

E-bulletin March 2014

Welcome to Link's March 2014 e-bulletin. See below for this month's top stories and updates from each of our working groups. If you would like to subscribe to our e-bulletin or submit news items, please contact [Morwenna](#).



Meeting with the Minister

Link met with Lord de Mauley, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for natural environment and science, on 20 March, to discuss the EU Regulation and the INNS GB strategy review. The group agreed to share with the Minister its research on the resources Link's member organisations spend on tackling the negative impacts of INNS on their reserves.

Natural Capital Committee second report

The Government's Natural Capital Committee published its second report on 11 March: *The State of Natural Capital: Restoring our Natural Assets*. Link published a [press release](#) welcoming the report and its recommendations. Link's Director, Dr Elaine King, said, "This report highlights the vital importance of bringing our environment to the forefront of decision-making. We welcome the proposed 25-year plan, which will bring a long-term, cross-party approach to restoring and enhancing the natural assets on which we ultimately depend."

Cross Compliance

Link [responded](#) to Defra's informal consultation on the Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions (GAECs), one part of cross compliance. Whilst Link recognises the constraints imposed by the new EU GAEC framework, we welcomed Defra's efforts retain as many elements as possible from the current GAECs. Link's main concern is to ensure that protection for biodiversity, landscape features, recreation and habitats is maintained or strengthened.

Blueprint for PR14 conference

The Blueprint coalition will be hosting a conference on the Blueprint for PR14 (the 2014 review of water pricing) on 14 May, at WWF's Living Planet Centre in Woking. The conference will hear from a range of expert speakers - from NGOs, water companies and Ofwat - who will analyse the current context and present case studies of positive partnership working. The aim of the conference is to maximise the environmental and biodiversity benefit of water company projects by understanding the potential for collaboration, and by learning lessons from NGOs in their role as 'delivery partners'.

The conference is open to NGOs and other groups such as water companies, Ofwat, and the Environment Agency and Natural England. Please contact [Kate Hand](#) by **24 April** for more information or to book a place.

Abstraction reform consultation

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abstraction, which are causing significant ecological problems in over 1,000 water bodies. Blueprint has welcomed the options that the consultation sets out, but stresses that the reform will only be successful if it has firm eco-hydrological foundations and an acceptable method for transitioning existing abstraction rights into the new system.

The Blueprint for Water's own response to the abstraction reform consultation welcomes both the 'Water Shares' and 'Current System Plus' options, and notes that either would link abstraction to water availability, introduce smart abstraction limits and charges related to use and availability, provide greater protection for the environment at low flows and increase transparency. We believe the proposals will encourage flexibility and efficiency, and enable collaboration to maximise the value of water and increase resilience among water abstractors. The Blueprint note, however, that the 'Water Shares' option would be preferable, offering as it does a future where there is stewardship of a shared resource and where water is more highly valued.

Conservation and Wildlife All Party Parliamentary Group

Link is now providing secretariat support for the Conservation and Wildlife All Party Parliamentary Group. Many Link members already engage with the group, which aims to provide a forum for the discussion and promotion of policies affecting wildlife and the natural environment.

Morwenna McKenzie, Link's Information and Office Coordinator will provide support to the group. The next meeting, on 6 May, will discuss the Law Commission's Review on Wildlife Law. Speakers from the Law Commission will include the Law Commissioner, Nicholas Paines QC. For more detail, contact [Morwenna McKenzie](#).

Conservation and Wildlife All Party Parliamentary Group

We are very sad to be saying goodbye to Kate Hand, Policy and Campaigns Coordinator at Link, who is leaving on 25 April to take up the post of senior policy officer in the RSPB's migratory species programme. Kate has made a huge contribution to Link's work over the past three years and will be greatly missed. Kate will be staying in the Link family, working for one of our member organisations, and we wish Kate all the best for the future.

Link is now [recruiting](#) for a new Policy and Campaigns Coordinator. The closing date for applications is 4 April.

Joint Links reports

Quarterly updates from our three sister Link's can be found [here](#).



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National Pollinators Strategy

Defra is seeking views on a proposed national pollinator strategy for bees and other pollinators in England. The strategy sets out proposals to safeguard these important insects given their role in pollinating many food crops and wild plants, in addition to their contribution to food production and the diversity of our environment. Link will be submitting a response to the [consultation](#) which closes on 2 May.



Local Nature Partnerships workshop

Link attended an event for Local Nature Partnerships on 12 March, at which Lord de Mauley, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for natural environment and science, delivered the key note speech. The aim of the day was for LNPs to share their achievements, ideas, opportunities and challenges, and to foster links between partnerships. The event also aimed to understand national priorities more clearly and to explore how LNPs can work more effectively together. A recurring theme was how to address challenges relating to communications and insufficient resources.

Terrestrial Biodiversity Group

Link attended the TBG meeting on 5 March. Items discussed included SSSIs and priority habitats (outcome 1A & 1B), species (outcome 3) and TBG member contributions. Link will continue to engage with TBG and will work with Natural England on appropriate actions.

Natura 2000

On 17 March Link attended a stakeholder workshop on the effectiveness of Natura 2000 sites. The aim of the study is to review the effectiveness of compensatory measures secured under Article 6(4) of the EU Habitats Directive in England and determine whether they have effectively compensated for the damaging impacts. This is a collaborative project between Defra and Natural England. To date, an analysis of English case studies has been conducted, with the second part of the study being to compare processes used in specific cases across Europe.



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GB INNS Strategy Review and EU IAS Regulation

Link continues to work closely with Defra as the GB INNS Strategy Review and Invasive Alien Species (IAS) Regulations develop, continuing to feed in advice and recommendations at a high level. The group will be issuing a response when the GB Review is published, and when the EU invasives Regulation is adopted.



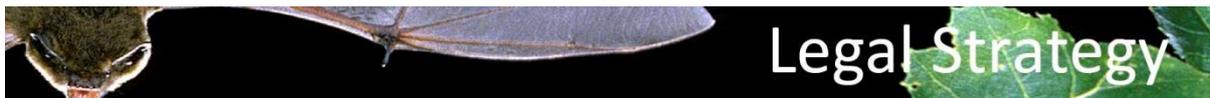
Land Use Planning Working Group meeting

The Land Use Planning Working Group will be meeting on 9 April to discuss the new National Planning Practice Guidance, the proposed DCLG select committee inquiry into the National Planning Policy Framework, brownfield and fracking. The group will also hear from the Association of Local Government Ecologists on ecological capacity and competence in Local Authorities.

Government response to the Environmental Audit Committee report on biodiversity offsetting

The Environmental Audit Committee has published the [Government's response](#) to their report on biodiversity offsetting. The Government response confirms that no policy decisions will be made on offsetting until the Government has been able to assess the independent evaluation of the offsetting pilots (which finish in March 2014). Link welcomes this development, which is in line with our recommendation to take a step-wise approach to considering biodiversity offsetting.

The response says that 'offsetting would need to take place within the existing planning framework, including strict protection for important natural assets', and the Government 'strongly agrees' with the Committee's recommendation that any offsetting system should emphasise the continued primacy of the mitigation hierarchy. The response also notes that 'offsetting could be a useful tool for ensuring appropriate compensation is secured where development is already permissible.' Finally, the response notes that 'it would continue to be acceptable to refuse planning permission for a development on [the ground of impacts on high-quality green space] even if an offset was provided to compensate for unavoidable losses of biodiversity.'



Access to Environmental Justice (Aarhus Convention and EU law)

On 13 February, the European Court of Justice [ruled](#) that the UK Government has failed in its obligation under the EC Public Participation Directive that access to justice should not be "prohibitively expensive" for claimants. While we understand the UK Government is still reflecting on the implications of the judgment, it is hoped it will ensure the Aarhus costs regime for environmental cases introduced on 1 April 2013 is protected and that differences between the costs regimes operating at devolved levels will be addressed.

In October 2013, Link [responded](#) to Defra's consultation on the Government's draft Aarhus National Implementation Report. The Meeting of the Parties to the Convention will be held in Maastricht, Brussels in late June/early July 2014.

Further reforms to Judicial Review

The Government's response to the most recent consultation on further reforms to Judicial Review was published on 4 February 2014, alongside the [Criminal Justice and Courts Bill](#) to give effect to its proposals.

The Government decided not to pursue amendments to standing, but is proposing a basket of financial disincentives to restrict civil society's ability to pursue Judicial Review (JR). These include requiring claimants to disclose information about how a case is funded at the outset (so that non-parties can potentially be exposed to costs orders) and abolishing existing principles limiting the financial liability of claimants during the early stages of JR. Defra has recently confirmed that these proposals will apply to environmental cases. Link submitted [evidence](#) to the [Ministry of Justice's consultation](#) in October 2013. A number of environmental NGOs have submitted written evidence to the Public Bill Committee, including CPRE, Friends of the Earth and the RSPB.

Legal Strategy Group meeting

The next meeting of the group is set for 31 March and will include discussion of issues including conservation covenants, the Law Commission's Wildlife Law Review, the Lobbying Bill and the Aarhus Convention.

Meeting with the Law Commission

Following the Legal Strategy Group meeting on 31 March, Link will be hosting a meeting for members with the Law Commission. The Commission expects to publish its Report on its Wildlife Law Review in autumn 2014. In the meantime, the Report is still being drafted and Dr Keith Vincent and Nicola Tilche will be joining us to discuss specific aspects of the review.



Parliamentary Support for Link's Marine Charter

More than 50 MPs from all three main political parties have now signed [Link's Marine Charter](#). The full list of supporting MPs can be viewed on the [Marine Charter webpage](#) on Link's website.

Letter to the Minister

On 7 March, Link wrote to George Eustice MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for farming, food and marine environment to follow up a number of points raised in a meeting with him in February. In the letter, Link emphasised the importance of implementing effective management measures for Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) and the need for further designations to achieve an ecologically coherent network of sites in UK seas.

Environmental Audit Committee additional evidence

Following Defra's announcement that it is considering designating 37 more MCZs, Link submitted further written evidence to the Environmental Audit Select Committee [inquiry into Marine Protected Areas](#).



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Water Bill: briefing for Report Stage in the House of Lords

The Blueprint has published a [briefing](#) for Report Stage of the Water Bill in the House of Lords, focusing on continued concerns around upstream competition and abstraction reform, affordability and metering, and fracking. However, the briefing also welcomes government amendments that require parties entering into bulk supply agreements to consult with the Environment Agency (EA), and which require applicants for new Water Supply Licences to consult with the EA.

Meeting with the Environment Agency

Following a letter to the Environment Agency, setting out the Blueprint's concerns around the River Maintenance Pilots, EA has offered the Blueprint a meeting to discuss progress with the pilots and other environmental work that it is taking forward.

Parliamentary briefing on flood risk

The Blueprint coalition and the Chartered Institution for Water and Environmental Management spoke at a parliamentary briefing on flood risk, chaired by Richard Benyon MP, on 3 March. The briefing was well-attended by MPs and peers, and saw a useful, measured discussion on the cases of the recent flooding, possible solutions and the leadership role of different sectors.

Blueprint for Water meeting

The Blueprint will be meeting on 7 April, to discuss the architecture of the new *Blueprint 2015*.

Catchment Based Approach national support group

Blueprint members attended the Catchment Based Approach meeting on 25 March, which discussed progress on the Catchment Partnership Fund, the development of a communications strategy, learning workshops and groups that sit under the national support group, including ones on transitional and coastal waters, agriculture and forestry, urban freshwater, governance and data. The group also discussed how catchment based approach work can be captured in draft River Basin Management Plans.



Meetings with Defra

Link's Whales Group held two meetings with Nigel Gooding and Defra's Marine Species Protection Team on 28 March. Nigel is Head of Marine Biodiversity at Defra and UK Commissioner to the International Whaling Commission (IWC). The morning meeting addressed international issues, including preparation for this year's IWC meeting. The afternoon meeting focussed on the points raised in Link's recent letter to Defra regarding threats to cetaceans in UK waters, such as bycatch, noise and inadequate cetacean monitoring.

Meeting with the Minister

On 29 April, Link's Whales Group will be meeting with George Eustice MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for farming, food and marine environment, to discuss priorities for this year's IWC meeting.



Letter to the Director of Public Prosecutions

On 11 March, Link wrote to Alison Saunders, Director of Public Prosecutions, highlighting that prosecutions by informed lawyers generally lead to proportionate and dissuasive sentencing for wildlife crimes. Although some offences are effectively prosecuted, we cited several recent convictions which had not received appropriate sentences. Link has asked for a meeting with Ms Saunders to explore how Link might assist with improving sentencing for wildlife crime.

Wildlife Trade Working Group meeting

Link's Wildlife Trade Working Group met on 20 March to discuss a range of issues including: UK wildlife crime sentencing; recording wildlife crime offences; engaging the UK public and preparations for the forthcoming Conservation NGO Liaison Group meeting with Defra.

Conservation NGO Liaison Group meeting

Link was represented at the Conservation NGO Liaison Group (formerly Joint Liaison Group) meeting at Defra on 27 March, hosted by Michael Sigsworth, Head of Defra's CITES Policy Unit. The meeting included a full debrief from the London Conference on Illegal Wildlife Trade and an update on UK preparations for forthcoming CITES meetings, including the Standing Committee 65 in July.



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