Working with Wildlife and Countryside Link:
Working Group and Task Force Protocols and Procedures

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) provides a forum for its members to exchange information, develop and promote policies and work collectively to effect positive change. Link exists to add value to the work of its members by bringing them together to achieve consensus on policies and providing support in the production of joint positions on a wide range of issues, thereby improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the environmental voluntary sector through collaboration.

This document is intended to provide Link members with an explanation of different protocols used to ensure that you can get the most out of your Link membership. It is also intended to provide guidance on the rules of engagement for non-member organisations that work in partnership with Link.

If you have any questions, please contact the Link Secretariat who would be happy to explain these protocols and procedures in further detail.

1. The Link Secretariat

Link is supported by a professional, dedicated Secretariat made up of four full time members of staff – the Director, a Marine Policy & Campaigns Co-ordinator, a Policy & Campaigns Co-ordinator and an Information & Office Co-ordinator. Link has a Management Committee of eight Link members who are elected from and by the membership to serve as Trustees, and which include Link's Chair, Deputy Chair and Treasurer. In addition, Link currently has three parliamentary Vice Presidents selected from across the three main political parties. A full organisation chart of Link is shown below (see Appendix).

On a day-to-day basis, with only four members of staff, Link relies on its members to provide the detailed policy knowledge in each of their particular areas of expertise.

2. How does Link work?

There are two main vehicles through which Link aims to achieve its objectives – Working Groups and Task Forces:

- Working Groups (WGs) work towards long term, wide-ranging or strategic objectives, focusing on strategic policy development as well as more immediate concerns.
- Task Forces (TFs) work on short term or more narrowly focused agendas, with clear campaign goals, which need to be achieved in the next one to three years.

In addition, for specific issues of interest or concern within a WG or TF remit, or for issues which require only a single meeting of members, Link may establish a sub-group or one-off initiative.

- Sub-groups of WGs and TFs have a more specific remit within their parent WG or TF that is best approached through a smaller dedicated group.
- One-off initiatives focus on events or workshops which are arranged by Link to focus on a particular issue not being considered by any of the WGs or TFs.

Each WG and TF elects a Chair and Vice-Chair(s) and group meetings are convened regularly, bringing members together to prepare statements, consultation responses and to organise campaigns. Each group is allocated a member of the Link Secretariat to act as Secretary, who serves as the liaison point with the Chair and group members and ensures that the group is operating for the benefit of all its members. In all our work areas Link employs the principle of positive sign-on, i.e. it is never assumed that any member of a group has signed up to a piece of work without their express support.

Chairs and Vice Chairs of all of the groups meet occasionally to discuss areas of common interest where groups could be working together. In addition, Link has a number of mechanisms by which senior staff of Link member organisations can come together to discuss overarching issues that cut across the objectives of the individual WGs and TFs. One such mechanism is through Policy Director meetings, which are held twice yearly to help Link look ahead and identify potential future work areas for consideration. Another example is the Landscape Scale Conservation Steering Group comprised of members from a cross section of Link's working groups, which was convened in July 2008 to discuss how Link can best address this issue.

3. Link planning cycle

Link has a three-year planning cycle, with the current planning cycle running from 2007 – 2009. In advance of the end of each planning cycle, members are brought together to review existing work areas to ensure that Link is working on those issues of most importance to members and where Link can add the most value. At this time members are given the opportunity to propose the withdrawal from or the addition of further work areas. In our most recent review conducted in 2006 a number of recommendations were put forward by the membership for small ways in which Link could improve the working of the WGs and TFs, and therefore the effectiveness of Link to its member organisations.

Within the three-year planning cycle, an annual review of work areas is also carried out by the Secretariat each October, with the forthcoming year's workplan subsequently approved at Link's Annual General Meeting (AGM) held in early December. In addition, Link's Management Committee reviews each of the group's more detailed annual workplans at its first meeting of the year in March.

4. Link representative

On joining Link, each member assigns a representative ('rep') from their organisation to act as the main point of contact for Link. The Link rep will be provided with a variety of information, for example, details about Link's AGM and any other relevant information which is of interest to members but falls outside the remit of the current WGs and TFs. Partner organisations will be requested to assign an individual from their staff to act as the main point of contact but will not be provided with Link-related information.

The Link rep is responsible for the way in which their organisation engages with Link, ensuring that it is represented at key Link meetings, and for raising the profile of Link within their organisation. The Link rep is also the first point of contact whenever the Link Secretariat needs assistance or information about the member organisation e.g. audits and planning cycle input. It is therefore recommended that the Link rep be a member of staff who is able to pass on issues of importance quickly within their organisation to ensure that these are dealt with in a manner appropriate to the organisation.

5. Participating in Link groups

On joining Link, either as a member or through a partnership agreement, the Link rep is invited to assign their staff to Link's work areas. These staff will be added to Link's email contact lists for the chosen group(s) and will receive all relevant information, including information on and invitations to group meetings. Full members have no limit to the number of groups they may join or the number of contacts they may add to each group contact list, although it is advised that this is kept to a carefully selected minimum. Associate members may join one WG or TF and its sub-group(s). Partner organisations will only be invited to join the contact list directly relevant to the project they are involved with.

The existence and focus of each of Link's groups is decided by and voted on by the Link membership at the AGM. Once the WGs and TFs have been agreed, members of the groups are invited to appoint a Chair and a Vice-Chair from the membership through a nomination and election process. Only full members of Link are eligible for appointment to the role of Chair or Vice Chair. Chairs and Vice-Chairs work closely with their appointed member of the Link Secretariat to ensure that each year a workplan for their group is developed and delivered on, and that meetings run efficiently and effectively.

'*Guidance for Chairs and Vice Chairs*' is available on request from the Secretariat if you would like further information.

6. Link meetings – internal

Meetings of WGs and TFs are held on a regular basis as appropriate to the workload and issues of the day. These may vary from monthly to quarterly or even less frequently. In advance of each meeting the Secretariat liaises with the group Chair to draw up an agenda which is distributed in advance of the meeting.

Attendance at these meetings is optional and not limited to a certain number per organisation (within reason), although Link encourages that members ensure the most appropriate representative attends wherever possible.

Each group is supported by a member of the Link Secretariat who supports and facilitates all aspects of these meetings.

7. Link meetings – external

Link is often approached by Government agencies and others to nominate representatives from the membership to participate in external advisory groups, steering groups and other stakeholder events. When these invitations are received by Link, they will be put to the WG/TF for a decision on who can best represent Link policies and/or views at the meeting.

In the event that more than one Link representative is required for an external meeting, a delegation should be carefully drawn up to ensure the most effective input into the meeting. This should usually only include one representative per member organisation.

8. The role of an external Link representative

This section gives some general guidelines on your role and responsibilities as a Link representative at external meetings, events or stakeholder groups.

8.1 Who should be a Link representative?

Generally, representatives should be regular attendees of the Link group they are representing externally. Link representatives (hereafter 'Link reps') on external fora should be able to attend the meetings of the external forum on a regular basis to ensure consistency. If this is not likely to be possible, the group should consider appointing another member of the group to deputise.

8.2 What does a Link rep need to do?
Link reps should advise the Secretariat and/or the WG/TF as early as possible of any upcoming meetings. Papers for these meetings should be circulated as far in advance as possible and members' views sought.

At the meeting, the Link rep should make clear to the Chair in what capacity they are attending and, if relevant, when they are speaking on behalf of Link and when they are speaking on behalf of their own organisation. Link reps should ensure that they only represent agreed Link policy at external meetings. Where there is no agreed Link position every effort should be made in advance of the meeting to solicit views from other Link members for representation at the meeting.

Link reps have a responsibility to report back to the Link Secretariat after each meeting, alerting the Secretariat and thereby Link members to any urgent matters that may have arisen at a meeting that may need the immediate attention of members or Link's Management Committee. To aid discussion, it is useful for the Link rep to provide a short written account of the meeting for circulation to the group.

9. Email protocol
Link sends and receives a large number of emails every day, many of which will require a response. Link recognises that in certain circumstances it is useful for members of the email group to see the responses of others to understand the rationale for suggested changes to documents or actions taken. In the majority of cases, however, using the 'reply to all' function simply increases the volume of emails group members receive and can cause confusion for individuals following an issue.

It is the Secretariat's aim to keep the number of emails from Link to a minimum and to label all emails clearly, including a prefix indicating which group / work area the message is relevant to. The Secretariat's role is to monitor group emails and co-ordinate comments, producing a summary email for the group collating the information received and explaining any changes to documentation, where relevant.

This moderator role allows the Secretariat to be able to clearly track members' thoughts on the issue and enables control over the number of emails exchanged to ensure consistency and clarity for all. To help achieve these aims, Link members (and partners) should not use the 'reply to all' button to respond to Link emails, but respond directly to the Link Secretariat, copying in only those people who need to see that you have responded (e.g. colleagues working on the issue).

10. The Link policy development process
Link brings organisations together to develop and achieve consensus on policies, providing support in the production of joint positions on a wide range of work areas.

10.1. Policy germination
Link is a broad coalition whose members work on a wide array of policy areas at any one time. As with Link's collectively agreed workplans, member organisations prioritise their policy and campaigns work to best reflect the concerns of their members and supporters. Often, members recognise that their advocacy work is best carried forward together with like-minded NGOs and it is with this agenda that members may approach Link to develop a collective policy position.

10.2. Cultivating a policy position
The secret to effective consensus building is information sharing. Link receives information from many different sources, which is sifted and collated for dissemination to the membership, primarily through electronic communications.

Members are encouraged to contact Link to ascertain whether their policy area of interest is being considered by other members, or more specifically, by one of Link's WGs or TFs.

If their policy area of interest is identified to fall within the remit of a particular WG or TF, the Secretary of that group may first consider capacity and compatibility with the agreed workplan before canvassing the group for "a show of interest". This is best done with a draft policy position paper or briefing from the proponent organisation to stimulate discussion and encourage early exchange of documentation.

In many cases, members may wish to exchange views prior to having formulated their own organisational policy position. If the membership is agreed, Link can facilitate discussions by arranging WG / TF meetings, teleconferences or workshops. This is particularly useful when there is an opportunity to offer up a collective policy position to decision makers where one may not yet exist, for example, when trying to influence green / white papers or departmental strategies, prior to their publication.

10.3. Harvesting a collective policy position

Consensus building in the realms of policy is an incremental and sometimes iterative process, best conducted by putting pen to paper. Although not all of Link's policy development activities culminate in a written statement, should an initial positive show of collective interest progress to the next stage, the procedures below set out how Link documentation is drafted and finalised.

11. Link documents

Link produces many forms of documentation, the majority of which are released into the public domain either via our website or by printed publication dissemination. This section provides guidance on why and how Link documents are produced, as well as whether or not they are to be considered public documents.

11.1. Link statements

Link statements are put together in response to current or upcoming issues when it is felt important that Link members develop and present a joint position. Link statements are public documents and are therefore posted on Link's website once finalised by the WG/TF. Link members may refer to statements in any press work on the condition that the distinction between Link and the member organisation is made clear in any related press release.

11.2. Link letters

In contrast, Link letters are sent directly for the attention of one or more specific individuals. They are sent to highlight issues which Link believes the recipient of the letter can affect directly. As a general rule, letters from Link are not published on Link's website and are not, therefore, considered public documents. They should not be referred to in any public communication by Link members or partners unless the WG/TF agrees to publish the letter either in print or on the Link website as a means of drawing attention to the issue. In certain circumstances, Link may refer to letters as having been sent but a copy of these letters should not be made available to parties outside of Link without prior permission from the Link Secretariat.

11.3. Link consultation responses

In many cases consultation responses are published by the receiving Government department or organisation at the end of the consultation period. As a result, consultation responses should be considered public documents and are therefore posted on Link's website. If the particular WG/TF responding to a consultation does not wish the consultation response to be made public, this should be clearly marked on the document.

11.4. Drafting Link documents

For all Link documents, best practice is to ensure that all Link members are clear from the outset about the role of the document being produced and whether it will be made public, to avoid any later confusion. It is therefore advisable for the group leading on the production of a Link document to prepare an advocacy plan for any materials that are to be produced for campaigning or lobbying purposes.

Ideally, a WG or TF should identify one person, or a small group of members, to prepare the initial draft of any document. This document should then be sent to the Link Secretariat and Chair of the WG/TF for comment and insertion of any relevant Link text before the first draft is circulated to the group. In many cases the content of the document will have been discussed at the group meeting and the drafter should ensure that these points have been included.

Once circulated, the Link Secretariat will set a period of time for comments to be made depending on the urgency of the issue. Once the majority of the group is happy with the draft, the final version of the document will be circulated for sign on.

When commenting on a Link document, comments and/or suggestions should be sent in tracked changes direct to the Link Secretariat and not by replying to the whole group. If the Link Secretariat thinks that the changes made require explanation this will be provided when the subsequent version is emailed to the group.

In certain situations there may be disagreement on a document causing the drafting process to stall. In this event, the Link Secretariat may choose to circulate an email on the principle and/or purpose of the document to refocus the group or will seek to facilitate a consensus building process with the two or more parties in disagreement. In the rare event that no consensus can be achieved, the Link Secretariat may choose not to send the document from Link and leave any subsequent action to the discretion of individual organisations.

11.5. The sign on procedure

Once the document has been (or is near to being) finalised, the Link Secretariat will call for sign on to the document. All Link documents are prepared on the principle of positive sign on. It is therefore important that you let Link know if your organisation can support the document. If you will be unavailable for the period of time over which sign on to a Link document may be required, it is advised that you tell Link and, if possible, appoint a replacement from your organisation to engage with the sign on process.

The Link Secretariat aims to allow sufficient time to conduct the drafting process and sign on procedure separately. However, in some instances it may be expedient for these two stages to overlap. In these situations, Link will re-circulate any successive versions to the whole group to allow members to adjust their position of endorsement before the document is finalised.

Wildlife and Countryside Link
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Wildlife and Countryside LINK

Appendix: Wildlife and Countryside Organisation Chart

Management Committee
- o Chair, Vice-Chair & Treasurer plus 5 Trustees

Secretariat
- o 4 members of Staff: Director; Marine Policy & Campaigns Co-ordinator; Policy & Campaigns Co-ordinator; and Information & Office Co-ordinator; plus 2-3 occasional volunteers

Chairs and Vice-Chairs
- o Conference calls & meetings, as appropriate

Policy Directors
- o Meetings held twice yearly

Working Groups and Task Forces

Biodiversity (WG)	Farming & Rural Development (WG)	Water (WG) - inc. Blueprint for Water	Land Use Planning (WG)	Wildlife & Trade (WG)	Whales (WG)	Marine (TF)

Virtual Sub-groups

Woodland

Badgers & Bovine TB

Bycatch

+ Landscape-scale conservation - one off initiative for further discussion in 2009