Exploring Local Links

The potential for improved networks between local groups and Scottish Environment LINK

FINAL REPORT

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**Executive Summary**

Protecting, sustaining and enjoying Scotland’s natural environment is an interest of many local and community groups in Scotland. They are motivated by different issues – from wildlife and habitat protection, to climate change and sustainable living. Some are affiliated with national NGOs, others are members of alliances or networks, while others are short-lived; formed to tackle a particular issue or lead a campaign. For the most part these groups are voluntary and operate with limited resources. Collectively they possess immense skills, talent and expertise and form a significant constituency for the environmental cause.

The aim of this work is to explore how the contribution of local groups could be strengthened through improved communication and networking with LINK and its member organisations. This report used a survey and follow-up interviews with selected groups and networks to:

* assess the demand from local groups for improved networks and communications with Scottish Environment LINK and its member bodies
* consider the potential for new or enhanced networking or communications
* evaluate the expectations of what improved networking could deliver, and the support necessary for participation

The report’s findings show that there is significant interest among local groups in improving networks with Scottish Environment LINK. At the same time, there was a strong view that any networking must deliver tangible results for the local group – time is their scarcest commodity. The research also showed there is a very low awareness of LINK and what it could offer local groups.

The report provides the following recommendations for LINK’s consideration in taking forward this agenda:

**Raise awareness of LINK**: A first step to extending links must be to raise awareness of LINK amongst these groups, making clear why it is relevant to their needs.

**Know what LINK is willing to offer:** Local groups could have high expectations of what LINK can provide and it is best if this is clarified from the start.

**Work with other networks**: There are lots of networks out there already serving the needs of local groups; just getting to know the other networks can give LINK a good insight on possible joint campaigns or projects.

**Identify priorities for joint campaigns or projects:** Once the area of work is identified, it is easier to find the right groups that share common objectives.

**Commit for the long-term**: Community groups need to know LINK and its members’ collective commitment to improving local communications and networks is for the longer term, worthy of investment of resources on both sides.

The report concludes LINK should address these points through a phased approach, starting with a **communications plan**. The plan should clearly state what LINK wants to achieve through extending its networks with local groups, why LINK is relevant to local groups, and what benefits LINK can offer them. It should learn from those member bodies which already have affiliated groups and other networks that provide networking services for their members. The plan would make the most of LINK’s existing outlets and events to reach out to local groups. It may be useful to select one or two priority areas of work to use as a focus for communications efforts.

The plan would also include efforts to strengthen working relationships with selected networks with a shared interest in LINK priorities. This could lead to possible **joint projects** and campaigns, which have a lot of interest from local groups. This will also build LINK’s credibility across social and economic sectors.

At a later stage, it may be appropriate to consider investment in an **online ‘virtual network’** of environmental groups. There is ‘in principle’ demand for such a service, but many doubts as to how much it would be used unless it was well-funded, coordinated and promoted.

This phased approach will allow both LINK and local groups to get to know each other, and provide the mutual support, inspiration, and expertise that local groups want. The overall conclusion is that developing good relationships with community groups has the potential to strengthen the environmental movement on the ground, in the Scottish Parliament, and in the wider business and civic sectors. This is particularly important, given the increasing profile for local democracy, community empowerment and landownership in Scotland.

1. **Introduction and Aims**

Protecting, sustaining and enjoying Scotland’s natural environment is an interest of many local and community groups in Scotland. They are motivated by different issues – from wildlife and habitat protection, to climate change and sustainable living. Some are affiliated with national NGOs, others are members of alliances or networks, while others are short-lived; formed to tackle a particular issue or lead a campaign. For the most part these groups are voluntary and operate with limited resources. In all their shapes and forms, they possess an immense amount of skills, talent and expertise and form a significant constituency for the environmental cause.

Scottish Environment LINK, the forum for environmental groups in Scotland, commissioned this report to explore how the contributions of local groups could be strengthened through improved communication and networking with LINK and its member organisations.

This aims of this research is to

* assesses the demand from local groups for improved networks and communications with Scottish Environment LINK and its member bodies
* explore the interest in more local networks. considers the potential for new or enhanced networking or communications,
* evaluate the expectations of what improved networks could deliver, and what support would be required to enable participation.

The report provides recommendations for LINK in taking forward this agenda and discusses options for improved communications and networking.

1. **Background**

LINK’s experience suggests that networking between local groups and with national eNGOs could extend their impact and benefit the environmental cause. At the same time, national NGOs can benefit from networking with local groups by providing evidence and profile for national campaigns. Some examples include the superquarry campaign which stopped the Lingerabay development on Harris, or more recently the Hunterston campaign, which stopped the development of a coal-fired power plant in North Ayrshire. Both campaigns were won with the combined efforts of local and national organisations. Other joint efforts include major restoration initiatives, such as the Inner Forth Landscape Initiative which is currently seeking project ideas from community groups.

The role and power of communities is receiving significant attention in national and local government. The Scottish Government has put forward the Community Empowerment Bill[[1]](#footnote-1) and has various initiatives to support and fund communities in renewables, climate action, and land ownership. There is growing interest from local authorities[[2]](#footnote-2) in strengthening local democracy and how community groups could help with service delivery. Communities themselves are increasingly taking control of local assets, setting up social enterprises, and accessing funds to develop their natural resources. These developments offer real opportunities for LINK to work in partnership with communities to protect and enhance Scotland’s environment.

1. **Method**

The research comprised the following:

* online survey of local groups working on the environment (83 respondents)
* interviews with selected organisations
* desk-based research of existing communication and networks for groups working on the environment

The full methodology and online survey questions are provided in Appendix 1.

1. **Recommendations**

The main recommendations for LINK to consider as it develops its thinking on greater engagement with local groups are listed below.

**Raise LINK’s profile:** LINK is relatively unknown to most community groups. A first step to extending links must be to raise awareness of LINK amongst these groups, making clear why it is relevant to their needs, and what LINK can offer.

**Know what LINK is willing to offer:** Local groups will have high expectations of what LINK can provide and it is best if LINK’s capacity is clarified from the start. Planning advice, funding partnerships, training, staff, office space are all possibilities. This may be considered on a case by case base depending on the project or campaign.

**Work with other networks**: There are lots of networks out there already serving the needs of local groups. Just getting to know the other networks can give LINK a good insight on possible forms that improved networking might take, joint campaigns or projects. It will also build LINK’s credibility and expand opportunities to work across social and economic sectors.

**Identify priorities for joint campaigns or projects**: Which campaigns would benefit the most from working with communities – for both LINK and the local groups? Once the area of work is identified, it is easier to find the right groups that share common objectives.

**Commit for the long-term:** Community groups need to know LINK’s commitment to them is for the long term, worthy of investment of resources on both sides.

These points will help LINK decide which options for improved networking are best for meeting their needs and those of local groups. A phased approach will be best, starting with raising awareness of LINK within the community sector. Ultimately all will need to be taken forward in some form to achieve effective engagement with community groups.

1. **Main Findings**

**5.1 What’s the current picture?**

*Is networking important*?

It is not surprising to find that almost all respondents (90%) said networking is important (see Figure 1). Groups thought networking is a “vital part of communication and understanding” and “helped us connect with other groups and partners that can offer us skills we lack ourselves.” Others said, “without it there would be fewer projects, less funding, and less knowledge - and I mean local community knowledge as well as interactions between the bigger players.” For some, “just knowing that you're not alone - that there is a collective voice advocating, campaigning and taking action” is important.

**Figure 1: Importance of networking**

*Existing networks*

Over 60% of local groups are already affiliated to national networks which are working well. These include Development Trust Association Scotland, SCCAN, Trellis, Community Energy Scotland, Community Woodlands Association, Keep Scotland Beautiful, Senscot, Scottish Community Alliance. ( see Appendix 3). There were also several positive comments from groups that are affiliated with national eNGOs, expressing satisfaction with the support provided by their parent organisation (SWT, RSPB, JMT).

Over 80% have networks (often informal) with other local organisations. These were seen as very important for project delivery and securing funding. They are also important for peer-to-peer learning and knowing who to contact to get things done.

*Networking with LINK and its member bodies*

Communications and networks with LINK and its member bodies are weak: 70% of local groups have poor or no links, with 45% having none (see figure 2). This reflects two issues: the low awareness of LINK in the community sector and the belief that networking with LINK and national environmental groups is not a priority. Those that have good or excellent links tend to rely on personal contacts, are significant organisations in their own right with paid staff and regular contact with the national policy agenda, or are affiliates of national eNGOs (eg SWT member group).

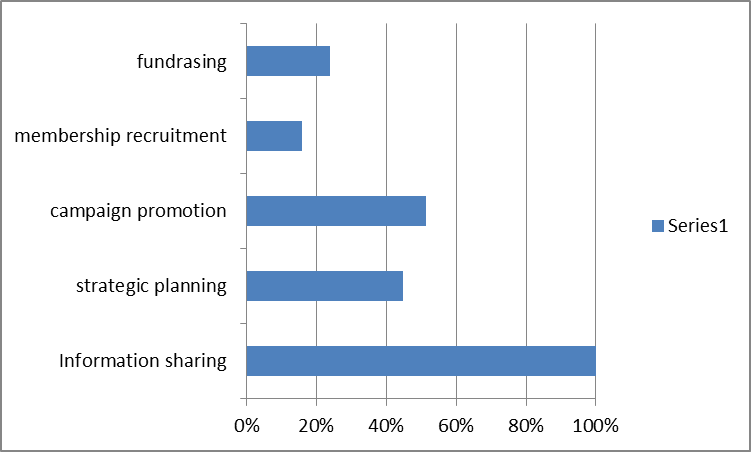
Groups that do communicate with LINK do so in a number of ways, but ad hoc and informal communications were dominant at about 70%. Communication tended to be made by direct contacts with board members or staff, rather than any structured or regular form of communication. Only a small number of groups mentioned using LINK social media outlets, and no one mentioned the website. The use of ad hoc communications was even more the case with local networks, with over 80% using informal means of communication and face-to-face meetings.

**Figure 2: Current networks with LINK**

*How networks are used*

All respondents use networks for information sharing, followed by campaign promotion (50%) and strategic planning (45%) (see figure 3). Many reasons for networking were given, with some of these provided in table 1. Most agreed that “better understanding of each others’ aims” was crucial to knowing when and how to work together.

**Figure 3: Purpose of networking**



**Table 1. Reasons for Networking**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Practical** | **Strategic** |
| make best use of collective skills and resources for project delivery | check on compliance with national policy |
| know the right contacts | avoid duplication at local level |
| advice on practical issues such as insurance | more influence to lobby |
| identify funding opportunities | aware of what others are doing so when objectives coincide, can act together |
| widen net of invitees, members, volunteer recruitment | establishes a base for creating political pressure when needed |
| case studies, share of programme models | more knowledge and expertise strengthens campaigns |
| Share costs for training, exhibition space, group discount purchasing |  |
| stronger funding applications and ability to deliver greater project value for funders |  |

**5.2 Is there a demand for improved communications with LINK and its member bodies?**

There is significant support for improved communications and networking - 90% of respondents saw a role for improvements at the local level and 80% at the national level. While the overall interest in improved communications is high, this comes with caveats. Many groups have little time for additional networking and indeed feel overwhelmed with what is currently available. Thus, any networking with national bodies needs to be ‘efficient’ and deliver ‘tangible results’ and help groups overcome the main barrier – lack of time and resources.

A minority of groups did not believe there was a need for additional networking for the following reasons:

* **parent or affiliated organisation** are already providing good support and information about the national context through their websites and support to member groups
* **current networks do the job**: several respondents highlighted the good support and information they get through other networks such as Greenspace Scotland, Community Woodlands Association, and Development Trusts Association.
* **not relevant**: there was a perception that national eNGOs are not relevant to local groups, which tend to be more focused on delivery rather than advocacy and campaigns. One respondent put it this way: “Local and sectoral networking is already very good for communities taking action on climate change. I'm not sure what relevance the national NGOs have for us.” For most there is an understanding that national policy has an influence on what happens in their community, but the local groups trust in the national organisations and umbrella groups to deal with these issues on their behalf.
* **too many networks**: many respondents thought there are too many opportunities to network already - newsletters, e-bulletins, conferences, etc . ‘I don't think there's any need for any more networking! There are too many meetings/newsletters as it is - more would just add to everyone's inbox and be a waste of resources!’

**5.3 Barriers**

While most respondents are interested in more communications with LINK, there are several challenges to making this work, including:

* too far to travel to meetings
* poor broadband connections
* volunteers often cannot attend meetings during the workday, while eNGO paid staff are less likely to work weekends and evenings
* just not enough time - “I am totally stretched with the amount of work on my plate already - only further funding would justify me taking on more”
* there is a “limited number of volunteers/members interested in this aspect [national policy]” and “translating the local situation to national policy level” is hard for local volunteers
* sometimes partnership is promoted as “a 'fix-all' but it is quite clear that groups need to consider compatibility of interests and styles of governance before collaboration”
* larger networks tend to be too broad and details get lost in the rush to scan news

In addition, some respondents thought that national eNGOs ‘have their own set work agendas and don't have much flexibility in their time or resources to pursue new opportunities” or are “more comfortable networking with other environmental groups but not the community itself.’

Thus, it is important for LINK to have a solid understanding of what benefits local groups want out of networking, and what can be done to overcome any barriers and support their involvement.

**5.4 What do local groups think the purpose of improved networks with LINK and its member bodies should be?**

As noted in Table 1, numerous reasons were provided for improved networks. This section explores those mentioned most frequently.

**Better understanding between local groups, LINK and national eNGOs**

A better awareness of the goals of local environmental groups and eNGOs would inform each other, identifying possible areas to work together. Overall, this should “increase general public engagement with and care and consideration for the environment at large.”

This shared understanding is important to “knowing that you're not alone - that there is a collective voice advocating, campaigning and taking action; and that there are folk out there that you can learn from, work with and mutually support.”

One respondent thought that eNGOs can be “blissfully ignorant and ill- informed” about voluntary groups and what they can offer the national agenda. Others thought that networking could “persuade national NGOs to take community groups more seriously” in their work.

* **Funding**

National networks can help identify funding opportunities, support funding applications, and even provide match funding themselves. Through their national advocacy work, networks can sometimes create new funding streams, and/or ease the application process for local groups. Networking can also help with membership recruitment to gain more participants and consequentially more influence.

A few commented that some people see networking as a “threat to either their existence or their funding” which can make for challenging working environment, particularly in today’s competitive funding environment.

* **Expertise**

Networking can give access to practical and policy expertise such as best practice in woodland management or regenerating a degraded bog. Other groups would appreciate advice in challenging planning applications. In some cases generic guidance will be enough, while others will need more tailored support.

In some cases, it is simply putting groups in touch with the right contacts – other local groups, agencies, academics, or local people with a particular skill that’s needed. This match-making helps groups save energy and money because they don’t need to reinvent the wheel.

* **Strategic/Campaigning**

A smaller number of groups noted how national and local groups working together can make a big impact: “with local links Scottish Environment LINK could mobilise communities politically and as a resource.” At the same time, some groups noted that they “could impact our local community through higher level policy.”

One transition group thought there was “potential to join forces between groups focusing mainly on nature and those on human behaviour, especially on complex topics like wind turbines, hydro, fracking, transport strategies, etc.”

1. **Options for Networking**

The research did not reveal a preferred approach to what an improved network or communications might be – all options presented in the survey to respondents scored about the same: virtual/online, newsletter, face to face and joint working. However, the analysis suggests there are a few options which would better meet local groups’ needs and overcome current barriers to participation. The options build upon each other, gradually increasing LINK’s and its member bodies’ commitment to extending their local links.

The analysis of the options outlined below considers their purpose, how they would work in practice, and provides a comment on resources required.

**6.1 Option 1- Improving communications**

**Purpose:** to raise awareness and understanding of LINK and its collective membership with local groups in order to build a platform for shared work as the opportunity arises. Some of this is already happening, and a communications plan would focus this effort and clearly state why LINK is interested in working with local groups and the tangible (and potential) benefits LINK can provide to local groups. This work would help overcome the current low levels of awareness of LINK, as well as the perception by some that LINK (and its member bodies) do not understand or support the community agenda.

**Design:** a communications plan to achieve the purpose as set out above. There may be merit in choosing one priority area for more focused effort. The strategy would use existing LINK communications (newsletter, facebook, twitter, website) and events (eg Congress, Environment Week) as well as identify new opportunities. It could be most effective to focus on two or three services or events and focus the communications around these activities. Specific suggestions from the respondents include:

* disseminate a simple concise e-newsletter to community groups highlighting what LINK is doing (ensuring the content is relevant to local groups), and providing contact details. Local groups could be invited to subscribe to this e-news, and given a filter to select the topics of interest to them, so they only receive the news they want.
* promote the facebook page and twitter amongst local groups. Thought will have to be given to making sure some of the content will resonate with local groups.
* provide some content on the website about LINK’s work and how it relates to communities. It should also spell out what LINK and its members (or task forces) can offer them (community heading is already established for this project).
* incorporate community perspectives in LINK events. The opportunity provided by the LINK Congress in 2013 was much appreciated by local groups.

In addition, LINK could consider the following activities (suggested by the survey respondents) as part of the plan:

* support local groups as social enterprises – for example using their facilities for venues.
* host webinars or study tours about a specific subject/campaign. This is already happening in some areas (eg Woodland Trust and Community Woodlands Association), and could be developed for others.
* name a community liaison contact in LINK and/or specific organisations that could be contacted for brainstorming project ideas, etc.

**Resource required**: taken at a basic level, these activities would not have to entail much extra cost as it mainly involves modifications to existing communications channels and events. It may be worth considering support for volunteer’s travel expenses, and organising some events in the evenings or weekends to suit volunteers.

**6.2 Option 2 - Improving network links**

**Purpose:** this option is a progression from the first option. The main purpose would be to improve awareness and understanding of LINK amongst relevant networks and umbrella organisations. This would allow the network bodies to identify potential for joint campaigns, opportunities to support each others’ work, and identifying local groups to work with as appropriate.

**Design:** this could form part of the communications strategy noted above. It fits with the research findings, which showed that local groups often expect their umbrella body to represent their interests at the national level, rather than making that connection directly themselves. It also makes the most of existing network services and directories which are already available (see Appendix 3). LINK is already liaising with some of these bodies, and this option would broaden and deepen these efforts as follows:

* contribute relevant material to existing e-bulletins and social media from networks such as CWA, SCA, Greenspace Scotland
* participate in other network events, eg SCCAN AGM;
* co-host and participate in local networking events, study tours and project visits

As a next stage, LINK could develop partnerships with certain umbrella bodies to work together on a shared project or campaign. The partner network could identify local groups that might want to get involved. For example, work on climate change adaptation policy could be supported through greenspace projects; and marine campaigns could be informed by local coastal groups. These network links could result in joint briefings, shared work on consultation responses, and joint promotion of campaigns.

Through the other intermediaries, LINK could also be made aware of any local networks which align with their priorities and might be interested in supporting LINK’s national advocacy work. Gaps might also be identified where LINK could work with other intermediaries to build local networks.

**Resource required:** a modest amount of resources would be needed to extend communications to a selected group of intermediaries. This could be taken forward in stages, starting with the identification of a short list of priority networks. The level of activity is likely to be determined by what opportunities exist for joint working. As a minimum, this effort will be a sound investment for making the most of joint advocacy work in the future.

**6.3 Option 3 - Joint projects**:

**Purpose:** to achieve local environmental improvements and strengthen LINK’s advocacy work through making the case on the ground and through citizen participation. As most local groups are focussed on delivering projects on the ground, support from LINK and eNGOs would be very welcome. This effort would supplement any joint work LINK member bodies are already undertaking with their affiliated groups.

**Design:** This option would be a natural progression from options 1 or 2, but could be pursued separately. For example, a LINK task force could explore the potential for a joint project with local groups as part of their work programme. This could focus on a particular campaign (eg marine protected areas) and a small number of local groups which would have the shared interest and desire to be involved in or support a national campaign. These groups could be identified through existing contacts and would not require the development of an online database. The joint project with the local group(s) could:

* provide evidence to support national campaign
* demonstrate good practice which should be funded, or supported through government guidance or regulation
* engage the local community in lobbying government

**Resources**: The joint project would entail a significant resource commitment, determined by the nature of the project. The funding need would be limited to the particular organisations in the partnership. There may be funding sources for a project, such as the Climate Challenge Fund Ideas Bank or Heritage Lottery Fund.

To overcome the time and funding barriers for many local groups, one respondent suggested that a joint project could involve secondments – for example paying a member of a local group to join the team working at LINK or the eNGO – or a staff person from the national body working in the local group. Alternatively LINK or the eNGO could host the local group member in their office.

**6.4 Option 4 - Online (virtual) network:**

**Purpose:** to identify shared interests so that groups (national and local) could develop joint projects, advocacy, and share expertise. It would allow groups to find out who else is operating in their area, and what other groups are working on the same topic. One respondent noted, “it’s a complex field to map out and often we stumble upon other organisations by pure chance.” Others called for a ‘matching’ service which would proactively ‘pair’ groups and promote exchange of information through online forums.

This is a product which could have interest beyond LINK and could facilitate cross-sectoral working. However, it requires further exploration with existing intermediaries that already provide membership databases. This resource would need to develop from options 1 and 2, so that local groups and intermediaries are aware of LINK and its objectives, and why it might be beneficial to work together.

**Design**: The online database should contain the following features:

* map-based
* searchable by topic and postcode
* provide web links and/or contact details for groups
* provide details of intermediaries they could join
* provide details of LINK and its individual member organisations

There are several intermediaries that provide searchable online databases for their memberships (eg Development Trusts Association Scotland, Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens, Keep Scotland Beautiful - CCF, Community Woodlands Association, Highland Environment Network, see Appendix 3). Before developing another online database, LINK would need to consider the following:

* What added value would an over-arching ‘environmental groups’ database have over using existing databases?
* Which existing databases get used and why?
* What are the data protection issues?
* Would such a disparate audience identify with this network?

While many survey respondents were in favour of an online resource, they did not name a successful example. On the contrary, they highlighted the fact that “lots of organisations have tried and failed at this - local groups are too busy to use online forums.” Even if they thought an online knowledge-based system for developing and testing ideas would be useful, they admitted that it would have to be actively promoted by LINK and relevant agencies so it became a necessary part of everyone’s work.

Thus, the online network would have to be more than a searchable database. In addition to the call for a ‘match-making’ service, there was also support for an online forum for groups to exchange ideas, promote events and share best practice. Respondents felt strongly that a pro-active virtual network would be more meaningful than just “more meetings, newsletters, and promises of joint working.”

The database could be developed for one topic area as a trial where LINK or a national member body has an interest (eg a catchment-wide restoration project) and/or an area that existing intermediaries don’t cover (eg unconventional gas).

**Resources:** a successful online database will require significant resource to set up, maintain and promote. It will need to be comprehensive, accurate and up to date so it is seen as a credible and trustworthy source. LINK, other intermediaries, and funders will need to use it and encourage others to do so to find information, form partnerships and put together funding bids. This will require a considerable shift from current working practices for both national eNGOs and local groups. It will also require dedicated staff resource to maintain the database and extend its purpose beyond a searchable database – through activities such as co-ordinating events, matchmaking between groups, and moderating online forums.

* 1. **Evaluation of options**

All of the options potentially meet the test from local groups that there should be a good balance between time spent and tangible benefit. However, they require different levels of support from LINK staff and member groups. The options are considered against the assessment criteria in Table 2.

**Table 2. Assessment of options against criteria**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Option** | **Demand from local groups/overcome barriers** | **Benefits** | **Resource requirements - LINK** |
| 1 | LINK local links communications plan | Exchange of information  Know who to call  Mutual support  Low time requirement | Raise awareness of LINK and why local groups might be interested in LINK | Low – use existing LINK communications and events |
| 2 | Improving network links | Umbrella organisations more likely to share policy agenda.  No time requirement from local groups | Potential for joint campaigns  Can identify local groups for joint work | Medium – staff and board member time to build relationships with selected networks |
| 3 | Joint Projects | Change on the ground, profile, shared understanding. Time needed only from groups involved. | Expertise, funding, demonstration projects, lobbying power | Medium but limited to those organisations involved |
| 4 | Online Resource / virtual network | Identify what groups you can work with.  Forum to exchange ideas, promote events. High time requirement, but could be tangible result for time spent. | New partnerships, avoid duplication, use best practice | High – resource required to set up, maintain and promote |

Some of the options will require significant investment by LINK, even if taken forward with other parties. Given the low awareness amongst local groups of LINK and the uncertainty around what LINK and its member bodies can offer to local groups, this report recommends the first step should be option 1 – the communications plan, along with option 2 – improving network links. These two initiatives will provide the foundation upon which to develop joint initiatives and campaigns. It will also help establish the need for option 4 – the online resource. Importantly, it will give LINK the credibility and profile it needs with this audience to make a virtual network a success at some point in the future.

In taking forward these options, it may also be useful to consider a flexible approach, as local groups have different needs. While most groups want to know how their work fits in with the national context, the research indicates that a relatively small number want to get involved with influencing national and local policy. These tend to be some of the larger marine groups, those working on climate action, and some of the development trusts that work across several issues. The groups involved with woodlands, peatland and greenspace simply want to get on with their local projects.

1. **Conclusions**

Local and community groups are working across Scotland to improve the environment – with on-the-ground projects, challenging planning applications, and working with their local authorities to deliver better services in their community. Scottish Environment LINK, the ‘voice of Scotland’s environment community’ for the most part works at a national level, influencing policy and legislation. Brought together, the local and national work on the environment can provide a powerful force for change.

This report examines the demand from local groups working on the environment for improved networks and communications with Scottish Environment LINK and its member bodies in order to extend their influence and achievements on the ground. The main findings show:

* in principle, local groups are interested in networking with LINK, but it must be done efficiently and deliver results for their community
* Some groups are already well-supported through other umbrella organisations, or as affiliates to a LINK member body and questioned the need for any additional networks
* any improved networking with LINK should provide mutual support, inspiration, share experience, and put them in touch with the right contacts
* there is very low awareness of LINK and its objectives amongst local groups. Therefore, any effort to extend communications will need to explain LINK, why it is relevant to local groups, and what benefits LINK can offer them.

It should be noted that the very existence of this research and LINK’s interest in local groups was viewed positively and opens the door for more dialogue.

Recommendations arising from the research focus on: raising LINKs profile; establishing what LINK is willing to offer: joint working with other networks; identifying priorities for joint campaigns or projects and; committing to this agenda for the long-term.

The first step to improving networks is to establish LINK’s profile and credibility with the local and community sector. LINK can implement a communications and engagement plan which makes the most of its existing outlets and events to reach out to local groups. It can also build on current efforts to improve links with selected umbrella groups or intermediaries. These efforts could lead to possible joint projects and campaigns. This will also build LINK’s credibility with the growing community empowerment agenda.

At a later stage, it may be appropriate to consider investment in an online ‘virtual network’ of environmental groups. There is ‘in principle’ demand for such a service, but many doubts as to how much it would be used unless it was coordinated and promoted.

The overall conclusion is that developing good relationships with community groups has the potential to strengthen the environmental movement on the ground and in the Scottish Parliament. It is particularly important given the increasing profile for local democracy, community empowerment and landownership.

**Appendix 1: Methodology**

The research focused on five areas of environmental work: peatlands, woodlands, greenspace, climate action, and marine. These areas were chosen to reflect LINK’s current priorities and thus potential for greater networking.

The research involved the following aspects:

* Online survey of local groups working on the environment
* Interviews with selected organisations
* Desk-based research of existing communication and networks for groups working on the environment

The online survey asked both quantitative and qualitative questions to assess the need and demand for improved communications and networking with Scottish Environment LINK and its member organisations. Overall 83 groups from all over Scotland responded to the survey, representing a wide range of topic areas, types of organisation, and ways of working.

Five organisations were interviewed to follow up the survey responses. The groups (Chance to Thrive, Portmoak Community Woodland, COAST, Transition Linlithgow and Kirkhill and Buchrew Development Trust) were chosen to represent the different types of organisation, topic areas, and geographic areas of Scotland. Both the survey and interviews were conducted on a non-attribution basis.

The survey and interviews gave a good understanding of existing communication and networks in the field, and how they are valued by their membership. Interviews were also conducted with selected networks (Scottish Community Alliance, Greenspace Scotland, Scottish Community Climate Action Network) to share LINK’s research plans, and to get a good understanding of how they work and are supported.

The main topics covered in the survey and interviews were:

* Current networking/communication provision and activity
* Need for /benefits of networking and communication with LINK
* Ideas for additions/improvements
* Design of any additional networking facility and support needs
* Examples of good practice

**Interviewees**

* Russell McLarty, Chance to Thrive (Glasgow)
* Alan Brown, Transition Linlithgow
* Andrew Binnie, COAST (Arran)
* Archie Prentice, Kirkhill and Buchrew Development Trust (Highland)
* Jeff Gunn, Portmoak Community Woodland (Fife)

**Appendix 2: Online Survey Questions**

The survey took place between 28 November and 20 December 2013

|  |
| --- |
| 1. Name of your organisation and indication of the kind of organisation it is. Charity Development Trust Local member group (of national NGO) partnership other (please describe) |
| 1. Describe the main objectives of your group (or provide link to website or group’s documentation). |
| 1. Does your group see networking as an important part of their operations? |
| 1. How would you describe your communications and networks with Scottish Environment LINK and its member bodies? Excellent, Good, Satisfactory, Poor, None. |
| 1. Do you have a satisfactory means of regular communication or networking with other national networks or alliances? Yes/No Please describe. |
| 1. Is the communication or networking with LINK /national NGOs/other national networks: informal / ad hoc; email group; face-to-face meetings; newsletter; established network; other   Please describe. |
| 1. Do you have some means of satisfactory communication or networking with other local groups either in your locality or your area of interest and activity? Yes/No |
| 1. Is your communication or networking with other local groups: informal / ad hoc; email group; face-to-face meetings; newsletter; established network; other (please describe) |
| 1. What benefits do these communications / networking provide to your work? Please tick any that apply: information sharing, strategic planning, campaign promotion, membership recruitment, fundraising, other   Please describe. |
| 1. Do you have a good practice example of networking (examples from other sectors welcome)? Please describe in one or two sentences. |
| 1. What are the particular barriers or challenges to networking for local groups? Please tick any that apply: time; funding; knowledge of other groups; understanding of links to national policy agenda; other (please describe). |
| 1. Would your local group benefit from improved communications and networking with 1) other local groups either in your locality or your area of interest and activity (yes/no); 2) with national environmental NGOs (yes/no). |
| 1. If your answer to question 12 is ‘no’ is this because the group does not perceive networking in general as an important way of achieving its aims, or other reason: time; funds; awareness of relevant bodies operating in Scotland; other. Please describe |
| 1. What would be the main purpose of the improved communications? Would the objectives of improved communications with other local groups be significantly different from those of improved communications with national NGOs? |
| 1. What design of communications or network would work best for your local group and why. Tick 1,2,3 in order of preference. Virtual (online) network; newsletter; face-to-face meetings; joint working; other |
| 1. If you selected ‘other’ to the previous question], or wish to provide more detail, please describe. |
| 1. Please describe in a few sentences your preferred option and what support you would need to take part. |
| 1. Is there anything else you would like to add? |

**Appendix 3: Existing networks – what do they offer?**

This list is indicative of the kind of support already on offer from intermediaries mentioned in the survey responses. It does not represent a complete list of networks or intermediaries working on the environment.

**Community Land Scotland**

* Represent community landowners.
* Support communities taking ownership of land
* Facilitate exchange of information
* Influence improvements to Land Reform Act
* Map of members (approximately 40)
* Member database by alphabetical order and with links to member websites.
* Annual conference and regional networking events

**Community Woodlands Association:**

* Membership fee is £30
* 200 members
* CWA receives funding from FC, Highland Council and Highland Leader
* Website has a member list and map of member groups
* Community Woodland Enterprise – a trading subsidiary to work with members to produce and market goods from community woodlands;
* a range of publications: biannual magazine Woodland Voices, quarterly e-newsletter, monthly e-bulletin, facebook page
* annual national conference and regional networking events
* peer-to-peer exchange visits across the network.
* Subsidised training events covering a wide curriculum, from forestry to governance, communication to environmental management. Wherever possible they involve member groups in the organisation and management of these events.
* Support new groups to set up, acquire land and assets and manage those assets

**Development Trusts Association of Scotland**

* 190 members
* member directory searchable alphabetically, by geography and topic
* support and strengthen development trusts, help new ones get established
* promoting and representing the interests of development trusts
* range of networking opportunities including an annual conference, a programme of training seminars and the provision of funding to resource visits between members and potential members.
* bespoke advice and training opportunities
* many useful resources including a regularly updated funding guide

**Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens**

* Searchable map of groups by postcode
* £30 to join if small group
* Training and networking events
* Publish guides and advice, you-tube clips on good practice
* Starter pack on community gardens
* Funding advice
* Scottish Parliament exhibition

**Greenspace Scotland**

* 150 network members (any type of organisation that are involved in creating, improving and managing urban greenspaces.
* opportunities for sharing knowledge, information and practice,
* a way to engage and feed into national policy development and consultations.
* Free e-bulletins of network members. Can search by type of organisation and/or postcode
* Research to explore if there is a need for a community greenspace groups network for Scotland - and if so what could/should it look like. For example, opportunities to network and support each other - face-to-face and by using social media. The research will also explore how a network could provide information, help groups to develop skills and capacity and empower them to work with local people and partners to further develop and sustain their work.

**Keep Scotland Beautiful (Climate Challenge Fund)**

* 635 projects funded
* Map of currently funded projects. Provides description of project and weblink
* Community Action Support Programme – capacity building through training and workshops for CCF groups and any group interested in climate change

**Scottish Community Alliance**

* The Alliance has two main functions - to promote the work of local people in their communities and to influence national policy development for a strong and independent community sector
* Supported by Scotland's leading community sector networks
* Regular e-bulletin – Local People Leading
* Anyone can be a supporter for free – over 4000 receiving bulletin
* List of supporters but not possible to search it

**Scottish Communities Climate Action Network (SCCAN )**

* Free membership
* List of members, alphabetical order with links to member websites
* Newsletter, website
* Networking events, briefings, advice on funding
* Consultation responses
* Matching and mentoring service

**Senscot - Social entrepreneurs in Scotland**

* e-bulletin - 3,400 recipients
* support local social enterprise networks – SENs – by theme, roundtable, and area. List of local networks available with links and resources
* encourage peer-to peer support

**Appendix 4: Good Practice Examples**

Good practice examples provided by respondents to the survey

**Boginar:** to attract expertise on how best to restore community woodland and raised peat bog. National NGOs as well as agencies such as SNH attended and gave their support to the event. This event was so successful SNH provided significant funding to help the restoration works on this site, and has replicated the ‘boginar’ in other parts of Scotland.

**Ideas sharing seminar**, focussed on environmental opportunities in the food sector

**Local awards ceremony**: Dundee City Council holds an awards ceremony to recognise the local groups supporting environmental and leisure activities. It is a good opportunity to share ideas and get to know other groups working on the same issues in the area.

**Fife network of groups taking action on climate change**: a peer-to-peer support group Community groups in Fife planning to meet quarterly. There is a mix of established and new groups, with varied interests and plans – from local food and growing to community energy. They agreed it is useful to meet up in person and share information, ideas and moral support – in particular:

* Site visits are a great way to get ideas and learn about the details of a project
* Some of the issues we face in our work are best tackled at a Fife scale – for example working with the Council on allotments or energy projects; sharing of physical resources
* Joint projects may naturally emerge, for example, engaging with the Council on their Home Energy Efficiency Programme Scotland: Area Based Schemes
* Other issues are best tackled nationally, for example Toolkits and Case Studies, and we’ll engage with Scottish Communities Climate Action Network and the Climate Challenge Fund’s Community Action & Support programme on those

**Group messaging**: to send queries around on any subject (Community Woodlands Association)

**Regular speed networking events**. to enable people to meet, share information and develop relationships (West and Central Voluntary Sector Network)

**Project DIRT** is a good platform for promoting local practical action and connecting people rather than policy issues.

**Project Wild Thing** as above, for projects reconnecting kids with nature.

**Scottish Biodiversity Officers Network** - keeps us involved with the Scottish Biodiversity   
Forum

1. <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2013/11/5740> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. CoSLA’s recently launched Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy [↑](#footnote-ref-2)