local' in this context, we do not mean a series of processes for each stream, brook or wetland in England and Wales. Rather, we refer to areas that are more meaningful to those who the Agency might look to as co-deliverers. For example, the Severn River Basin District includes systems on the scale of the Severn, Wye, and



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Usk, in addition to a number of further significant water bodies. In this context, 'local' engagement could mean the sub-division of a river basin district into a number of catchments, each itself of a significant size, or engagement at other geographical scales e.g. metropolitan areas, lake catchment etc.

Secondly, we think it is important to clear up any potential confusion about what we mean by stakeholder engagement. We are certainly not proposing a programme of local engagement of the general public across the whole of England and Wales. What we are talking about is engaging and involving those who can contribute to the achievement of WFD objectives through the knowledge they hold and the action they can take on the ground. Clearly there is a problem in the use of language because "stakeholder" can mean all things to all people. There are also no obvious alternatives but in the context of the text below we have chosen to use the phrase "co-deliverer" which, while not perfect, reflects the more active role of those we believe the Agency should be engaging with.

The role of co-deliverers in achieving good status

In order to meet WFD objectives, there are a number of steps that must be taken where co-delivers could add value.

Step 1: Identification of problems and associated pressures

The current approach proposed for the identification of pressures in river basin planning is to be based on a risk assessment undertaken at the RBD level. This assessment will largely be based on an assessment of compliance with the UKTAG Standards and Conditions, assessed against Agency data. While this represents a reasonable starting point, there is much that will be missed by this approach:

- The standards and conditions only cover some of the pressures on freshwater bodies. Those that are not covered include, for example, historic morphological change and sedimentation.
- A range of organisations and individuals hold data that may be of use in assessing pressures.
- There are inevitable gaps in the available data, for example the failure to pick up 'spikes' of particular pollutants.
- The current approach cannot assess systematically the relationship between land-use and water quality within a catchment.

As a result, the Agency faces a significant challenge in creating the detailed understanding of the causes of the failure of good ecological status that will be necessary if meaningful and targeted programmes of measures are to be drawn up. Link is not convinced that either existing Agency activities or the current proposals are capable of producing this analysis. We believe that more targeted engagement with co-deliverers will be necessary to tease out data and knowledge that can be used to refine strategic characterisation.

Step 2: Prioritisation

Delivering the maximum benefits for the least expenditure will obviously depend upon prioritisation. In any catchment, there will be some areas that are of high ecological or social significance, or at greater risk, while others will be less so. Equally, there may be some areas of a catchment, or types of pressure, where action can achieve rapid results, while others will require a significantly greater investment over a longer time period. This kind of prioritisation is required in catchments and even water bodies, not only between them. Link believes this can only be done effectively in discussions with those groups in a catchment who have an understanding of the pressures (see above), have a role in co-delivery and, importantly, will be affected by measures.

Step 3: Designing and delivering plans of action

Ultimately, understanding pressures and prioritising interventions must lead to the development of programmes of action. As we all recognise these programmes will need to be delivered by a range of different bodies and groups, not just the Agency. The chances of effective delivery will be greatly enhanced if co-deliverers are involved in the design of measures. Moreover, mechanisms need to be in place to monitor and assess progress against agreed plans and objectives. There is a long history of 'strategic' plans being drawn up without detailed delivery plans or funding, often because there is no clear statutory driver. Clearly the WFD is different and it will be crucial that progress made towards objectives is understood.

We touched on many of these points in our meeting and would welcome future discussions about how the Agency intends to engage with co-delivers to meet these challenges. In particular, we would ask that the Agency provides more detail on how it is proposed to move from the very broad, strategic overview provided at River Basin Districts, to the detailed analysis, design and delivery of programmes of measures at a meaningful scale. At this point in time, Link does not believe that the proposals advanced in the *Working Together* consultation document will meet this challenge and we hope this letter provides some clarity as to why we feel this is the case.

As mentioned at 10th April meeting, the terms of reference for a short piece of research using real life experiences from the southwest River Basin District to illustrate these points, is currently in the process of being drawn up. It is anticipated that this will be completed within the next few months and representatives of the partners involved would welcome an opportunity to discuss both the scope of this study and the results when they emerge.

Lastly, we welcomed hearing from you that the Agency continues its streamlining project. We believe that it is important there is a process of rationalisation and streamlining between WFD catchment planning and the many other water planning processes. Without this, there is a real risk of contradiction and stakeholder fatigue.

Yours Sincerely,



Tom Le Quesne
Chair, Link Water Working Group



Philip Burston
Vice-Chair, Link Water Working Group

This letter is supported by the following organisations:

- Buglife – The Invertebrate Conservation Trust
- Herpetological Conservation Trust
- Marine Conservation Society
- The National Trust
- Pond Conservation: The Water Habitats Trust
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)
- The Wildlife Trusts
- WWF - UK