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M. Kuehlewind, Ed.
S. Krishnan
Q. Wu
IAB

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Procedures for Handling Liaison Statements to and from the IETF
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Abstract

This document describes the procedures for generating and handling liaison statements between the IETF and other SDOs, so that the IETF can effectively collaborate with other organizations in the international standards community.

About This Document

This note is to be removed before publishing as an RFC.

Status information for this document may be found at https://datatracker.ietf.org/doc/draft-iab-rfc4053bis/.

Discussion of this document takes place on the Internet Architecture Board Internet Engineering Task Force mailing list (mailto:iab@iab.org), which is archived at https://mailarchive.ietf.org/arch/browse/iab/. Subscribe at https://www.ietf.org/mailman/listinfo/iab/.

Source for this draft and an issue tracker can be found at https://github.com/intarchboard/draft-iab-rfc4053bis.

Status of This Memo

This Internet-Draft will expire on 20 April 2026.

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1. Introduction

This document describes the procedure for generating and handling liaison statements between the IETF and other SDOs, so that the IETF can effectively collaborate with other organizations in the international standards community.

Most organizations have a process to send liaison statements that simply provides a more formal way of communication, beyond just sending an informal email. However, every organization has slightly different procedures to handle the sending and receiving of liaison statements. In some cases sending formal liaison statements might be the only way of communicating with a certain organization. The IETF process is intended to be as simple as possible while still accommodating the process or format requirements of various other SDOs. One key property of the IETF liaison statement handling process is the requirement to record all sent and received liaison statements in a publicly accessible central location, which makes it more formal than other direct communications. However, liaison statements do not have any special standing within the IETF process otherwise. This means that any input provided through a liaison statement, even if that statement reflects consensus in the other organisation, does not have a different standing in the IETF process than other (individually-provided) inputs.

Further, liaison statements sent by the IETF usually do not go though the normal IETF consensus process (e.g. an IETF-wide last call) and therefore do not automatically represent IETF consensus. Depending on the nature of the liaison statement, it might refer to existing IETF consensus as documented in IETF-stream RFCs or working group chairs might ask for working group consensus on a technical matter not (yet) documented in an RFC. While the existence of a formal liaison statement does not automatically imply any form of consensus within the IETF process, liaison statements still reflect an official position supported by leadership approval and particularly underline when the stated position is based on existing community consensus. When sending a liaison statement from the IETF, it is highly recommended to clearly indicate any level of consensus or non-consensus as part of the liaison statement content.

The exchange of liaison statements does not require a formal liaison relationship (see [I-D.krishnan-iab-rfc4052bis]). The procedures described in this document encompass all liaisons statements received from SDOs, whether or not a formal liaison arrangement is in place between the SDO and the IETF.

Receipt of a liaison statement does not automatically impose an obligation of sending a response by the other party. The decision to send a response depends on the content and kind of request. A liaison statement, just like any other input into the IETF process, is considered for its relevance, importance, and urgency. However, if a formal liaison relationship exists, it is the responsibility of the liaison manager to ensure appropriate communication between the organisations (see Section 3 of [I-D.krishnan-iab-rfc4052bis]) even if no response is sent.

If no response to an incoming liaison statement is provided, this does not indicate agreement or consensus on the topic raised to the IETF. IETF positions require community rough consensus via processes managed by the working group chairs and the Internet Engineering Steering Group (IESG).

Sometimes liaison statements sent from other SDOs may cover topics that are relevant for research done in the IRTF. In this case the IAB consults with the IRTF chair who might choose to forward them to any relevant IRTF research group(s). The IRTF chair as a member of IAB can work with the IAB, as well as specific research group chairs, to decide whether a response to the liaison statement is needed. Research groups do not initiate sending of liaison statements.

1.1. Changes compared to RFC4053

The major change in this revision of the document is that all tooling details have been removed. Particularly, some text in the introduction, Section 3.1.1. (Liaison Statement Submission), Section 3.1.2. (Mechanism for Displaying Liaison Statements), Section 3.2.2.4. (Generating Liaison Statements) and the appendix have been removed.

Further, the following guidance has been updated in the -00 version:

1. A shorter abstract and introduction, as well as a clarification in the introduction about obligations to send replies.

2. Removal of the definition section (2.1) as "assignee" is not used anymore, and the "addressee" is now simply called the receiver.

3. The section on "Content of a Liaison Statement" has been revised to

   * be less detailed about tooling, e.g. not talking about concrete fields anymore,

   * introduce a new concept to handle contact information, replacing "Response Contact" and "Technical Contact" as well as additional fields ("CC", "From Contact", "To Contact") that exists in the tooling but are actually not specified in [RFC4053] and therefore often caused confusion,

   * add new address information ("Send Reply To"/"Send To") that can be used to support processes where one central address is used to receive all liaison statements. This is also the process preferred now by the IETF where the central address is either the liaison manager or the IAB coordination contact.

4. The purpose "For Comment" has been removed as either "For Information" or "For Action" can be used instead; depending if a deadline is needed or not. In the current record of statements, "For Comment" has been rarely used indicating that this purpose is not needed or at least its meaning was not clear.

5. New section on "Recording Liaison Statements" that replaces Section 2.4. on "Lifetime of a Liaison Statement" to underline how important the public record of a liaison statement is and clarify the responsibility of the receiver to ensure that all incoming statements get appropriately recorded.

6. Section 4 from [RFC4052] on "Approval and Transmission of Liaison Statements" has been moved to this document, without modification so far.

Changes in the -01 version:

1. New text in intro on "no special standing" and consensus

2. Minor wording adjustments to avoid tooling implications

3. Merge section 3 (Responsibilities when Receiving a Liaison Statement) into Section 4 (Recording) and 6 (Responding)

2. Content of Liaison Statements

A Liaison Statement is a formal letter sent by one standards organization to another. These organizations may be at any level (WG, Area, etc.). Generally, the sender and receiver are peer organizations. A liaison statement may have any purpose, but generally the purpose is to solicit information or request an action, like share a document, or ask for a review or a technical question.

Liaison statements may be very formal or informal, depending on the rules of the body generating them. Any liaison statement, however, will always contain certain information, much as a business letter does. In order to be able to process and record these statements in the IETF, the information should include the following:

2.1. Contact Information

The following contact information are expected to be part of a liaison statement:

From: The statement needs to indicate from what body it originates;

for example, it may be from an IETF Area or WG, an ITU-T Study Group, Working Party, or Question, etc. A statement may be sent from more than one group, e.g. multiple IETF working groups, but usually all groups are from the same organization.

From-Contact: One or more electronic mail addresses belonging to the "From" body. This includes the addresses associated with the "From" group(s), e.g. in the IETF these are the working group chairs, working group mailing lists, and Area Director(s), and contacts that are required for the management of the liaison, like the liaison manager (if one exists) and/or an IAB liaison contact in case of statements sent by the IETF or the staff person from the external organisation that has sent the incoming liaison by mail, as well as any additional technical experts who should be informed.

From-Liaison-Contact ("Send Reply to"): An explicit "Send Reply To" address may be provided that is used for processing the liaison statement reply. This address is usually not a personal address but rather a generic address associated with a role or process. For liaison statements sent by the IETF, this address should be the alias of the liaison manager, if applicable, or an address maintained by the IAB for liaison management such as liaison-coordination@iab.org. If a "Send Reply To" address is provided, the expectation is that a statement sent in reply will only be sent to this address and will then be distributed in the receiving organisation, following their internal process.

To: The statement needs to indicate to which body it is sent. A statement may be sent to multiple bodies or groups within one body.

To-Contact: One or more electronic mail addresses from the receiving body to which this statement should be sent. Similar to the "From-Contact" this includes all addresses associated with the "To" information, additional contacts that are required for liaison management, as well as any additional experts.

To-Liaison-Contact ("Send to"): If this address is present, the liaison statement is only sent to this address and not to the addresses in the "To-Contact". If a liaison statement is a reply, this "Send to" address is the "Send Reply To" address provided by the other organisation in the original statement. This supports processes where an organisation has a central contact address to receive statements and then distributes the statement using their own process to the appropriate groups and persons internally.

2.2. Purpose

A liaison statement generally has one of three purposes and should clearly state its purpose using one of the following labels:

For Information: The liaison statement is to inform the receiving body of something and expects no response. This includes calls for review comments if the expected response is optional.

For Action: The liaison statement requests that the receiving body does something on the sender’s behalf, usually within a stated time frame. This is also used if a document is sent out for comment, and the review feedback is expected in the stated time frame.

In Response: The liaison statement includes a response to a liaison statement from the peer organization on one or more of its documents and expects no further response.

Liaison statements that request action indicate a deadline when the action is required. If the receiving body cannot accomplish the request within the stated period, courtesy calls for a response offering a more doable deadline or an alternative course of action.

2.3. Body, Title, and Attachments

As with any business letter, the liaison statement contains content explaining the issues or questions at hand.

Usually, the statement also contains a short (single line) title providing a statement of its context and content.

Attachments, if enclosed, may be in the form of documents sent with the liaison statement, or may be URLs to similar documents, including Internet Drafts.

IETF participants use a wide variety of systems, thus document formats that are not universally readable are problematic. As a result, documents enclosed with the body or attachments should be in PDF, W3C HTML (without proprietary extensions), or UTF-8 encoded plain/text format. If they were originally in a proprietary format, such as Microsoft Word, the file may be sent, but should be accompanied by a generally readable file.

Different organisations have different requirements on the format of liaison statements. There are no requirements from the IETF on the format of the actual liaison statement; however, we require the metadata (address information and purpose) as indicated in the previous section to be recorded explicitly. As such, when receiving statements from other organisations, these metadata should be extracted. Further, the content of the statement must be recorded. This content may be recorded by archiving a received document in its original format, such as PDF or word, or may be transformed into another format, such as plain text or markdown, when it is reasonable to do so.

For statements sent from the IETF, it is recommended to provide the content in plain text but also provide an attachment following the formatting requirements of the receiving organisation if possible. In cases where we have a liaison manager, it is the responsibility of the liaison to check or convert the formatting requirements. It is further recommended to convert received documents in proprietary formats into PDF and upload both versions as attachments.

This ensures that our process can comply with all formatting requirements from other organisations.

3. Recording Liaison Statements

For the IETF, a liaison statement is a message that was sent or received (usually an email or some formal letter) that is recorded in our liaison management tool, i.e. the value of sending a liaison statement for an organization compared to an email, is that it will officially be recorded and the public record will attest that certain information has been communicated between the organizations.

3.1. Incoming Liaison Statements from Other SDOs

The IETF will record any received liaison statement and make it publicly available.

For received liaison statements with a formal liaison relationship, it is the responsibility of the liaison manager to create that public record. However, even if a formal liaison relationship exists, it is possible that liaison statements arrive without knowledge of the liaison manager. Therefore, it is generally the responsibility of the receiver to ensure a public record is created.

Liaison statements that are sent to the IETF without a liaison manager are generally handled by the IAB. Ideally, statements are sent to a contact point appointed by the IAB, who records them and further distributes them within the IETF to the right groups and experts. This enables a better control to ensure that liaison statements are received by the relevant parties.

However, it is difficult to ensure that liaison statements will always be sent to the right group or person, as statements are sometimes sent directly to WG mailing lists or individuals. E.g an SDO might send a liaison statement to a specific IETF Area whose Area Director (AD) deems it better handled by one of the WGs, or it might be sent to one WG when it should have gone to a different, more relevant one. If a liaison statement arrives that appears misdirected, it is recommended to manually forward it to the right groups and inform the liaison manager or the IAB so that informal feedback can be provided to the sender for the future.

3.2. Outgoing Liaison Statements from the IETF

IETF participants (usually WG chairs or ADs), of course adhering to the requirements on approval and consensus as outlined in the next section, can send liaison statements to other SDOs, and all sent liaison statements must be publicly recorded. Therefore, it is recommended to use an IETF-provided tool to send liaison statements, rather than send them directly by email and record them after the fact. This approach is possible e.g. if a certain form of submission other than email is required by the other organization.

4. Sending Liaison Statements from the IETF

There are different reasons for an IETF group to send a liaison statement to another organization such as

* A working group might request additional information from another organization, for example, to resolve an impasse (i.e., don't waste time arguing over what the real meaning or intent of another SDOs document is, just ask the other SDO and base further work on the "official" answer).

* A working group might request comments for a document under development in the IETF that would benefit from the input of experts in another relevant SDO, consortium, or forum. Generally, this is done before the text is "fully cooked" so that input from experts in another organization can be included in the final result.

* In the case of overlapping or related work in another organization, a request could be made that the other organization change something to align with the IETF work.

* A request could be made for another organization to start a new work item (on behalf of IETF).

* A request could be made for another organization to stop a work item (presumably because it overlaps or conflicts with other work in the IETF).

Further, a group might reply to an incoming liaison statement, as discussed in more detail in the next section; however, of course, the same requirements on consensus and approval as discussed in this section are applied.

Liaison Statements can be generated at a WG, Area, or IETF level to another organization. The respective (co)chair(s) or Area Director (AD) are responsible for deciding the content and judging the level of consensus that is needed for sending the respective content. This section outlines approval requirements and gives guidance about the level of consensus that should be sought before sending a liaison statement to another organization.

Generally, it is recommended to base liaison statements on existing consensus (in the form of references to RFCs or other IETF documents) or focus on information sharing related to e.g. process like expected timelines, rather than aiming to communicate technical matters beyond the active work of the respective group. Further, the level of consensus implied or not implied by the liaison statement should be spelled out clearly in the liaison statement itself, as this provides the most clarity and avoids potential confusion.

4.1. Approval

All liaison statements sent by any group in the IETF need AD approval to ensure that those writing such statements, who claim to be speaking on behalf of a group in the IETF, are truly representing IETF views. This does not include statements sent by the IAB, which require IAB approval instead, based on the judgment of the IAB Chair. Statements sent from an area, respectively, need approval by at least one of the responsible ADs. Statements sent by the IETF or IESG require IETF Chair approval.

Sometimes it is beneficial or required to send a statement that indicates the IETF as the originator rather than a specific working group or area. This might be the case e.g. for questions related to the scope of work of the IETF as a whole rather than a specific chartered group. In this case, approval of the IETF Chair is required; however, it is usually expected that other matter experts, sometimes from the IESG or IAB, are involved in generating the content of the statement.

Statements sent by the IESG do not have different approval requirements than statements sent by the IETF: both require IETF Chair approval. This is to avoid heavy processes when sending liaison statements. However, statements from the IESG might imply there is consensus among the IESG and, as recommended earlier in this document, it is best to clarify in the statement itself if that is intended or not.

In cases where prior approval was not obtained as outlined above, and the designated authority (AD, IETF Chair, or IAB Chair) in fact does not agree with the message, the designated authority will work with the liaison manager or IAB to follow up as appropriate, including emitting a revised liaison statement if necessary. Clearly, this is a situation best avoided by assuring appropriate agreement in advance of sending the liaison message.

4.2. Level of Consensus

A liaison statement does not automatically imply any level of consensus and as such it is the responsibility of the chairs or the responsible AD to figure out if working groups consensus should be strived for before sending a liaison statement.

The simplest case of sending a liaison statement from IETF is when the information being transmitted is based on already existing IETF consensus, such as an IETF document that has some level of agreement within the IETF or general information about the process or (WG) scope. When sending such statements for pure information sharing purposes, the chairs or AD might not reach out for consensus.

Further, requests for information from the other organization, including requests for access to certain documents of other organizations that are not publicly available, may be initiated by the chair if the additional input is considered helpful for the group’s progress.

Other requests, that might often be initiated by a specific group discussion, such as soliciting comments for a standards track WG Internet Draft, usually benefit from some level of consensus to be reached in the WG, or another appropriate, open mailing list.

Generally, it is recommended to inform the respective group or individuals before transmitting a statement to create early awareness as the recording and sending of the statement must be announced to the originating group.

4.3. Transmitting (references to) documents

Any Standards Track RFC (Draft Standard, Proposed Standard, Internet Standard, BCP), and any WG document expected to be placed on the standards track, may be transmitted without concern. Informational documents may also be exchanged readily when they represent a WG position or consensus, such as a requirement or architecture document.

Individually submitted Internet Drafts, Experimental or Historical RFCs, and non-WG informational documents should not be transmitted without developing further consensus within the relevant group, as these documents cannot be truthfully represented as any kind of IETF position.

In all cases, the document status must be appropriately noted. In the case of a WG Internet Draft, it must be clear that the existence of the draft only indicates that the WG has accepted the work item and, as the standard disclaimer says, the actual content can be treated as nothing more than as ’Work in Progress’.

5. Receiving and Responding to Incoming Liaison Statements

The responsibilities of the receiver of a liaison statement are the same as the responsibilities of any business letter. A liaison statement calls for appropriate consideration of its contents. Liaison Statements are always important to the body that sent them. Having arrived at the appropriate body, the liaison statement may be more or less important to the receiver depending on its contents and the expertise of the sender.

If the liaison statement seeks to influence the direction of a WG’s development, it should receive the same consideration as any input document receives. This could be the case if a liaison statement provides input to a working group document, requests modifications, or new work, or comments on the scope of work. The WG chair may request the sender to make their case to the IETF WG in the same manner that an author of an Internet-Draft makes their case.

If a reply is requested (usually marked as "For Action"), the originating organziation expects a response by the deadline. The urgency of a liaison statement is usually reflected in its deadline. A liaison statement specifying a deadline gives the receiver a finite opportunity to influence the activity of another body; if it fails to react in a timely fashion, it may miss the opportunity.

Examples of the kinds of actions that may be requested are:

* Access to documents or information about the process and timelines.

* Comments on a document of another organisation.

* Technical questions related to an RFC or working group document.

* A request for the IETF to align its work with that of the other organization, in the case of overlapping or related work.

* A request for the IETF to undertake a new work item.

* A request for the IETF to stop a work item (presumably because it overlaps or conflicts with other work in the originating organization).

The originating organization should always be informed of what, if anything, the IETF has decided to do in response to the request, either by sending a formal liaison statement back or utilizing information communication, like a simple email reply, if appropriate. If a formal liaison relationship with a liaison manager exists, it is the responsibility of the liaison manager to ensure appropriate communication. Otherwise, the IAB can be consulted and should be integrated into any additional informal communication.

There is, of course, no requirement that IETF perform the action that was requested. But the request should always be taken seriously, and generally, a response is anticipated. The reply may be that the information was useful or not useful, that the requested action has been accomplished, it will be accomplished by a specified date, it will not be done for a specific reason, an answer to a question posed, or any other appropriate reply. If the IETF decides not to honor the request, or to honor it with modifications, ideally, the response should include the reasons and, if applicable, an alternate course of action.

It is the responsibility of the (co)chair(s) of the addressed group, supported by the liaison manager if one exists, to ensure that a response is generated by the deadline if a response is intended. In some cases, a liaison statement may require consideration by multiple groups within the IETF; in such cases, potentially multiple chairs and area directors have to coordinate, but ideally one of them takes the lead and responsibility for developing a response.

5.1. Level of Consensus When Sending a Response

As discussed in Section 4.2, it is the chairs’ and AD’s responsibility to decide about the necessary level of consensus needed for a certain response. This section adds additional consideration when replying to a request from another organization.

As also discussed in Section 4.3, if another organization requests information that can be found in an IETF document, this can be transmitted by the (co)chair(s) of the addressed group, indicating the level of agreement for the relevant document.

If an incoming liaison statement requests information that goes beyond what is documented in existing IETF documents, such as asking for comments on a document from another organization or a specific technical question not addressed in existing RFCs, the chairs should seek group input. Usually, such a request is received on the mailing list of a group, and a discussion will occur on the mailing list where participants can provide their comments.

If a clear consensus is evident from the pattern of comments made to the mailing list, the (co)chair(s) can summarize the conclusions in a reply liaison statement back to the originating organization.

If no clear consensus is evident from the pattern of comments on the mailing list, or if there is no further discussion, a response is still anticipated to the originator. A summary of the email comments, or lack of interest in the issue, can be created and sent to the originator, and represented as "collected comments" rather than a consensus of the IETF group to which the liaison statement was addressed. It is possible to send this kind of reply even if some of the comments are contradictory.

For other requests for actions, for example, if initiating or stopping a work item requires a charter change, the consensus of the receiving group within IETF or even IETF-wide consensus is clearly necessary to fulfill the request. However, as already indicated, a liaison statement has no special standing and should be considered equal to all other inputs. Still, if there is a need for this work by the other organization the request should be considered seriously. Usually, it is appropriate for the chairs to send a response (by the deadline) and explain the process, or invite experts of the other organization to participate directly, even if the request itself cannot be fulfilled by the deadline. Potential follow-up liaison statements might be sent to provide a status update, e.g. when a document gets adopted or is ready for publication.

6. Security Considerations

One of the key considerations in developing this process has been the possibility of a denial of service attack on the IETF and its processes. Historically, the IETF has not always handled liaison statements effectively, resulting in people working in other organizations becoming frustrated with it. Various organizations have also used the liaison statement process to impose deadlines on IETF activities, which has been frustrating for all concerned - the IETF because it does not accept such deadlines, and other organizations because they feel ignored. While the IETF cannot rate-limit the submitters, it can manage its internal pipelines.

This issue is exacerbated by the lack of any authentication on the part of the submitter. However, the IAB considers it important to be able to accept liaison statements, whether or not a liaison relationship exists, so authentication of submitters is not an effective control.

7. IANA Considerations

This document has no IANA actions.

Acknowledgments

[RFC4053] was authored by Stephen Trowbridge, Scott Bradner, Fred Baker. The text in RFC4053 further has been prompted by discussions with numerous individuals within IETF and other SDOs and fora, including Gary Fishman and Bert Wijnen. It has been developed in cooperation with [RFC4052], which is to say with the express cooperation of the chair of the IAB at that time, Leslie Daigle.

This document contain parts of text from [RFC4053], however, all tooling details were removed and the remaining text will be reworked step by step with the goal to end up with a shorter and clear document that outlines requirements and gives high-level guidance to people sending and receiving liaison statements.

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Authors’ Addresses

Mirja Kuehlewind (editor)
IAB
Email: ietf@kuehlewind.net

Suresh Krishnan
IAB
Email: suresh.krishnan@gmail.com

Qin Wu
IAB
Email: bill.wu@huawei.com