

LINK Member survey June-July 2015

Background

The Member survey was issued in order to gauge members' views on LINK's strategy and operations. It looked back on the period of the current strategic plan (2012-15) and ahead to the next one (2015-2019/20).

Introduction

The survey contained 20 questions, based on themes and ideas from a number of sources including the current Strategy, Board engagement with members and previous strategy reviews. It was issued to a mailing list of 79 members, honorary fellows, trustees and staff. It ran from 26th June to 26th July 2015. 35 responses were received. 7 respondents consulted with colleagues before completing the survey, though 14 reported that their CEO and Boards were aware of the survey. 16 people identified themselves as 'Main Reps'. Tables 1&2 show a breakdown of respondents' relationship to LINK (their role and organisation):

Table 1: Respondents' relationship to LINK

Role	Respondents*
Task Force member	12
Task Force convenor	9
Honorary Fellow	7
LINK trustee	6
Member of LINK staff	5
Task Force Depute	2
Other ('ordinary' LINK member)	2

**Number is higher than 35 because some people have more than one role*

Table 2: Size of respondents' organisation (based on LINK membership categories)

Organisation size	Respondents
1 £3 million and above	4
2 £1 million – £2,999,999	1
3 £500,000 – £999,999	1
4 £250,000 – £499,999	4
5 £100,000 – £249,999	2
6 up to £99,999	11

These numbers are broadly proportionate to the number of members in each category.

About this paper

The first five survey questions provided the information above. Answers to the other questions are explored below. Unless otherwise stated, survey quotes are used as illustrations of wider themes – they are therefore unattributed. Anything appearing in 'inverted commas' in the text is a direct quote from the survey.

Because it is relatively early in the strategy review and planning process, this paper presents observations rather than making firm recommendations. It encourages further questions and discussion to help develop the next stage of review (including stakeholder survey and interviews in September).

Major themes and topics for discussion are summarised on pages 1 and 2 below.

Summary: Survey findings and discussion points

1. Collaborator or critic?

One of LINK's major successes has been its engagement with policy and decision-makers. There are mixed views, however, on whether it has attained the right balance between the roles of 'collaborator' and 'critic'.

Q. Is it possible to attain a balance between these roles? Is it possible to reconcile different members' views on this, given that opinions can vary even within one member organisation? How desirable is consensus in this matter? How confident are LINK's members and Board of the extent to which external stakeholders feel the balance is right?

2. Determining priorities, making decisions

Members value their sovereignty and finding strength in LINK's collectiveness. Trustees have corporate governance duties within a democratic coalition. LINK's activities are broad. Resources (teams, Task Forces, member bodies) are stretched.

Q. Would it be productive to agree/revisit *the means by which* priorities and decisions are determined? Who makes these decisions? Who is involved – and who should be? How long should it take to decide priorities? How far in advance can they be set? What form of democracy most suits LINK's structure, objectives and values?

3. Network – and organisation?

Members, trustees and staff appear to be looking to each other for decisions. Trustees have corporate governance responsibilities within a democratic coalition.

Q. Are there any contradictions or compromises between governing LINK the organisation and supporting LINK the network? If so, how are they felt and by whom? What are the people's perceptions of how these roles differ and what they mean for decision making within 'LINK'?

4. Task Forces

Task Forces are one of the most valued and valuable ways for LINK members to come together and make a difference. There are mixed views on the desirability of limiting their number, though capacity limits are probably being stretched.

Q. Should the number of Task Forces be limited? Should TFs be assumed to be 'standing' or 'task and finish' groups? Should their status be reviewed annually? How comfortable are members and trustees with the possibility of members coalescing and acting outwith the umbrella of formal TFs? What would be the benefits or risks of assigning staff members to support each TF?

5. Congress

People value Congress but feel it could be better organised and more 'conclusive', with more focus on agreeing actions.

Q. How can Congress maintain its diversity and interest while becoming more action-focused? Should Annual Congress move the traditional planning day to Day 1 when minds are fresher?

6. Membership

Membership should be value for money. Members get the most benefit from LINK when other members take part, particularly in events. There is concern when this is not the case - and when members leave LINK. Small organisations can find it hard to contribute, and sometimes to be heard.

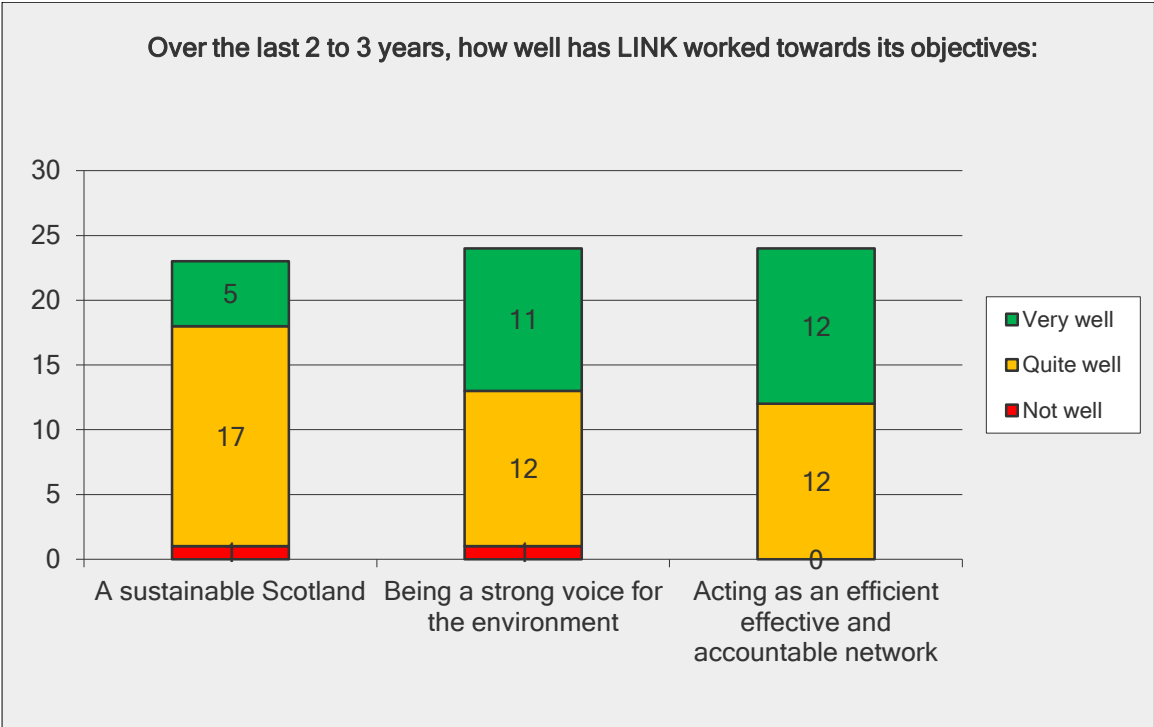
Q. To what extent are membership levels sustainable? Do larger organisations have a louder voice? Is remote participation a useful way to involve smaller organisations? How does LINK keep members informed without overwhelming them?

7. Figureheads

It appears to be generally agreed that better, more focused use could be made of LINK champions and figureheads.

Q. What outcomes would arise from making better use of LINK supporters and advocates (e.g. President, Fellows, Species Champions)? Are member organisations' senior staff (e.g. CEOs, trustees, presidents) appropriately involved in high-profile events?

Q6. Over the last two to three years, how well has LINK worked towards its objectives?



The first objective, **a sustainable Scotland** received a fairly qualified response due to the scale of the task rather than a lack of effort on LINK’s behalf.

Throughout the survey, LINK was described as an **effective network**, open and accountable to its members (Objective 3). Respondents value LINK’s ability to coordinate common goals and collective actions.

However the role of being a **strong voice** (Objective 2) is more contentious. As one Task Force member put it, what should the voice say? LINK represents 32 members, each made up of many other voices. Another respondent put it this way:

‘The idea of being a strong voice for the environment troubles me a little as LINK quite correctly identifies its role as providing a means by which member bodies discuss and collaborate. It’s surely not the role of LINK to be the voice.’ (Honorary Fellow)

Voices also have to find their audience. Three respondents acknowledged the difficulties in balancing the roles of ‘collaborator’ and ‘critic’ in working with Scottish Government. On the one hand there is *‘no doubt that LINK facilitates the wielding of influence by its member bodies’*, but on the other, it *‘may have erred slightly too far towards collaboration’*. Specifically, LINK needs to find the balance between working alongside government on implementing current legislation while facilitating debate about emerging environmental/policy issues.

Q7: What are LINK's three most important achievements in the time covered by its current strategy (2012-2015?)

There was a good deal of agreement on LINK's recent achievements, with clear themes emerging. Work in the Marine environment was a commonly cited example of success, and emerged as the main achievement under this question.

Achievement	Comments
Marine Act and Marine Protected Areas	10
<i>'Influencing policy and practice in the field of marine conservation and planning.'</i>	Of which: 1 st choice: 6 2 nd choice: 4 3 rd choice: 0
<i>'Profile of Marine issues assisted by the added capacity of marine staff.'</i>	
Government and political influence (including managing the referendum challenge – 3 comments)	8
<i>'Achieving some profile and possibly influence on 'Governance', economics, constitutional agendas and on advocacy about integration of strategies (e.g. marine protection/fisheries, land reform/use).'</i>	Of which: 1 st choice: 4 2 nd choice: 3 3 rd choice: 1
<i>'Referendum Challenge - gave an overall vision of a sustainable Scotland in a neutral way.'</i>	
Species champions	5
<i>'Establishment of its MSP Species Champion scheme'</i>	Of which: 1 st choice: 2 2 nd choice: 3 3 rd choice: 0
<i>'The species champion work has raised profile with MSPs but not sure what impact it has had on the ground.'</i>	
Sustaining work/impact during changing times	4
<i>'Maintaining its position and continuing to achieve objectives during a time of change and uncertainty.'</i>	Of which: 1 st choice: 1 2 nd choice: 1 3 rd choice: 2
<i>'Keeping afloat in tough financial times without sacrificing its integrity as an organisation.'</i>	
Membership	2
<i>'Keeping most members on board and recruiting new/returning members - their investment in a cooperative approach is key.'</i>	
Staffing	2
<i>'Deploying the small staff team very effectively and efficiently - they punch above their weight!'</i>	
National Performance Framework	2
<i>'Work on NPF and setting up the flourishing Scotland project'</i>	
Economic capacity	2
<i>'Added capacity on Economics from the Flourish Scotland project building alliances'</i>	
Land reform	2
Work with other LINKs	2
Other	4
<i>'Defining Community Empowerment'</i>	
<i>'Hill tracks'</i>	
<i>'Higher public face and image'</i>	
<i>'Continued respect and demand for LINK participation'</i>	

Q8. What three environmental challenges does your organisation want to address through LINK between now and 2019/20?

Compared with Question 7, there were more diverse views of the challenges ahead. Land use and reform was with biggest single theme in its own right, and also encompassed several sub-themes, each mentioned by two people: 're-wilding'; landscape policy greenbelt protection; windfarm control. The latter was characterised by one respondent as an area of potential 'schism' requiring compromise and further work facilitated by LINK.

Environmental challenge	Comments
Land use	14
<i>'Sustainable land use / land reform'</i>	<i>Of which:</i>
<i>'Securing greater recognition and attention for landscape considerations in policy-making and decision-taking in Scotland (ongoing objective of Landscape Task Force).'</i>	<i>1st choice: 5</i>
	<i>2nd choice: 5</i>
	<i>3rd choice: 4</i>
Biodiversity	6
<i>'Addressing key threats to biodiversity - see Scotland Biodiversity Challenge 2020 Road map'</i>	<i>Of which:</i>
	<i>1st choice: 4</i>
	<i>2nd choice: 0</i>
	<i>3rd choice: 2</i>
Economic measures	6
<i>'Provoke more debate about limitations of GDP and its supremacy and the importance of additional indicators'</i>	<i>Of which:</i>
<i>'For LINK members to use economic related concepts, such as Ecosystem Services or Circular Economy, to further their objectives, whilst understanding the limitations these concepts might have'</i>	<i>1st choice: 2</i>
	<i>2nd choice: 3</i>
	<i>3rd choice: 1</i>
Climate change	5
<i>'Helping government to find ways to meet climate targets by adjusting and joining up its various strategies'</i>	<i>Of which:</i>
<i>'Climate change - mitigation and adaptation'</i>	<i>1st choice: 2</i>
	<i>2nd choice: 1</i>
	<i>3rd choice: 2</i>
National parks	4
<i>'Securing the commitment of the post-2016 Holyrood administration to preparing a National Parks Strategy for Scotland and to expanding the current family of national parks'</i>	<i>Of which:</i>
	<i>1st choice: 2</i>
	<i>2nd choice: 1</i>
	<i>3rd choice: 1</i>
Environmental governance and scrutiny	3
<i>'Environmental governance: incl. deregulation agenda, de-legitimising campaigning charities, civil society empowerment, etc.'</i>	<i>Of which:</i>
<i>'A revised National Performance Framework appropriately used in scrutiny so that policy is sustainability proofed'</i>	<i>1st choice: 2</i>
	<i>2nd choice: 1</i>
	<i>3rd choice: 1</i>
Energy policy	3 (all 3 rd choices)
Other (see Appendix 1 for full comments)	14

Q9. Keeping members informed about the work going on under the LINK name.

19 out of 35 people completed this question. Most forms of communication were found to be helpful, with the exception of Twitter and Facebook updates:

	Sum: Very/ Helpful	Very helpful	Helpful	Neither helpful nor unhelpful	Unhelpful	Very unhelpful
Targeted emails from staff	19	7	12	0	0	0
Network Meetings, as an opportunity to inform, influence and learn	17	6	11	0	0	0
LINK's Monthly Bulletin rounding up relevant news	16	9	7	2	0	0
Weekly Advocacy Monitoring Report (Holyrood, Westminster, EU)	14	10	4	5	0	0
Thrice-a-year Newsletter	14	1	13	3	0	0
Task Forces and their communications	14	8	6	4	0	0
LINK websites (www.scotlink.org & www.savescottishseas.org)	14	8	6	4	0	0
Inductions (new Reps, new Convenors and Deputes, new Trustees)	14	4	10	2	0	0
Tweets/Facebooking to alert you to outputs	5	2	3	9	1	1

13 people gave further comments. In response to a prompt, two of these felt LINK should *'do more to communicate with external audiences'* or *'relevant academics and some professional institutions such as engineers.'*

Two more felt that communication from staff was good, but from Task Forces it was *'hit and miss'* or *'variable'*. One felt that the way the Advocacy Monitoring Report is set out makes it hard to read.

However, the most common unprompted comment, shared by six respondents, was that people get too much communication from LINK. This is particularly hard for smaller organisations to process (e.g. before sharing with trustees) or absorb:

'The information circulated by LINK is overwhelming and for smaller organisations without specific policy staff it is impossible to keep up to date with all the communications that are circulated on a continuous basis. There needs to be a more structured approach to how LINK communicates with its members than there is at present.'

Q10: Opportunities for meeting, sharing, discussing and developing ideas

19 respondents answered this question and 13 provided further comment. Workshops, network meetings, seminars and Task Forces are seen as useful ways to get together and exchange ideas:

'Getting people together is key to building relationships on which most everything else depends.'

'I always find the topic-focussed workshops/seminars to be excellent. Networking meetings could be more effective if more people attended'

Four respondents shared the feeling that events would be more useful if more members took part. One practical suggestion was for smaller organisations to become 'corresponding members of TFs and forums'. Specific suggestions were also made regarding Annual Congress.

'The Annual Congress is a great opportunity to get people together and it often results in excellent discussions on some big theme issues.... However, there is no obvious follow-up on these or change in the way LINK operates in order to address the challenge/opportunities identified. It would be good to see future discussions focus more on our collective effectiveness to influence significant change.'

Another suggestion was to have the planning day on Day 1 of Congress, so celebrations don't limit valuable input on Day 2, particularly the drawing of conclusions and the agreement of actions, e.g. allocating resources to Task Forces. For more suggestions on improving Task Forces, see Q14.

	Sum: Very/ effective	Very effective	Effective	Neither effective nor ineffective	Ineffective	Very ineffective
Task Forces and Forums	18	12	6	1	0	0
Topic-focussed Workshops/ Seminars	15	10	5	1	0	0
Annual Congress	14	7	7	1	1	0
Network Meetings (Jan, April, August)	13	5	8	5	0	0
Annual Strategic Planning Meeting (Nov)	13	3	10	4	1	0
Receptions (Festive in Dec, SEW in Feb/March)	12	4	8	5	0	0
Trainings (Advocacy)	11	2	9	4	0	0

Q11: LINK's activities, outputs and their effectiveness

LINK's ability to engage with policy and decision-makers stands out, including influence through Task Forces and special initiatives. The Marine project was the topic that the highest number of people were 'very satisfied' with. There is something valuable to be learned from this example of long-term collaborative work.

	Sum: very/ satisfied	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	Unsatisfied	Very unsatisfied
Strategic level relationship-building (dialogue with Ministers, Government & Agencies, policy community)	14	6	8	1	2	0
Choice and range of policy issues which can be addressed through Task Forces	14	5	9	1	0	0
Task Forces as mechanisms for building strong common ground across diversity of views	14	4	10	2	0	0
Scottish Environment Week/Festival	14	3	11	2	0	0
Initiatives such as Species Champions	13	9	4	3	0	0
Submissions, Evidence, Briefings, Research, Reports	13	7	6	2	0	0
LINK Congress	13	3	10	1	0	0
Marine Project	12	11	1	2	1	0
Flourishing Scotland project	12	5	7	2	0	0
Engagement with the other Links on issues (marine, REFIT, access to justice) and in terms of a federal approach to joint work	12	2	10	4	0	0
Political strategy (Political Strategy Report, Referendum Challenge, manifesto process, advice on political issues, environmental governance issues)	11	8	3	4	1	0
Involvement as a stakeholder in key groups	11	3	8	4	0	0
LINK Receptions / events to engage wider audiences	10	4	6	3	1	0

Political strategy

One respondent feels that, with the exception of the Marine project, LINK reacts rather than leading, and that its political strategy had yet to catch up with having an SNP majority government in Scotland. As an example, they note that

'The SNP has no environmental caucus in its 110,000 members, and we don't have a plan for building one.'

LINK's political strategy appears to appeal to some but not to others, something which probably reflects different views on the 'critic' and 'collaborator' roles:

'Concerns that the tone of some submissions are too strident and need to be more measured and evidence based. If not there is a danger sounding like a broken record.'

'Maintaining the conviction that boat rocking is the right thing to be doing, over a period of say 2-3 years til change begins to show, is tricky in a network of diverse members whose personnel change over that time.'

'All this may be a function of a natural 20-odd year cycle prevalent in most voluntary sectors, shifting from aggressive campaigning on the outside to considerable influence on the inside – until institutional capture renders them impotent and they resort back to campaigning...Meanwhile the member bodies of LINK appear to be more interested in fine tuning the laws and policies which end up languishing, un-enforced'.

Decision making and responsibility

Views differed on the responsibility for steering LINK's political strategy. One respondent desired 'clear steer and firm management' from the Policy team, another felt that this is a Board responsibility, while another observed that

'Member organisations depend on creating and sustaining an independent public profile...and the LINK network would need to find a way of providing a platform for all voices and opinions.'

This returns to the theme of the difficulty of finding a single voice for the network and the risk of LINK being perceived as a cohesive whole rather than a coalition of shared but diverse interests.

In the short to medium term, it could be productive to work on agreeing (and/or revisiting, as appropriate) *the means by* which priorities are identified and decisions made - Who makes these decisions? Who is involved – and who should be? Is the voice of large organisations louder than smaller ones? How long should it take to decide priorities? How far in advance can they be set? What form of democracy most suits LINK's structure, objectives and values?

'Overall, I think LINK needs a bit of a refresh. I'm not sure that the approach of trying to take everyone along with everything gives us a sharp enough edge: and I'm not sure we are able to mobilise our collective membership effectively.'

Senior engagement

Meetings with Scottish Government work when the right people are there and meetings are well run (as seen with network meetings above). In order to attract senior civil servants and ministers to high-profile events (like Government receptions), senior members of the LINK network need to take part. This relates to a recurring theme about underuse of LINK figureheads and might suggest a focus for involving the President, Honorary Fellows, trustees, member CEOs (and their own chairs, presidents etc.) and others in developing LINK's political engagement.

Q12: Tactics and tools

The table below shows more responses in the 'neither/nor' and 'unsatisfied' columns than we have seen so far. However, fewer comments were given than in previous questions to help get behind this.

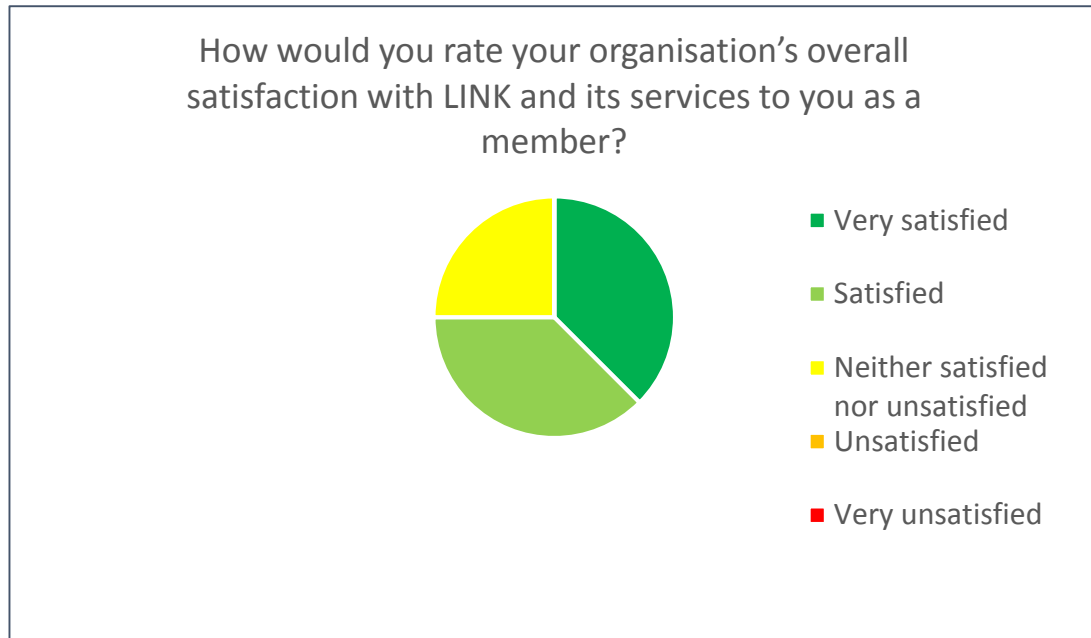
Indeed, there was a great deal of crossover with the themes that emerged in Q11 and elsewhere (e.g. use of Fellows, structure of Congress events). One of these is that respondents (regardless of their role within LINK) did not always feel they had enough knowledge of the *breadth* of LINK's work to make informed judgments.

LINK's areas of work are broad enough to mean they can be hard to focus and prioritise. At the same time they don't cover all of the policy domains of potential relevance to different members (e.g. health, transport, construction). Two respondents see Task Forces as a means to address these concerns, if they can undertake direct work and adopt 'strong advocacy strategies'. This may well be a desirable approach, with the caveat that it needs appropriate governance and oversight from the LINK Board. Staff roles in supporting TF's also need further exploration, as increased TF activity (e.g. funding) needs increased staff input.

	Sum: very/ satisfied	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	Unsatisfied	Very unsatisfied
Working through Task Forces (self-supporting, member-driven, Convenor-led)	14	5	9	2	1	0
Staff skills and availability to advise on the work	13	8	5	3	0	0
Looking for results through participating 'in the tent'	12	3	9	4	0	0
Balance between setting and responding to agenda	11	6	5	3	2	0
LINK's approach to negotiations with government and stakeholders	11	4	7	4	1	0
General advocacy approach of LINK Task Forces	11	4	7	5	0	0
Agenda-setting forum to discuss strategic issues (e.g. Congress)	11	3	8	3	1	0
Providing opportunities to build relationships with policy community (e.g. via SEW)	10	0	10	4	0	0
Level to which LINK works in partnership with players across the policy community	8	3	5	6	2	0
Use of media to promote/investigate/expose/ inform	7	4	3	6	3	0
Use of President/Fellows/ Trustees in support of advocacy	6	2	4	6	2	0
Ability to relate the environment effectively to other agendas – e.g. social justice	4	1	3	8	3	0

Q13: Overall satisfaction with LINK and services to member organisations

16 people answered this question. Of these, 6 were 'very satisfied' with LINK and its services, 6 were 'satisfied' and four were 'neither satisfied nor unsatisfied'. Six people provided comments (see below).



Area of satisfaction

These included task forces and being connected to policy:

'We see the value in working with other organisations on shared activities/campaigns and learn much from these colleagues. LINK is very well connected and this gives us the opportunity to engage with a wider policy community, and this suits our key objectives since (our) interests span a range of policy areas.'

Areas of dissatisfaction

- **Expense** – two people questioned the value for money of LINK's membership fee, with one organisation (from Band 1) noting that they are much more expensive than comparable networks. In response to a later question, another member notes that 'raising a substantial percentage of income from membership is important for stability and independence of voice.'
- **Smaller organisations' capacity to engage** - Two people mentioned this, with one also feeling that their voice isn't always heard, though they acknowledge that there are other for a for raising the issues of interest to them:
'There is some concern that the bigger member groups have too loud a voice. I am with a very small organisation and I think we have taken the opportunities that LINK offers us as well as we can with the human resources we have...and are thus very well represented. Issues where we are not well heard are relatively new areas of wider environmental concern e.g. rewilding regarding fauna and not just flora'.

Q14: What are your views on how LINK sets and works towards its priorities? How can it make best use of staff, Board and member input? Should LINK act as a collective more than it does currently?

As with the remainder of the survey's open questions, relatively few people answered this, 11 out of 35. Broadly, there was a view that current systems work effectively:

'I think the balance is about right - when members wish to act collectively they can/do - when they are busy as individual, autonomous bodies, they are that too!'

'I think LINK is very good at listening to its members and responding accordingly. It works as a collective where there is common ground, but is also very valuable in facilitating debate and enhancing understanding of differing positions.'

Other themes were:

- **Acting as a collective** (8 comments)

The biggest single theme, with eight comments, related to operating collectively. There is a continued desire for working together – it adds weight to advocacy and helps accountability. However, people also recognised that because LINK is a network (rather than a unitary body) it is necessary to follow protocols and reach agreement. Priorities should be 'network-driven' even where this is difficult or time consuming.

One suggestion was to work on fewer issues at any one time, raising again the question of prioritisation and how this is to be done.

- **Quality of staff support** (5 comments)

Echoing comments throughout the survey, respondents were appreciative of LINK's staff. Five people commented on staff being supportive, particularly in engaging and informing members, and mediating and facilitating dialogue.

'Staff do an excellent job in their role as intermediaries between the bodies, especially when their objectives diverge.'

'Staff are great - supportive, informative, competent and innovative.'

- **Decision making and governance** (4 comments)

'With the scope of outputs LINK has, it is difficult not to have a very wide ranging set of priorities. This is difficult to balance against effective corporate priority setting which would suggest that really successful organisations only do a few things but do them well.'

The LINK Board is acknowledged to have a difficult role, balancing their duties to govern an *organisation* whose primary purpose is to serve a *network*¹ which in turn carries out activities towards agreed plans. LINK's Operating Principles set out the Board's responsibility for having:

'An overview of management and strategic direction as agreed and taken forward by member bodies, working to the Strategic Plan and the annual Network Plan; it also prioritises allocation of staff and other resources'.²

Calls for board decision-making have apparently increased, for example through meetings with members during 2014-15. At the same time, LINK's Board recognises the 'sovereignty' of its members and the need for collective involvement described above.

One suggestion was for the Board to prioritise staff time and resources by focusing on a set number of areas of work (see Q16). This could mean, for example, agreeing the number of Task Forces that LINK has capacity to support, and acknowledging that there will be some areas where it makes sense for members to work together without LINK's direct support. To some extent this is already happening, as two respondents gave examples of having done this, either to expedite action or to involve wider interest groups. As noted in Q11 above, agreeing a *process* by which work is prioritised may be a useful first step.

It may also be helpful to revisit the distinction between governing LINK the organisation and supporting LINK the network. What are the Board's perceptions of how these roles differ and what they mean for how decisions are made within 'LINK'?

- **Task forces** (2 comments)

An example of the impact of LINK's wide ranging priorities was given by a Task Force Convenor, who also used an interesting metaphor regarding staff input:

'I think the current task force structure is a bit unwieldy. We have an awful lot of goals and plans but I'm not sure we all know what they are. I'd like to have staff on the bridge not just in the engine room.'

Another respondent echoed this theme and provided several suggestions for improving Task Force functioning by moving to task-focused, time-limited Task Forces:

- *'Only putting taskforces on a standing basis, with regular meetings, when there is a particular objective to be pursued. Otherwise, an electronic circulation list for items of interest would probably suffice for the subject in the interim.'*
- *Operating taskforces should consider each year whether to continue or drop down to circulation status.
Each taskforce should have an attached member of staff who attends the taskforce meeting and takes actions that are best delivered by the secretariat.'*

¹ This is my characterisation. Respondents were much more likely to see LINK as a network than as an organisation.

² LINK Operating Principles 2015, available here: <http://www.scotlink.org/about/>

Q15: How and to what extent does LINK add value? Where does LINK fit?

11 responses were given to this question, each of which was positive about LINK's role and where it fits with other networks.

For some small organisations, LINK provides the only link to policy and advocacy. For those who have other alliances, it complements other policy networks and information exchanges. It is generally (though not universally) seen as being well-connected.

LINK's collective work is especially valuable. It allows members' voices to be heard, within the network and beyond, adding weight and credibility to members' views.

'The collective working model through TFs is very effective in terms of information sharing and getting things done. Other networks we are involved in do not have the TF model, nor do they always ensure that their members are supportive of the position of the organisation in the same way that LINK does.'

Q16. What are your views on expanding the 'core' (e.g. by fundraising) to support more Task Force aspirations?

11 responses were given, and again were generally of one accord – that expanding the 'core' of the organisation is not desirable for its own sake, but more focus is needed. Seven respondents cautioned against growth or felt the current balance was about right:

'If it goes too far one way, the LINK "infrastructure" can creak/struggle; while too far the other way risks creating a "new/standalone" NGO that competes with members rather than acting as an enabler.'

Six people identified a growing desire amongst Task Forces to have staff attached to them:

'There seems to be a growing interest in TFs engaging their own staff member to take key activities forward. In general this is welcomed, but it needs to be monitored to ensure the impact on staff's ability to carry out other functions is minimal.'

Most respondents accepted that this development would come with an increased fundraising burden, and acknowledged that this would not be easy. One suggested that assigning staff to Task Forces could be met from existing resources and that instead of fundraising, LINK should reduce costs, for example by moving the Perth office to Edinburgh.

Q17. Should LINK limit the number of Task Forces operating each year? Do you have a view on the balance between reducing the burden on Task Forces and members, and the risk of limiting LINK's ability to respond to changing demands?

12 responses were given to this question. On the face of it, these are equally split between three answers: 'Yes', 'No' and 'It depends'. The answers are linked, as most respondents suggest that Task Forces should only run when there is sufficient interest, purpose and capacity to do so:

'We would recommend that each taskforce undertake an annual review as to whether to continue as a standing taskforce, with a cycle of meetings, or drop down to an information circulation group (probably by email) that could be restarted as a taskforce when need arises.'

'Not sure there's much to be gained by limiting the numbers, but perhaps TFs need to demonstrate they do still want to remain in existence. Some TFs are clearly Task and Finish groups (e.g., WANE Bill TF) while others are in abeyance and simply exist as email groups for months at a time.'

Where people did not qualify their response in this way, it was because:

- 'Limiting the number of task forces could adversely affect LINK's ability to respond to changing issues.'
- 'All of the current TFs seem to have important work in hand' and new demands could be met by asking larger organisations to commit more employees or volunteers to them.

These views assume there is spare capacity in the LINK network or staff team, which is unlikely to be the case. Indeed, the Q17 arose out of the need to help the organisation and network cope with overstretched capacity. *Not* limiting the Task Forces, either by capping a number that can be adequately supported or undertaking annual reviews, is likely to be riskier to LINK in the long term:

'When a TF continues to exist beyond the lifetime of the task, or with no clear task, the better resourced professional members leave and a sense of disaffection can take over for the smaller member bodies.'

As with Q16 above, the Board has a role to play in this:

'If enthusiasm for TFs on particular issues from members is there, then by all means let them happen. But the Board needs to be ready to challenge TFs as to whether they really need to continue if they are clearly ineffective.'

Q18. Is the LINK model still relevant today? How do you see it working into the future?

14 people answered this question. Seven emphatically felt that the model is relevant and effective:

‘Still fit for purpose, important in relation to the different wants and expectations that diverse members will have, and to their capacity to engage.’

‘Still relevant, in fact more so as governments cut back on central and local authority funding for the environment...How do we get them to think further than the next election?’

‘Yes - it is a model that you'd to invent if it didn't exist. If it ain't broke, don't fix it!’

Six people gave more qualified answers, with three citing capacity issues and two more noting the potential for resources to be used differently:

‘As the main functions of information exchange and coordinating action can increasingly be done remotely, or through ad hoc meetings, then LINK needs to keep its overheads low enough that membership is preferred to setting up an alternative network.’

‘Yes, absolutely - but need for sharper focus. LINKs should act as a radar sweeping the political and social landscape for the issues, news, consultations etc. Then to let members know about these and, based on prioritised key objectives, to assess if there is interest in ‘task and finish’ groups to respond. We would also suggest a greater investment in the Discretionary Payment Fund to use specialist, expert consultants to do some focused work that might take a TF many weeks.’

Only one person answered ‘No’, feeling the network needs a ‘Major refresh’.

Note: Themes from Q19 (‘Any other comments?’) have been incorporated throughout this summary. Q20 asked for people’s permission for anonymised quotes to be used, which all respondents gave.

Appendix 1: Question 8 – other environmental challenges organisations want to address through LINK over the next Strategy period

There were relatively few themes to emerge to this question, noted above. 14 other comments could not be grouped or themed and are given in full below.

First choices

- 'Habitat loss'
- 'Impact of food system (from production to consumption) on biodiversity and ghg emissions: including soil sealing, internalisation of externalities.'
- 'Presenting a clear, coherent and strong public voice for implementation of sustainable development.'
- 'Lack of Government action on farming, marine, uplands, etc.'

Second choices

- 'The need for a National Ecological Network'
- 'The establishment of more Marine protected areas and giving them some real teeth especially the control of fishing'
- 'Better protection for Green Belts'
- 'Encompassing health, wellbeing & social justice themes within environment, and ensuring outdoor recreation is still a strand of LINK's work despite loss of MCofS and JMT.'
- 'Within this (impact of food system), overfishing and concentrated animal feeding operations (including salmon farming)'
- 'Freshwater pollution'

Third choices

- 'Wildlife mortality on roads'
- 'Broadening access to Scotland's natural environment'
- 'Environmental justice'
- 'Better Wildlife crime enforcement'