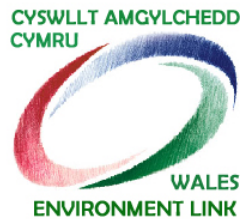


THINK LINK

A Guide on How to Make the Most of Your Link Membership



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1. INTRODUCTION

This handbook has been produced to help member organisations to get the most out of their membership of Link. Link provides a medium for voluntary environmental organisations to work together. There are four separate Link networks, one in each of the four countries of the United Kingdom, each with its own founding document or constitution. They operate in an essentially similar manner, with some differences – factors which are reflected in the rest of this document.

For simplicity, the use here of the term Link applies generically to all four networks.

These pages contain key information for employees or voluntary representatives of member organisations of Link. In producing this handbook, the aim is to give a fuller understanding of the roles, responsibilities and relationships within the networks in order to make the networks more efficient and effective. The handbook has been prepared by the four Links at a general level, but please note that each Link carries its own operating procedures or protocols which will be made available to those involved in that Link.

We hope that this booklet will be useful to you and will help you to make the most of your membership of Link.

2. ABOUT THE LINKS

There are four Link organisations:

- ❖ *Northern Ireland Environment Link* (Established 1990);
- ❖ *Scottish Environment LINK* (Established 1987);
- ❖ *Wales Environment Link / Cyswllt Amgylchedd Cymru* (Established 1989);
- ❖ *Wildlife and Countryside Link* (based in England, established 1990, though originally established as *Wildlife Link* in 1980).

Each Link is a coalition organisation, representing a number of environmental non-governmental organisations (eNGOs). Wildlife and Countryside Link's members also include organisations interested in animal welfare, which for the purposes of this document are considered to be included within the 'eNGO' term. These eNGOs are voluntary sector, non-profit-distributing organisations. The Links aim to add value to the work of individual organisations by facilitating information exchange and collaborative working amongst members on issues the members choose.

2.1 CONSENSUS

Obviously, with the large number of organisations involved in each Link, there are many different perspectives. The ethos of Link is to find consensus amongst these differing viewpoints, and to foster an attitude of mutual trust amongst member bodies, where the joint positions adopted take account of differences but promote the common ground.

On many occasions the value of consensus outweighs the importance of differences, which brings members together on potentially contentious issues. Consensus is an invaluable lobbying tool, which enhances the public credibility of the member organisations and of Link as a whole.

2.2 INFORMATION EXCHANGE

The Link offices receive significant amounts of information every day - keeping memberships in the loop is therefore a key role. The Links are in contact with many different groups, including government departments and agencies, member organisations and individuals, other sectors, and media.

2.3 JOINT WORKING AMONG THE LINKS

Each Link attempts to effect change within its own part of the United Kingdom, working mainly to its country's administration. However this is not to say that the four work in isolation - the Links are in regular communication with each other, and occasionally produce combined Link statements. Furthermore, several member organisations belong to more than one of the Links, with country, or devolved, representation on any one Link.

2.4 DEVOLUTION

Responding to devolution, Scottish Environment LINK and Wales Environment Link / Cyswllt Amgylchedd Cymru both have a full time Parliamentary/Assembly Liaison Officer, to ensure a close connection with elected representatives and the parliamentary/assembly process.

3. MEMBERSHIP ENTITLEMENT

3.1 WHAT VALUE CAN LINK ADD TO YOUR WORK?

The Links have been set up to complement and add value to the actions of individual NGOs rather than to replace or duplicate them. Link membership provides a facility for combined action, and a forum for discussion recognised by government and other stakeholders. It also provides access to a network of contacts and to information.

3.2 COORDINATED ACTION

A key aspect of Link membership is the facility for coordinated action, which can bring about a more concerted lobby for change and a stronger voice for environmental protection. Collaborative working amongst NGOs, and a recognised representative point of contact and consultation, are increasingly looked for by government, albeit on the understanding that networks will not subsume the sovereignty of their members.

On major overarching issues of significance to a range of organisations, a Link statement or position may be produced, representing the consensus views of members. These statements reflect a collective membership which is larger than that of any of the individual NGOs, and therefore makes a stronger impact.

3.3 BENEFITS FOR ALL MEMBERS

By working together, member organisations can all be more effective, regardless of their size. Larger member organisations may get involved in many areas of Link's work. Their cause is strengthened by the weight of numbers and diversity of angles represented by fellow members, large and small.

Link can also help smaller organisations to "punch above their weight". By working with larger, better-resourced groups, they may be able to influence and produce material they would be unable to produce on their own.

3.4 SHARING IDEAS AND PERSPECTIVES

Owing to its varied membership Link can bring together experts from different groups to campaign together. Many members find that Link provides a useful forum for discussion and idea-sharing. It provides a “safe” environment for airing ideas and getting feedback, before something is presented to the wider public or government. Link also affords its members the opportunity to broaden their coverage, by keeping informed about, or getting involved in broader themes or cross-cutting issues not normally tackled.

3.5 VALUE FOR MONEY

Each Link has its own funding package, comprising income from a variety of sources in addition to membership subscriptions. For further details please refer to the four individual Link websites.

3.6 OTHER BENEFITS

- ❖ Increased credibility
- ❖ Variety of approaches to issues; capacity building
- ❖ Personal development of individuals involved with Link
- ❖ Broadening each others' agendas
- ❖ Recognition from outside
- ❖ Improved relationships with other member organisations
- ❖ Improved relationships with external organisations
- ❖ Intelligence sharing
- ❖ Skills sharing
- ❖ Networking
- ❖ E-Bulletins
- ❖ Quarterly Reviews
- ❖ Parliamentary/Assembly Liaison (Scotland and Wales)
- ❖ Bridges to other sectors
- ❖ Trust building between members
- ❖ Collective initiatives achieving more than individual action

4. LINK MEMBER REPRESENTATIVES

Each Link member organisation nominates a Link representative to take responsibility for the way in which it engages with Link. These individuals are the primary point of contact between the Link and that organisation, and as such need to be reasonably senior in their own organisation and committed to the ethos of Link.

It is the responsibility of Link representatives to inform other colleagues and raise the profile of Link within their organisations. They are expected to attend general meetings and respond to or pass on within their organisation requests for participation in other Link initiatives or activities. It is also important that Link and all within the member organisation are informed when the internal representative changes.

Link often works to tight deadlines so it is essential that members receive information as early as possible. Link representatives are the first port of call for general information about Link and will be sent information such as the annual review. They may or may not be involved in matters to do with working groups (see section 6), or as representatives at external events, depending on the size of the member organisation and the individual Link concerned.

5. SETTING PRIORITIES

5.1 PLANNING WITHIN LINK

The Links have been set up by and are run for the benefit of their members. It is the membership which decides what the network will focus on, and where the priorities lie. They are run on a “one member, one vote” basis, where all members have an equal say, regardless of their size or resources.

Each Link works to a strategic plan drawn up by members, and to an annual work programme derived from this. Annual (and in some cases, more regular) reviews report on the organisation’s progress for the year, and provide an opportunity for members to voice concerns or indeed praise.

Planning seeks to take account of wider contexts (social, economic, international), forthcoming opportunities and resourceability. The Links aim to be realistic about what areas can be covered and to allow a contingency for reactive work.

5.2 PLANNING YOUR INVOLVEMENT IN LINK

The organisations which get the most out of their Link membership are those which plan their engagement in and involvement with the network. The more an organisation puts into Link, the more added value it will gain from the engagement. There are two aspects to this.

Members are encouraged to participate actively in opportunities to influence Link’s plans, through the mechanism outlined above, and/or through participation in working groups or other Link initiatives.

Of equal importance is the need for member representatives, or members of working groups, to report back on Link’s plans, so that these can be integrated with those of their home organisation.

This requirement to dovetail the planning processes applies equally in terms of the member organisation's priorities, and the work plans of individual representatives or working group members.

In short, the maxim is "Think Link"!

6. HOW LINK INFLUENCES POLICY

The Links influence policy in various ways depending on circumstances. Mechanisms include:

- ❖ Working Groups or Task Forces, which are a fundamental mechanism behind most outputs;
- ❖ Liaison with other interests, with Ministers, agencies and departments, and with Parliament/Assembly and elected representatives;
- ❖ Seminars, conferences and publications;
- ❖ Campaigning, media and marketing.

6.1 WORKING GROUPS/TASK FORCES

All of the Links have working groups or task forces which are set up for shorter or longer periods to look at particular policy issues, identified on a year-on-year basis. These involve individuals from member organisations working together on a common issue. The issues tackled are diverse and differ with each Link network. Working groups bring together experts from different organisations, allowing them to share their knowledge and experience and to develop a consensus view as to the best tactic for promoting the group's objective(s).

The way in which working groups are constituted and run differs from Link to Link. For some of the Links, the more pro-active and self-sufficient these groups are, the more of Link's time is available for newly emerging priorities. Although working groups pre-plan their work, a degree of flexibility is required to react to changing events.

6.1.1 Being Part of a Working Group

Members should choose which working group(s) they wish to be involved in, and contact their own Link representative or staff at the Link office. Consistency is vital to the effectiveness of working groups, so continuity of representation on working groups is desirable. Whilst substitution is clearly inevitable on occasion, it is

the responsibility of the member organisation to make sure that the substitute is well informed and has an understanding of how the group works.

Even if you are unable to commit the time required for active membership of a working group, you can receive information about its activities, for instance through a wider email group.

6.1.2 Chairing a Working Group

Each working group has a chair or convenor who leads the discussion and direction of the group's work. These individuals commonly put themselves forward for the position, and may be elected (or re-elected) either at the AGM or on a timescale agreed by the group. If you are interested in chairing a working group, contact either your Link representative or the Link office.

The role of chair carries additional responsibilities, but offers opportunities for individuals to make a significant contribution in a particular field of expertise.

- ❖ Chairs are responsible for the working group's effectiveness. It is usually the chair, together with the Link secretariat, who leads the agenda of the group.
- ❖ Skilled chairing is essential to the group's effectiveness – whether this means cutting short digression, dealing firmly with issues of protocol, chasing participants on action points, or encouraging the quieter players.
- ❖ The chair together with the Link secretariat is usually responsible for providing regular progress reports and ensuring the group works within the spirit of agreed guidance, to other working groups, Link Board/Council, staff, and Link planning processes.

6.2 LINK RESPONSES AND STATEMENTS

Responding to consultations is inevitably a core part of work for all the Links. It is also quite common for a Link to proactively produce a position statement on a particular issue, to stimulate action. The Links each have agreed protocols for the production of such responses or statements. The first draft is often produced by an

individual from a member organisation, or from a working group, or other specially convened group. Drafts are circulated to relevant members (according to the detail of the Link's operating procedures), who then have the opportunity to influence the response.

This process works best when members are up to speed on the issues, aware of the opinions of other members, and ready to respond rapidly when timescales are limited.

6.2.1 Signing Up

When a statement or response is produced members can sign up to the document and add their logos to it. Sign-up is an active process – member organisations are not automatically signed up to Link statements. If an organisation does not agree with the consensus, it does not have to sign up to a joint statement, but does at least benefit from being well informed about the views of others in relation to that issue. Many member organisations produce their own responses to government consultations as well as signing up to a Link statement.

Organisations may sign up to statements which they have not been involved in producing, thus showing commitment to an area of campaigning with limited input. This action is welcomed, but it is important that all signatories read the statement thoroughly, as they may be questioned about the position they have taken.

6.3 LINK REPRESENTATIVES ON EXTERNAL BODIES

Link often provides representatives with expertise on specific issues, to speak on behalf of the environment for various events, such as parliamentary and assembly hearings, or to sit on external groups, committees or initiatives.

Opportunities for representation can be offered to all members, who may volunteer to take on this task. Where there is a relevant working group or task force, the representative will usually be elected from that group. In some circumstances the representative may be a Link staff member.

Representatives are accountable to group chairs (where applicable), or to the Management Committee, Board of Trustees or Council.

- ❖ Representatives must be well-informed, and aware of the range of views within Link;
- ❖ They need to seek the views of other members in advance of meetings; and report back to members and relevant Working Groups;
- ❖ It is important that they also report back to Link staff, so that the whole network can be kept informed of activities;
- ❖ One of the most important aspects of this role is the ability of the individual to separate the views of their own organisation from those formed by consensus in Link and which they are asked to represent.

6.3.1 Delegations

There will be occasions where more than one external representative is required. Delegations should be appropriately sized in order to be both effective and match the offered line up. In any delegation the maximum any one organisation can usually field is one individual.

7. HOW LINK IS MANAGED

7.1 MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES

Each Link has a management committee (or board of trustees), and a president and/or chair able to represent the network as a whole. Management committees tend to be drawn from the member organisations, and are responsible for keeping an overview of the business management in relation to the Link's strategic directions and financial situation. Essentially, the management committee must ensure that the organisation operates within its remit as a charitable body, and that it is financially probate.

Management committees meet regularly throughout the year and report to the members at the AGM. They may also be involved in day-to-day running of the organisation on matters such as employment review.

All full Link members have a right to serve on the management committee. The commitment of those who do deserves recognition, and needs the support and cooperation of the other members.

7.2 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF MANAGEMENT

Membership of a management committee carries certain formal and legal responsibilities. Details of these will be provided to anyone considering taking on the role. Responsibilities of particular relevance within Link include:

- ❖ The ability to view a role on the management committee as being quite independent from the "home organisation";
- ❖ The ability to understand financial information and how it is presented;
- ❖ A commitment to upholding Link's agreed operating protocols;
- ❖ The ability to maintain objectivity in personnel matters and staff management;
- ❖ A willingness to lever wider skills and expertise as necessary from within the home organisation.

7.3 LINK STAFF

Each Link organisation runs with a small team of dedicated staff who operate mainly as facilitators - organising meetings, helping to set agendas and informing the members. Owing to the diversity of areas covered by the Link groups, staff must be both knowledgeable and up to date with their information.

The staff are a valuable resource, and are the first port of call for enquiries. If they cannot answer an enquiry, they will provide contact with someone who can.

Link staff are usually working on several issues at once. They have to balance important and urgent issues every day, and may often have competing priorities.

7.4 FEEDBACK

The Link staff rely on feedback – both positive and critical - from the members, in order to improve the way in which the networks operate. Comments or suggestions will be welcomed.

CHARITY/COMPANY DETAILS

NORTHERN IRELAND ENVIRONMENT LINK

Northern Ireland Environment Link is a company limited by guarantee (NI34988) and is recognised as a charity by the Inland Revenue (XR19598).

SCOTTISH ENVIRONMENT LINK

Scottish Environment LINK is a Scottish Charity under Scottish Charity No SC000296. Scottish Environment LINK is a Scottish Company Limited by guarantee and without a share capital under Company No SC250899.

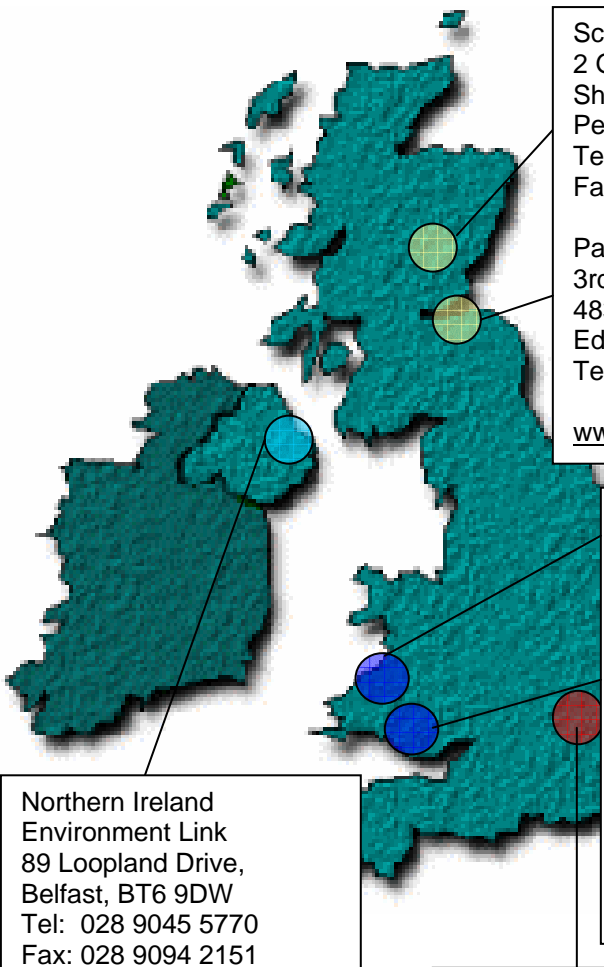
WALES ENVIRONMENT LINK / CYSWLLT AMGYLCHEDD CYMRU

Wales Environment Link / Cyswllt Amgylchedd Cymru is a registered charity under Charity No.1022675

WILDLIFE AND COUNTRYSIDE LINK

Wildlife and Countryside Link is a registered charity number 1107460, and a company limited by guarantee number 3889519 registered in England and Wales.

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