

## Stakeholder interviews – Summary

### Introduction

This paper explores a number of themes from stakeholder interviews:

1. [What LINK does well \(serving members and stakeholders\)](#)
2. [Closeness to policy makers](#)
3. [Influence across policy areas](#)
4. [What LINK is ‘for’ – modernising, offering solutions, thought leadership](#)
5. [The role of values](#)
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7. [LINK Identity and messages](#)

Numbers 2-4 relate to questions that were asked in response to findings from the Stakeholder and Member surveys. The others arose naturally, based on issues that were important to interviewees.

The seven themes provide a structure, each providing a heading for the report below. A small amount of analysis and interpretation is given where appropriate. However the focus is very much on allowing stakeholder voices to emerge, using quotes as fully as possible to give LINK’s Board an insight into the 12 interviews that took place. The organisations that took part were:

- Cairngorms National Park Authority
- The Crown Estate
- Oxfam
- Scottish Council for Development and Industry
- Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation
- Scottish Government (x3)
- Scottish Natural Heritage (x2)
- Scottish Parliament (MSP)
- University of Dundee

### Notes

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*As agreed at the August Board meeting, attributable quotes were requested, to help LINK to contextualise responses. However the majority of interviewees were only comfortable to speak candidly, and for quotes to be shared, on condition that their views were anonymous and un-attributable. As with the Member Survey, the majority of quotes are actually fairly representative of a range of views: knowing their source wouldn't change how they should be interpreted. All of the interviewees gave their time to help LINK and this is the spirit in which their views should be taken. However some sections begin with a quote from one of the two surveys to help illustrate where the question originated, and these are attributed where possible.*

*Square [brackets] indicate where words have been inserted or replace for clarity [most commonly changing ‘they’ to ‘LINK’]. Ellipses...indicate where quotes have been edited for brevity.*

Graeme Reekie, Wren and Greyhound Limited 14<sup>th</sup> October 2015

## 1. LINK serves its members and stakeholders well

Members and stakeholders share the view that LINK's strengths are in bringing people together purposefully, facilitating responsive, collaborative processes to create – and use – a strong collective voice for the environment.

*'It is extremely important that there is an organisation like Link, which works to collectively influence opinion. Firstly, Link provides a way for the sector to come together, and discuss issues and clarify 'thinking'. Secondly, it helps the sector develop a broader view, which makes it easier to communicate a joint message. Finally, Link provides the mechanism for the sector to communicate 'as one'. This makes it easier for a message to be communicated, and is more effective at influencing 'decision makers'. This 'single voice' does not stop individual organisations developing individual messages or views.'*

Stakeholder Survey response (Third Sector organisation)

- LINK provides a way for the environmental sector to debate, develop and deliver coherent messages.

*'I think diversity is part of LINK's strength, and they shouldn't shelter from the fact that they may not have the same view on things, because actually bringing things to public debate in an intelligent way, saying that there is more than one way of looking at this, you could have different answers, is actually quite healthy and mature'. Stakeholder interview T8*

- LINK makes it easy for government to get civic involvement and consultation with the environmental sector

*'I can see why, if government wants to talk to the environmental NGOs it tends to do it through LINK...That's just a very difficult landscape to engage with, but, LINK, right, that's all the environmental bodies in one, I can go and talk to them and get a view. I think that is a useful thing, provided it can represent that view and does it in a credible way.'*

Stakeholder interview T6

*'In terms of the running of the Scottish Parliament...it's a very effective way of civic involvement and working on policy networks, getting involved very early in the legislative process. To have a place for government to go to get the broad environmental picture that then has further links to disseminate information.'* Stakeholder interview W13

- LINK does good work

*'The reality is that good ideas come from groups like LINK, and so they should be instigating policy, they should be instigating change. I know they already do that...and history shows that they are good at that.'*

Stakeholder interview W13

*'LINK is a useful organisation, umbrella body, and it does something that would be very difficult to do in England if not other parts of the UK too. There's something about the scale of Scotland and the way that it works that LINK is a very useful umbrella body in that sense.'* Stakeholder interview T6

*'There is a stronger focus on values [since the referendum], on authenticity of voice. LINK has that, because of the people engaged with it and the people in its member organisations. It has that in spades, and it needs to use that to maximum advantage.'* Stakeholder interview T7

*'LINK has done amazingly good work over the years. There are some very passionate people there, who day to day campaign and do some really great work. I'm certainly not knocking it, we'd be lot worse off without the NGOs and without LINK.'* Stakeholder interview T8

## 2. Closeness to policy makers

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*"I think LINK is hugely important. But if I'm looking for progressive thinking on environmental issues I tend to find that in academic circles, or through particular individuals - very rarely via LINK and component bodies. Many parts of LINK have become part of the establishment. That's a little disappointing.'*  
Stakeholder Survey response (Public Sector body)

- Influence on policy and legislation

Both the Member and Stakeholder Surveys identified that one of LINK's biggest achievements is its influence on policy and legislation. In the words of a respondent to the Member Survey, there is *'no doubt that LINK facilitates the wielding of influence by its member bodies'*.

At the same time, members, stakeholders and LINK themselves have asked whether this has led to LINK becoming too 'close' to Scottish Government. It *'may have erred slightly too far towards collaboration'* (Member Survey) to challenge Government effectively or to develop radical ideas:

*'I think there's less criticism. To be perfectly frank, at times they just appear to be a bit too fluffy. If there's a message to be told and it needs some real robust and frank dialogue...with a view to creating some change, they really have to man up...Some might think that they don't impart as much influence as they might.'* Stakeholder interview T5

*'There is more than a hint at times that getting so close has created perhaps a more friendly and positive relationship. But the visible critique of government doesn't come through any longer quite as it used to. I'm not saying that LINK's behaviour is in any sense naive, because it's far from that.'* Stakeholder interview T8

However it was just as likely that stakeholders saw the necessity of being close to government in order to influence policy, and therefore didn't regard LINK as being 'too close':

*'I wouldn't necessarily come to the same view that they are too close to government. At the end of the day, all organisations that lobby have to build a relationship, have to be understood, so it's very difficult not to have some degree of familiarity with government. To have influence you have to be able to do that. That doesn't worry me as such.'* Stakeholder interview W1

*'They are close enough to government to be able to get things done from a sort of joint approach, but I don't think they're so close that they can't criticise government.'* Stakeholder interview T9

*'It's becoming less of an advocate and a proponent of radical ideas and more as a sort of collegiate group working with government, that's how LINK are more likely to achieve change I think. That's not to deny that they don't as individual members still retain the ability to be radical and critical.'* Stakeholder interview W2

Throughout the interviews, there was a recurring observation about the direction LINK and its members face and the importance of adopting different approaches in different contexts. Stakeholders accept that LINK member organisations need to adopt different tones when facing policy makers than they do when facing their own memberships.

- From legislation to implementation

*'I think the headline achievements are primarily legislative, but I think the implementation of environmental protection and influencing spending decisions by the Scottish Government, local councils and businesses generally is much less impressive.'* Stakeholder Survey response (Politician)

*'Member bodies of LINK appear to be more interested in fine tuning the laws and policies which end up languishing, un-enforced.'* Member survey response (Honorary Fellow)

If LINK's last Strategy's was judged by its influence on policy and legislation, its next may be judged by the extent to which it supports effective *implementation* of these.

*'It is about delivery, I genuinely am not sure how much new legislation is needed, if you look at it we're pretty well-covered with legislation. It's a case of are we implementing it right and do we have the right targets, are we going in the right direction? I think there's good opportunities for LINK if they get it right.'* Interview T9

*'Legislation is not always the answer, but I think there is a prevalent view in LINK that if you can regulate something then you've got it under control. I'm not convinced that that is necessarily right in the sphere that we work in... You could argue that you need more regulation in terms of*

*cross-compliance and so on. But you could also argue that you just need a change of heart in policy making, and that it's a policy issue that determines whether you have cross-compliance or not, not a statutory one.'* Interview T8

*'You can't ignore legislation [but] there is a general view that law doesn't solve everything, there are a lot of laws being passed, some of them which are rubbish. So we need to have effective policy networks [too].'*  
Interview W13

### 3. Influence across policy areas

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*'The environment movement could make its voice heard in issues which are not core "environment" - for example health or social justice.'* Stakeholder Survey response (Public Sector body)

LINK is increasingly interested in influencing debate about the environment as part of wider or more mainstream public policy. Stakeholders are wholly supportive of this approach, as can be seen from the illustrations below and the sections that follow:

*'It's always good to work in collaboration with different interests, if you can get different arguments to back up your case, not necessarily all environmental, that's all to the good.'* Interview W10

*'Behaviour change and society, the politics, the power relationships that determine what nature looks like. All of these things are massively politically and socially challenging issues, but I would have thought profoundly important in nature and the environment. But LINK seemingly has very little to say about them. I think that is odd for a body like that that could have such an important influence on shaping some of those fundamental drivers of what shapes the environment and our relationship with it.'* Interview T6

*'You are trying to think about the whole thing working together and ways people can feel that they are actually doing the right thing.'* Interview W1

However, there was a caveat from two stakeholders that environmental issues should still be seen as legitimate, and that LINK shouldn't lose focus:

*'There's an environmental case for environmental action in my view. It's legitimate enough in its own right. That's not to say that you can't have collaboration that increases effectiveness, but I don't think it should be always the case that you need to do that.'* Interview W10

*'We're increasingly looking to use nature to address other social issues, such as equality and health, which is giving it a new relevance. There is a risk in there, that the objectives for nature come linked too closely to those*

other agendas and we lose some of the purer conservation objectives about species diversity and so on.’ Interview T8

Stakeholders went on to give several examples of what it might mean to address environmental issues across wider policy areas. These are listed and illustrated over the next two pages.

- LINK can work across different policy teams in government  
‘We are well aware that there are big portfolios in government, in health and transport and agriculture and energy, which all have a crucial impact on biodiversity and the environment.’ Interview W2  
  
‘There’s always been a challenge in getting environmental issues integrated with other policy areas, coming to mind is education, for example. That’s one area where I think there hasn’t been the integration between policy, and there’s probably quite a few other areas as well, transport and things like that, certainly that level or degree of cross-thinking takes place.’ Interview W3
- There can be more crossover between economics and the environment  
*‘Business and economic growth aspects, clearly there’s an opportunity to integrate more effectively with business growth and activity.’ Interview W3*  
  
*‘Environmental considerations should be a key part of our economic character. Putting it in that context, then that necessarily means that environment has got a part to play and should be seen as an integral part right across the whole spectrum, whether it’s any component part of the economy. You could take public services, for example, and public service reform, you could take transport, infrastructure etc.’ Interview T7*
- LINK can engage with a wider range of organisations on an issue-by-issue basis  
‘By affiliating themselves with different groups who have a concern for the elderly, for example, or homelessness, or obesity, then the argument is strengthened...It may be too that they are better to associate with other umbrella groups. ...not going into the nitty gritty, but lining up...on a particular issue. ... it may be more effective to actually get two different (policy consultation) responses from two different perspectives that are saying the same thing.’ Interview W13  
  
‘[To modernise our sector] I think we would need to have new partnerships, I don’t think it should just be the conservation bodies in isolation. It would be really nice if LINK opened its doors and encouraged membership say from Scottish Council for Development and Industry or Institute of Directors.’ Interview T8
- LINK can encourage people to see the link between environmental and social issues  
‘The relationship between nature and health and well-being is very powerful.’ Interview T6

*'Certainly the health agenda, there's a lot of opportunities there to link the environment side of things and health side of things much more closely together, and to really push that...Also I think that the economic development side and tourism, I don't think that we make enough of the fact that our tourism industry is based on the natural heritage of Scotland and the things that people come to see.'* Interview T9

*'If you are seriously wanting to engage around issues of social justice, not just bring people who work on social justice into the room to give you credibility to continue to talk about environmental issues...you do need to think about how to provide basic needs for everyone in society, particularly the poorest or people in poverty.'* Interview W12

*'We're winning hearts and minds on the utilitarian values of nature, the health and equalities issues. We've got legislation to deal with some of the purer issues. But that big bit in the middle which isn't just about the best and elite, and isn't just about solving other social issues, there's a bit more work we have to do in there.'* Interview T8

- LINK can help people to understand the environment's relevance to their lives

*'Nature is more relevant to more people than probably legislation and policy provision suggests. Popularity of visits to the countryside, nature programmes, all of these things indicate a level of interest that is not necessarily reflected in, say, agricultural policy, forestry policy and so on. Somehow we're not managed to make that connection.'* Interview T9

*'All nature is kind of local. However important something is in a national or international context, it's still going to be in somebody's back yard and you have to be able to demonstrate the relevance of that to them.'* Interview T6

- LINK can make messages positive and engaging

*'A positive agenda must come about, thinking about the benefits of nature, positive things that nature does for people and promoting where possible that contact with nature.'* Interview T6

*'People do need to constantly be fine-tuning what they're saying to be sure that it's relevant and it's not stale, and it's not seen as relentlessly telling people off, chiding them for their failures...[LINK] do need to find a way of doing it. I think some organisations are better at it than others. Some give the impression that they are relevant and interesting, full of new ideas, others seem to be remorselessly downbeat, "We're all doomed".'* Interview W2

*'The messages need to be ones that people can understand, really get, and see how they can be a successful part of the solution, not just the problem.'* Interview W1

*'I think all too often environmental bodies generally can challenge, but clearly from the perspective of the environment alone, but without coming up with the solutions which can allow collaborations, partnerships and*

*what have you to develop, although I think that has changed a lot more recently.’ Interview W3*

This last theme, of environmental organisations sharing solutions alongside challenges, leads to the question of whether LINK needs to change or modernise the way it engages.

#### 4. What is LINK ‘for’? Modernising, offering solutions, thought leadership

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*‘LINK could be a mechanism for communicating solutions, but I don’t see that happening much.’ Survey response (Public Sector body)*

Following up on an issue that arose in the Stakeholder Survey, interviews asked stakeholders whether environmental messages and tactics could be perceived as anachronistic. Two people put this perception in the context of how they saw the history of environmentalism:

*‘Most conservation thinking was set out in the 1940s, the institutions that largely brought it into its current effect were set up in the 1970s...and they are still very wedded to what might be described as a mid/early-twentieth century conservation agenda. I think the fact that most of that was set out before the onslaught of an oil economy and the intensification of natural resource management that surrounds most of the problems that we’re currently concerned with, is for me a worry. That we have effectively a solution that was designed before the problem came into full effect. I think it’s about time that we stood back and thought hard about what kind of conservation strategies would be best suited to the kind of issues that we face today.’ Interview T6*

*‘Our notions of environment very much stem from a Victorian notion of wilderness, which wasn’t correct at the time and is not correct today.’ Interview W1*

Another stakeholder expressed a desire for constructive engagement:

*‘[LINK] are regarded with a degree of exasperation at times. If I was them I would try and look somehow at some of the - it’s not necessarily the message that they’re putting across, it’s the way that they do it. It seems a bit sanctimonious at times, and a bit lecturing and hectoring and proselytising...What we need is some constructive ideas about how we move forward rather than being lectured about shortcomings and failings. It’s really about thinking about the most effective way of working.’ Interview W2*

A follow-up to this question was whether it is time for LINK to transform the way it engages with the wider world. There is not a straightforward answer to this question. Even if LINK wants to transform, it would need to make decisions about what to leave behind and what to preserve. Its range of choices would be determined, or limited, by its history and previous trajectories. Nevertheless, there is a strong sense that stakeholders are looking to LINK for positive visions of - and solutions for - the future.

*'Trying to look to the future and saying, "This is what it could look like, this is what it could be and this is why it would be good". I think that positive message is always more powerful than "We're all under threat and we're all doomed", because people tend to eventually turn off to that ... The positive message is where I'd want LINK to be, without trying to sugar-coat it in terms of the challenges.'* Interview T9

*'LINK is in a brilliant position at this point in time within this context to start painting the characteristics which the environment will feed into the emerging economy, rather than it being seen as a big barrier to economic growth.'* Interview T7

*'We all in conservation are at risk of seeing the world as a place that people have damaged rather than a place in which we have evolved along with everything else. Therefore, to determine that there is a right path for nature, that's what we must push nature along, is a little old-fashioned now in my view. I think LINK needs to help us all find what the alternative strategy to that is...LINK could engage in that discussion in a more creative way but I can see why it would struggle to do so, because its pedigree, its baggage and all the rest of it is routed in that twentieth century view of the relationship between people and nature.'* Interview T8

*'It's about making things happen. In terms of tone, [LINK] want to be a group that is excited about the future, excited about change, rather than worried, or not wanting to encounter any form of change or any form of progress. I think this idea of "The Future We Want" that's being bandied about is a good approach, because it's making people actually think about the positive life that they would like.'* Interview W13

*'I'd look for LINK to be building up over the next few years as part of its strategy, is to provide some thought leadership. I don't see any of that coming from LINK at the moment. If I look for thought leadership, I tend to go to individuals that I trust, academics, think tanks – but none of those include LINK. I know that they have done some really good work, but again it tends to be individuals who are acting more in their individual capacity under the LINK umbrella.'* Interview T6

## 5. The role of values

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Modernising or changing its approach could be challenging for any organisation, and if one stakeholder's characterisation of environmental organisations as conservative is true, it could be even more challenging for LINK. There were several suggestions that LINK could find the way forward by developing a core set of values as a touchstone for making sure new developments don't take it away from its core purpose:

*'Maybe one of the issues there is whether LINK actually has an underlying philosophy or set of values or principles that it can use to reference issues to...By developing a kind of philosophy and identity around such a principle, it can help bind the organisations together. And they might be in a better place then to work out what position LINK collectively should take on some of those issues, and why that might be different from some of the individual NGO members... Without that they are just going to get blown by the winds of the power relations that operate within LINK.'* Interview T6

*'If they can define some common principles and say that the solutions might look a bit different [for different members], that's OK. They shouldn't agonise too much about having to have one single voice on everything.'* Interview T8

*'If it can try and find what its positive vision is for Scotland and to keep on banging on that, and over time achieving those things.'* Interview T9

This isn't about only presenting positive pictures or avoiding standing 'against' something, but keeping values at the heart of what LINK does:

*'Being positive about things is important, but that's quite difficult when issues come along. So, fracking for example, comes along and understandably lots of people in communities and lots of people in organisations think, we need to oppose this. I think sometimes it's hard to get away from that. I think the broader issue is to make sure of the values that are at the heart of it, whether it's supporting something or proposing something or opposing something, making sure that social and environmental values are at the heart of that campaigning work.'* Interview W12

## 6. Evidence

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It was noticeable that evidence was important to stakeholders, albeit that it was often discussed in terms of its contested nature and the tendency for different ‘sides’ of environmental debates to interpret evidence in their own ways. Generally, stakeholders encourage greater use of evidence and reasoned argument.

‘I think that being research evidence-based is absolutely crucial to this, and I think a lot of organisations recognise that as well. The challenge being that evidence, in many of these areas where conflict exists, the interpretation of that evidence can be the bigger challenge. It can be interpreted in different ways and often is.’ Interview W3

‘People who are having the biggest influence on policy are the people who are putting forward debates, arguments which are framed in the sort of language and science evidence-based approach that the policy makers want to hear.’ Interview W2

‘In some areas of environment policy the evidence is really good. We know how clean our air is or isn’t, we know how clean our rivers are or aren’t. What we probably don’t know is how things can be integrated successfully with each other. It’s the opportunity cost of not doing things or not fixing things or not getting these things to work together and evidence to back that up I think is where probably some of the risk is.’ Interview W1

This last comment is interesting as it relates to the theme of encouraging greater integration between areas of public policy. If this is a direction LINK pursues, it may need to find or facilitate evidence for the effectiveness of the approach.

Another stakeholder also encouraged LINK to take a broad interpretation of what constitutes ‘evidence’ and to know their audience:

*‘Even if [LINK] are representative of members and as an interface with government, they still need to be able to draw on, as part of their evidence base, the real stories about how people connect with and relate to nature. That’s the large part of the evidence that politicians would then act upon. But all too often I see LINK framing evidence in the same way that we would, in a scientific kind of way, and failing to represent those small stories that politicians react so strongly to.’ Interview T6*

## 7. LINK identity and messages

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In our previous discussion with the Board, we discussed the LINK 'voice'. Notwithstanding the comments about values above, LINK doesn't expect to be able to write or decide positions in advance, and has found it hard to do so in the past. However, recognising that the Board identified that there should be a strategic aspect to selecting themes and priorities to work on, the following (unprompted) comments about LINK's identity may be of interest.

'I don't know what an Environment LINK message is, to be honest. I get Environment LINK briefing papers and policy type stuff, you might get a view or a letter from them, but I tend to think of RSPB or SWT or National Trust or someone like that in terms of where the main messaging is coming from rather than from LINK.' Interview W2

'(LINK's members) exist to promote a specific issue or campaign on a specific topic, and that necessarily narrows their focus, and doesn't allow them the room and the flexibility to look at the bigger picture, unless they choose an overarching theme like climate change. LINK as an organisation by its nature is that body that should be taking that overview, and should be able to rise above the nitty gritty operational stuff and do as it says in the name, link up the different organisations and project that to the world at large...to the rest of the economy.' Interview T7

'The profile for LINK itself...There might be something in terms of some more visibility for it as its own entity. I'm not sure exactly how that would work, but I just want to know if there is something in that, in terms of looking at how you get a bit more visibility for it as an entity.' Interview T9