

Link response to Consultation on *Local Strategic Partnerships: Shaping their future*
March 2006

Introduction

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) brings together 37 voluntary organisations concerned with the conservation and protection of wildlife and the countryside. Our members practise and advocate environmentally sensitive land management and food production practices and encourage respect for and enjoyment of natural landscapes and features, the historic environment and biodiversity. Taken together, our members have the support of over 8 million people in the UK.

Link welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation paper. Link believes that planning is fundamental to protecting and enhancing wildlife and the natural and historic environment. This response is supported by the following organisations:

- Buglife: The Invertebrate Conservation Trust
- Butterfly Conservation
- Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE)
- Council for British Archaeology
- Council for National Parks
- Friends of the Earth
- Herpetological Conservation Trust
- Open Spaces Society
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)
- The Wildlife Trusts
- Woodland Trust

Summary

- Link believes the re-examination of the role of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) and Community Strategies represents a major opportunity to ensure that the natural and historic environment and biodiversity are properly embedded within the new Sustainable Community Strategies.
- We regard the degree to which there are meaningful outcomes for environmental sustainability and biodiversity as the most significant test of whether the LSPs and the new Sustainable Community Strategies mature successfully.
- We are concerned that organising LSPs around the four thematic blocks of the Local Area Agreements may continue to marginalise the natural and historic environment and biodiversity. We are recommending a requirement that each block should incorporate appropriate biodiversity and environmental outcomes and targets, including targets for the protection of landscape, the historic environment and for the provision of public recreation opportunities.
- We are recommending a requirement for LSPs to include suitable qualified environment and biodiversity representatives within their structure in addition to the provision of modest funding to help the voluntary and community sector to participate more effectively.

An opportunity to build in biodiversity and environment

The consultation makes clear the increasingly important role of Community Strategies in helping to deliver genuinely sustainable communities. In our view biodiversity is a necessity for genuinely sustainable communities, rather than a luxury. It is no less important than the provision of other public services such as schools, health centres and transport.

There is a powerful body of research which underlines the significant benefits that biodiversity rich natural spaces brings to the quality of life for, for example, in terms of health, social cohesion and added economic value. There is also abundant evidence to demonstrate that biodiversity furnishes communities with a range of, life supporting, ecological services from carbon capture, to offset climate change, though flood prevention, to pollution control. These environmental, social and economic benefits of biodiversity are also increasingly recognised by government. They are promoted in planning policy guidance and within the England Biodiversity Strategy, “Working with the Grain of Nature”, which highlights the need for the full integration of biodiversity considerations within local and regional policies, strategies and programmes.

The government has also made clear that it expects biodiversity to be incorporated into Community Strategies. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister produced a circular in July 2003 on the rationalisation of plans within local authorities in which it was proposed that Local Biodiversity Action Plans should be fully integrated within Community Strategies. However, our experience and the conclusions of the English Nature Research Report 644 “Community Strategies and the integration of biodiversity - an assessment of progress in England” confirms that the exhortation within the circular made little impact and that there has, in fact, been significant variation in the extent to which Community Strategies integrate action for biodiversity. In the majority of cases there is considerable scope for improvement. The evidence we have seen suggest that is also the case for the environment more generally (see, for example, footnote 44 of the consultation) in spite of the fact that Community Strategies were required under the Local Government Act 2000 to contribute to sustainable development.

We believe this re-examination of the role of LSPs and Community Strategies represents a major opportunity to ensure that the natural and historic environment and biodiversity are properly embedded within the new Sustainable Community Strategies. Indeed, we regard the degree to which there are meaningful outcomes for environmental sustainability and biodiversity as the most significant test of whether the LSPs and the new Sustainable Community Strategies mature successfully.

Structure of Local Area Agreements and Local Strategic Partnerships

The consultation suggests that organising LSPs around the four thematic blocks around which most Local Area Agreement are structured is a useful approach. However, since none of these four blocks address the natural and historic environment and biodiversity directly we are concerned that organising the governance of LSPs in this way might perpetuate the trend for this important theme to be marginalised.

There is already evidence that some LSPs have failed to take the opportunity to link environmental issues to other outcomes in the four blocks in developing Local Area Agreements, in spite of the considerable encouragement offered in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister’s Local Area Agreement Guidance.

If the intention is to continue to focus Local Area Agreements around the four blocks we recommend a clear requirement within the Local Area Agreement Guidance that each block should incorporate appropriate environmental and biodiversity outcomes and targets.

Environment and biodiversity representatives

The consultation points out that the involvement of environmental partnerships in LSPs is not prescribed at a national level. However, a key factor that emerged in the English Nature research described above was the correlation between the involvement of “environmental” experts and the quality of the biodiversity content of Community Strategies. We recommend a requirement for LSPs to include suitable qualified environment and biodiversity representatives within their structure. Both to ensure that this theme receives the particular attention that it deserves and to unlock the real opportunities to join up action on the environment with actions to promote social and economic wellbeing, as mentioned in the Local Area Agreement Guidance.

It is clearly important to ensure that environment and biodiversity representatives have the appropriate knowledge and skills sets, are professional in approach and sufficiently well resourced to afford the partnership working the attention that is needed. That is a particular issue for voluntary and community sector organisations who are often able to bring skills, expertise and local knowledge to the process but have limited resources.

We recommend government consider underpinning local compacts and partnership working with modest funding to enable the voluntary and community sector to participate more effectively, for example, by contributing towards the costs of volunteer training and the release of professional staff to devote time to participating in LSP business. That would make it easier for organisations to make available skilled personnel with the time to properly engage.