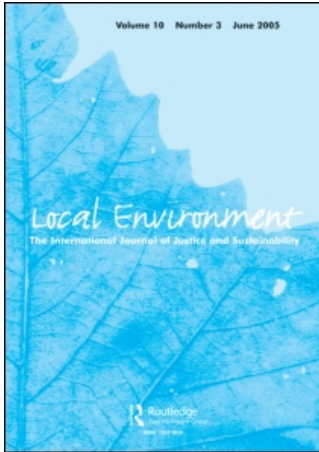


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ARTICLE

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# The Mersey Basin and its River Valley Initiatives: an appropriate model for the management of rivers?

SUE KIDD & DAVID SHAW

**ABSTRACT** *Concepts of sustainable development have stimulated innovation in the delivery of environmental management. In particular, new partnership approaches have been developed in recognition of the need to adopt more holistic perspectives and facilitate multi-sectoral and cross-sectoral working. River catchments are complex systems and have been one particular focus of experimentation in environmental management mechanisms. This paper provides a brief overview of river management experience in the UK, charting changing approaches in terms of scope and organisation since the 1970s. This sets the context for a more detailed examination of the Mersey Basin Campaign and, in particular, its River Valley Initiatives. The paper concludes with an evaluation of the merits of this approach in relation to sustainable river management.*

## Introduction

Recent years have seen a major shift in environmental policy. Concepts of sustainable development are now firmly on the agenda and this has had a considerable impact on environmental management. Growing recognition of the links between human activity and ecological relations and capacities has highlighted the need for a more holistic approach. This requires the harmonisation of economic, social and environmental decision-making. It emphasises the need for cross-sectoral and multi-level co-operation and action. In addition, recognition of the scale of natural processes in the development of effective environmental management mechanisms is highlighted.

Although such ideas are now widely accepted, they are potentially difficult to operationalise as they require a transformation of traditional compartmentalised working practices and the engagement of many organisations and individuals not previously directly concerned with environmental matters. However, in an effort to incorporate sustainability principles, partnership models of environmental management are becoming increasingly evident (Kidd *et al.*, 1997). Through such models, attempts are being made to co-ordinate established public sector activity, harness and develop private and voluntary sector action and develop a sense of shared responsibility and stewardship for local areas.

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River valley management is an area where this search for improved environmental management practices has been evident. The challenge is how to achieve the rational, efficient and equitable management of a finite resource whose supply is being adversely affected by population growth and resultant pollution. The need for an integrated and holistic approach has been considered essential but the traditional fragmented approach to water resource development has proved to be a great impediment to integrated water management (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), 1992).

Influenced by such thinking, attention has been given to the development of mechanisms to ensure the effective management of river basins. This has highlighted a range of issues related to the appropriate scale and form of management arrangements and the difficulties in devising structures which have both integrity in terms of natural boundaries and relevance and identity at the local scale. Examination of established river management mechanisms illustrates the difficulties involved. For example, major flooding in the Lowland countries of Europe in 1994 (Belgium, France and the Netherlands) and more recently in eastern Europe (along the German–Polish border) has drawn attention to the need for the transnational management of major river systems (Commission of the European Communities (CEC), 1994). However, despite the long-standing existence of the International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine, established by the 1963 Berne Convention, an inquiry into the 1994 flood indicated that actions in the upper part of the Rhine Basin had catastrophic impacts further downstream. A lack of local engagement with the strategic river management objectives of the Commission can perhaps be inferred. Attempts to try and encourage a sense of environmental stewardship at the local level have been made in Belgium and have led to the development of ‘river contract’ schemes. These cover water-courses ranging from large rivers running through polluted industrial regions to tiny streams in rural districts (Mormont, 1996). Each contract is specific in terms of the problems identified and the projects devised to tackle them. The contracts all fall within the same operational model. The emphasis in each scheme is placed on voluntary partnerships to devise and implement the schemes, with local communities taking a key role. However, what appears to be absent is the sense of a strategic overview which ensures that action at the level of individual rivers contributes to management objectives at the basin level.

Growing appreciation of the need for active river management has also been evident in the UK and, since the early 1970s, a range of management approaches have emerged. One of the most innovative developments, established in 1985, has been the Mersey Basin Campaign (MBC), located in the north-west of England. Eight years into its life the MBC developed its River Valley Initiatives (RVIs). As a result the MBC now presents an interesting example of a tiered approach which attempts to provide coherent and effective river management at a basin level, and develop a sense of local stewardship of individual water-courses at the local scale. This paper seeks to add to the river management debate by providing an overview of river management experience in the UK. This provides the context for the subsequent examination of the MBC and, in particular, its RVIs. The paper concludes with an evaluation of the merits of this approach in relation to sustainable river management.

## **River Management in the UK: an overview**

Even before the Rio Earth Summit, there was evidence that the UK government was attempting to shift programmes and policies towards the concept of sustainability. In *This Common Inheritance* (Department of the Environment (DoE), 1990), the then Conservative government set out its commitment towards delivering sustainable development in the UK. Whilst many environmentalists were critical that the document was not sufficiently radical, it did recognise “the need for the right institutional arrangements to deliver successful environmental policy” (DoE, 1990, p. 157). This inevitably poses the question of what these might be, but by inference the final section of the document suggested that they were likely to involve some form of partnership arrangement whereby all interested parties could collaborate and co-operate to deliver agreed environmental benefits. However, it would be erroneous to suggest that such thinking was purely a 1990s phenomenon. Indeed, a growing recognition of the need for more holistic, partnership approaches to environmental management has been evident in the development of river management in the UK since the early 1970s. A range of practices have been adopted over the ensuing period and changes in emphasis and institutional arrangement are apparent.

In terms of these variations in emphasis, Merritt (1997) identified six spheres of action which water resource management should ideally seek to embrace:

- protection of water’s hydrocyclical capacity to renew ground and surface water;
- purification of water from effluents;
- conservation of natural habitats;
- husbandry of water in its supply and use;
- supplying water to meet society’s biological, cultural and economic needs;
- protection against floods.

Examination of UK river management practice reveals that the emphasis given to these spheres of action has varied over time. Initially, they were pursued in a rather compartmentalised manner and it is only recently that a more holistic and co-ordinated approach has begun to emerge.

In relation to institutional arrangements, variation in the extent of public sector control appears to be the most critical factor. Recent years have witnessed a profound shift in the mechanisms through which environmental management objectives are secured. Traditionally, the principal delivery agents were public sector organisations. In contrast, contemporary initiatives are increasingly multi-sectoral in character. This emerging emphasis on partnership is partly a response to developing notions of sustainable development. However, it is important to recognise that partnerships have been increasing in other spheres of management and that this general trend also reflects changing attitudes to the role of the state over recent years. Thus it can be seen that the idea of partnership emerged in the late 1970s as part of an attempt to improve public sector service delivery. It evolved in the 1980s as a means of acquiring greater private sector involvement in development facilitation and in the 1990s as a vehicle for stimulating local policy ownership and associated action.

By applying these criteria it is possible to describe the approach to river management in the UK, which emerged in the early 1970s, as compartmentalised and led by the public sector. Prominent in this period were two forms of river valley planning which had a recreational focus. One form developed as a result of the Countryside Commission (CoCo) promoting the benefits of an area-based approach to countryside management, particularly in the urban fringe (Groome, 1993). Within the north-west of England, the Goyt Local Traffic Experiment and the Bollin River Valley Project were examples of CoCo-initiated countryside management schemes with a river valley focus. These schemes were jointly financed by the CoCo and the relevant local authorities. This funding covered small-scale capital projects and the employment of project officers. The project officers were concerned with reconciling problems of access, developing and maintaining recreational provision and providing educational programmes, and according to Lavery (1982) the pragmatic qualities of the individuals involved often helped shape the success of these schemes.

Drawing upon this experience, a number of local authorities subsequently embarked on a development plan-led approach in an effort to reconcile conflict and realise the potential of the river valleys that flowed through their areas. This formed a second strand of activity in this period. The preparation of formal and informal subject local plans, designed to deal with one particular issue or area, demonstrated recognition of the particular characteristics of river valleys, the need for a clear vision for the management of these resources and the important role local authorities were perceived to have with regard to their care. Again, the focus of these plans was predominantly recreational but concern for the conservation of natural habitats was also evident. Examples of such plans include that produced for the River Cam in and around Cambridge (Cambridgeshire County Council, 1973) and the waterways within Reading (Berkshire County Council, 1978).

However, perhaps the most significant focus of plan-led river management activity was in Greater Manchester. Here, the structure plan encouraged the development of a county-wide network of green leisure corridors based on the Greater Manchester river valleys. Policies sought to promote environmental improvement and protection as well as developing leisure facilities within these areas. The structure plan also provided the underpinning for the preparation of subject local plans related to individual watercourses. Ultimately, six of these were published, covering the Mersey, Croal/Irwell, Douglas, Etherow/Goyt, Tame and Medlock river valleys (Davenport, 1996). The Greater Manchester experience also illustrates a growing appreciation of the need for a broader approach to river management. It was recognised that improvement in water quality was critical to the realisation of leisure-related objectives. In addition, and partly linked to this, there was a growing recognition of the importance of supportive action by a range of public and other agencies, and of the need to create formal structures to facilitate this partnership approach. As a result, for each of the local plan areas a joint committee was set up composed of elected members of the relevant local authorities. Representatives of the CoCo, the North West Water Authority, British Waterways, the North West Sports Council

for Sport and Recreation, the National Trust and a variety of local interest groups also sat on these committees, but, significantly, did not have any voting powers.

It can be seen, therefore, that the 1970s represented a period of experimentation and innovation in river management, particularly in relation to recreation, but also in relation to water quality and nature conservation concerns. However, it would be wrong to imply that other aspects of river management, such as flood protection, were being ignored. Indeed, through the activities of the regional water authorities and local drainage authorities a much more rational, technical and engineered perspective towards such matters was emerging. The results frequently involved schemes which lacked sympathy with the environment and recreational and nature conservation considerations. Consequently, such aspects of river management became the subject of increasing criticism, and calls for a more holistic approach to river management strengthened (Newson, 1992).

The 1980s saw the emergence of a very different approach, partly as a result of such calls but also due to the changing political perspectives of the period. Local authorities came under increasing pressure from central government to become enablers rather than the sole deliverers of the 'public good'. This, coupled with substantial cuts in their expenditure, meant that the scope for direct local authority action in areas of discretionary activity, such as river management, became increasingly limited. In addition, the privatisation of key public utilities and the development of a range of specialist quangos charged with specific goals and responsibilities led to a new approach to the management of local resources (Cloke, 1992; Thornley, 1993). In relation to water, the 1989 Water Act in England and Wales split the regional water authorities into privatised water companies and established the National Rivers Authority (NRA) as the public body responsible for overseeing the management of water resources. The configuration of the NRA reflected contemporary thinking on the scope of river management, and it had a broad remit which reflected the full spectrum of river management activities (see Table 1).

In order to provide a framework for its work, the NRA, through its regional offices, embarked on a programme of preparing and publishing a series of catchment management plans (CMPs). These represented the next significant development in river valley management in the UK. The aim of the CMPs was to provide "a consistent framework within which the various responsibilities of the NRA can be implemented within a catchment" (NRA, 1993, p. 1). The plans were intended to provide a link between the NRA and the users of water catchments so that the NRA could better reflect their interests while carrying out its duties. Although these plans reflected the broad scope of river management and were devised to be consistent with natural boundaries, they were conceived by the NRA primarily as internal management documents. However, it soon became clear that effective links with other organisations and agencies were necessary if the aims and objectives for each catchment were to be fully realised. Whilst the NRA consulted widely in the preparation of the CMPs and included actions that needed to be taken by other agencies, the process was still largely top-down and did not represent a real partnership approach. For example, Slater *et al.* (1994) reported that the links between the CMPs and the statutory land use plans, which should have been close, were by no means readily apparent.

TABLE 1. Spheres of water resource management and NRA responsibilities

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Sphere of water resource management	NRA responsibility
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Purification of water from effluents</li><li>• Conservation of natural habitats</li><li>• Husbandry of water in its supply and use</li><li>• Protection of water's hydrocyclical capacity to renew ground and surface water</li><li>• Supplying water to meet society's biological, cultural and economic needs</li><li>• Protection against floods</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Improving water quality and controlling pollution</li><li>• Nature conservation in water and related habitats</li><li>• Conserving water resources and controlling abstraction</li><li>• Maintenance and improvement of fisheries</li><li>• Promotion of water-related recreation</li><li>• Control of navigation</li><li>• Providing flood defence and flood warning systems</li></ul>

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*Sources:* Merritt (1997) and NRA (1994).

Further institutional reform followed in the mid-1990s. In 1996 the new Environment Agency (EA) was established for England. Formed as a result of the Environment Act 1995, this body integrated the responsibilities of the former NRA, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Pollution, the local waste regulation authorities and certain staff of the DoE into an extremely powerful pollution control agency. Its power is in part reflected in its responsibilities, which, according to the Environment Act, include the onerous task of delivering sustainable development. Because of the enhanced remit of the EA, it has subsequently been felt to be necessary to extend the scope of the CMPs beyond water resources to cover issues such as air quality and waste disposal and it is envisaged that the newly named local environment action plans (LEAPs) should be seen as key environmental management documents for local communities. However, to date, perhaps because the new EA is dominated by former NRA employees, the new LEAPs appear to place most weight and emphasis on water-related issues. Equally, whilst there is consultation in the plan preparation process and a clear recognition that "the Agency will be jointly responsible, with other identified organisations and individuals for implementing the Action Plan" (EA, 1997, p. 5), there is still a widespread perception that this is largely a top-down approach that is not locally accountable, the main purpose of the LEAPs being to direct EA activities.

There is no doubt that the EA is undergoing a period of experimentation in relation to its LEAPs and that within the organisation questions are being raised as to what are the most appropriate institutional and organisational structures to deliver integrated and holistic management. While the new LEAPs may have the benefits of being broad in scope and consistent with natural boundaries (i.e. river catchments), the lack of local community identity with their objectives and a true

sense of partnership is perceived as an important limitation of the approach. As a consequence, in the north-west of England, regional officers of the EA have begun to seriously consider whether lessons can be drawn from the experience of the MBC and, in particular, its associated RVIs. This experience reflects a very different approach to river management which is based on the development of broadly configured partnerships at a series of different scales. The remainder of this paper explores the form of this alternative approach and evaluates its merits as an institutional model able to take a long-term partnership approach to the management of local water resources and, most importantly, engender a sense of local stewardship related to the care of individual watercourses.

### **The MBC**

The MBC is a government-sponsored 25-year initiative to clean up the rivers, canals and estuary of the Mersey Basin and restore the associated land to optimum use. Formally launched by the DoE in 1985, the MBC covers an area of some 4680 km<sup>2</sup> with over 2000 km of watercourses. At the inception of the MBC the Mersey estuary was the most polluted in the UK, receiving up to 60% of the mainland pollution generated by over 5 million people living and working in the catchment (MBC, 1995). The MBC has three overarching objectives:

- to improve river quality to at least fair standard by 2010 so that all rivers and streams are clean enough to support fish;
- to stimulate attractive waterside developments for business, recreation, housing, tourism and heritage;
- to encourage people living and working in the Mersey Basin to value and cherish their watercourses and waterfront environments.

To achieve such goals, initial rough estimates suggested that the clean-up campaign would require a £4 billion funding programme (£2.5 billion for water quality measures and £1.5 billion for landward regeneration).

The MBC is in many respects an esoteric concept. It is a vision towards which a wide range of partners work. In his introduction to the *First Periodic Report*, Peter Walton, the then director of the environment and technology arm of the government's North West Regional Office, described the most significant element in the emergence of the MBC as:

... the seemingly elusive federal nature of the operation ... I am convinced that understanding the true character of the Campaign calls for a kind of conversion in outlook—after which the ‘modus operandi’ becomes clearer. In providing a framework in which all partners can gain from their own inputs, the Campaign seeks continually for added value. (MBC, 1995, p. 3)

Clearly, the MBC is based on the notion of partnership, which encourages concerted and co-operative action towards an agreed set of objectives. As a loose



federal entity the MBC is owned by all its participating partners, though three key organisations have been established at the centre.

- (1) Mersey Basin Campaign Administration Ltd acts as the overall co-ordinator and administrator of the partnership. It was originally part of the government's North West Regional Office, but since 1996 it has become a free-standing company grant-aided by central government.
- (2) The Mersey Basin Trust was formed in 1987. It is a registered charity and acts as a focal point for the community and voluntary sector to voice their views on the Campaign.
- (3) The Mersey Basin Business Foundation, formed in 1991, acts as a channel for business sponsorship for MBC-related activities.

These organisations promote, and facilitate action by, the myriad of agencies and groups involved in the MBC. As Peter Walton indicated, during the early years of the MBC much of its time was spent in spreading awareness of its vision and persuading other organisations to work towards its objectives. That is not to say there were no tangible achievements during this period. Much publicity was afforded to a significant number of large-scale projects, carried out by the major public and private sector agencies, which were in line with the MBC's objectives. Investment by the recently privatised water company North West Water, aimed at improving the sewerage network in the Mersey Basin, and the success of the north-west urban development corporations, in terms of landward regeneration, were particularly prominent throughout this period. No less significant, though much lower-profile, were the myriad of small community-based projects. Between 1989 and 1992, the Mersey Basin Trust provided over £100 000 in grants and enjoyed a membership of over 400 community groups, voluntary organisations and schools. Being able to effectively co-ordinate and harness all this enthusiasm and commitment was certainly a challenge which was likely to be critical to the success of the MBC in the longer term.

To this end, in 1993 the Minister for Environment and Countryside launched, under the umbrella of the MBC, the RVI programme. RVIs were in effect seen as 'mini campaigns'. Through the RVIs it was envisaged that the partnership approach of the MBC, which had been brought to bear so successfully at the strategic Mersey Basin level, could be developed to encourage local stewardship of individual watercourses. The fundamental principle behind the RVIs was that there was a need to harness the MBC's message at the local level by giving communities and individuals the opportunity to identify with its vision and objectives and be stimulated to take action for themselves.

### **RVIs**

Between 1993 and 1996, six RVIs were established (see Figure 1) covering the following diverse watercourses.

- The Alt, which is the second largest river after the Mersey. Much of its course is highly urbanised. Its mouth is an important habitat for wading birds, forming part of a site listed under the RAMSAR Convention on Wetlands of International Importance.

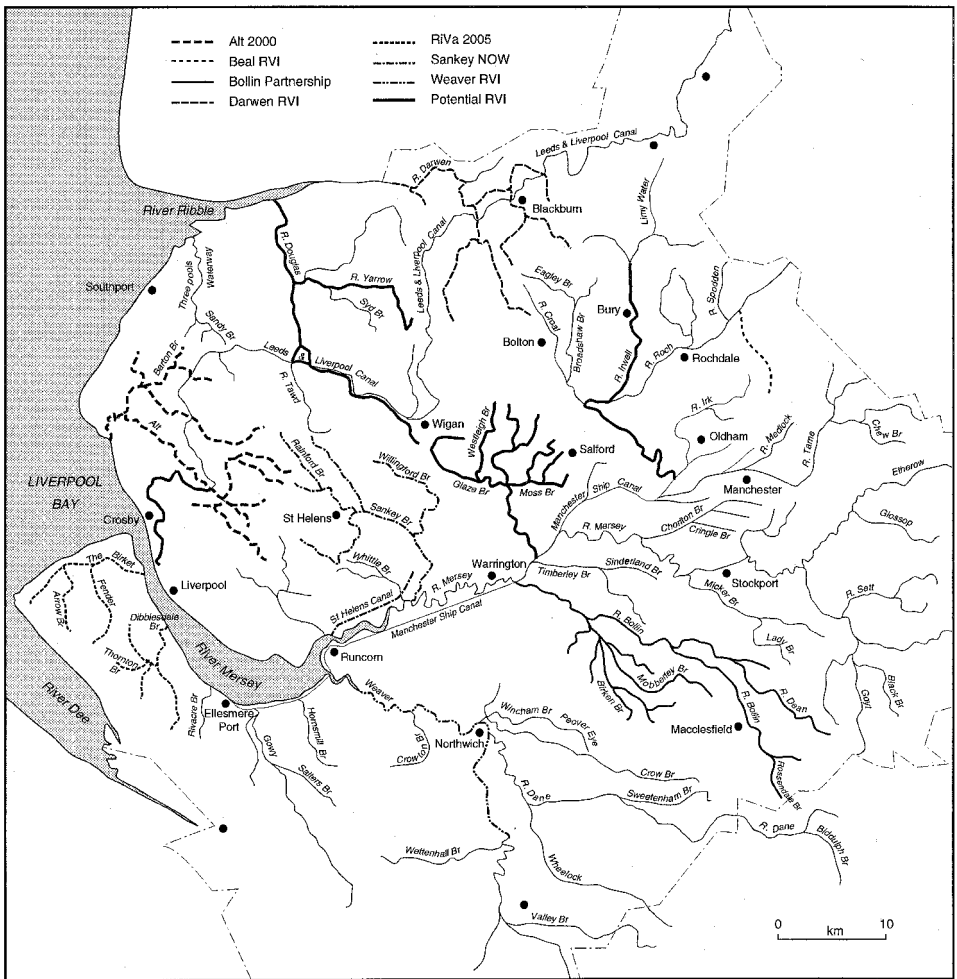


FIGURE 1. Location of the MBC RVIs. Source: Kidd *et al.* (1997).

- The Bollin, which has a predominantly agricultural catchment. The river and its tributaries have high amenity value.
- The Darwen RVI was initially focused on a 10 km stretch which is largely culverted and runs through heavily industrialised areas.
- The Riva 2005 initiative covers those catchments on the Wirral peninsula which drain into the Mersey estuary, the Birket and the Dibbinsdale Brook.
- The Sankey NOW initiative covers the Sankey Brook and the Sankey Canal.
- The Weaver is a tributary of the Mersey draining a wide area of predominantly agricultural land. The RVI covers about half the length of the river.

### The Formation of RVIs

Although the objective is to establish RVIs across the whole of the MBC area, much emphasis has been placed on the need for existing local interest in

water-related activity in order to provide a supportive environment for RVI development. The first six RVIs reflect this concern.

The Bollin RVI, for example, was considered complementary to the long-established Bollin Valley Project, and as such was felt to be an ideal vehicle to promote the MBC's new concept of mini-campaigns. Alt 2000, another of the early initiatives, was instigated by Liverpool Healthy City 2000 and Liverpool Friends of the Earth. Their original aim was to establish a green corridor running through the heart of the conurbation and, recognising a degree of consistency with the aims and objectives of the MBC, an RVI was established. Sankey NOW, in many ways, represents a new generation of RVIs. It was proposed by the local Groundwork Trust and the MBC, which felt that conditions were right for the creation of an RVI. Environmental improvements were urgently required and it was considered that the establishment of an RVI might well provide a vehicle for accessing various funding possibilities. Riva 2005 was also instigated by the MBC in conjunction with Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council. Numerous bodies were already active on the rivers of the Wirral, and it was felt that the presence of an RVI could help to co-ordinate and add weight to these efforts.

It is evident, therefore, that over time there has been a change in the way that RVIs have been designated. The MBC has always held a pivotal role in facilitating rather than initiating RVIs, often following the initiative of the Mersey Basin Trust. The importance attached to established local interest is clearly evident. The first phase of RVIs tended to involve the MBC linking into established organisations and river-related activity, whilst in more recent RVIs the MBC has been formative in working with others to develop local approaches to river valley management. In all cases, whilst one or two organisations may have taken the lead, the need for a range of local parties willing to work together towards the common objectives of the MBC was critical.

### **The Aims and Objectives of the RVIs**

Once the decision has been taken to establish an RVI, its specific purpose and function need to be defined. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given their common link to the MBC, there appears to be a great degree of similarity between the specific issues and the aims and objectives of the individual RVIs (Table 2). In particular, five dominant themes emerge:

- improving water quality;
- enhancing the land adjacent to the river and identifying suitable sites for conservation, landscape enhancement and community access;
- raising the public profile of the river;
- improving access to the river, mainly through the construction of integrated footpath and cycle networks;
- ensuring community involvement in the initiatives.

There are only three specific objectives which are unique to their respective RVIs and these reflect the particular characteristics of the area concerned:

- Alt 2000 aims to protect and interpret the internationally significant Alt estuary RAMSAR site;

TABLE 2. Aims and objectives of the RVIs

Aims and objectives	Bollin	Alt	Weaver	Sankey	Wirral	Darwen
Improve water quality	×	×	×	×	×	×
Enhance land adjacent to river and identify suitable sites for conservation, landscape improvement and community access	×	×	×	×	×	×
Raise public profile of watercourse	×	×	×	×	×	×
Involve local community in initiative	×	×	×	×	×	×
Improve access		×	×	×	×	×
Encourage business involvement in initiative	×			×		×
Integrate environmental and economic strategies		×		×		
Maintain river flows		×			×	

- the Weaver RVI seeks to promote the unique industrial heritage within its catchment, including the Anderton Boat Lift, the Lion Salt Works and the Weaver Navigation;
- Sankey NOW aims to promote the restoration of the Sankey for navigation by 2004.

The apparent similarity between the objectives of the different initiatives can partly be explained by the fact that in principle the RVIs are similar, in that they are working to bring the strengths of the MBC to the local level through partnership. However, by encouraging communities in the Mersey Basin to develop a sense of ‘ownership’ of their local watercourses it is perhaps inevitable that the aims and objectives of individual RVIs are more detailed than those of the MBC in general. Similarly, variations in emphasis can be expected. Although water quality concerns remain a constant feature, greater importance seems to be given within the RVIs to environmental, access and recreational issues and less to the regenerative aims which feature prominently in the operation of the MBC at a more strategic level.

### **Organisation and Operation of the RVIs**

Having established a clear set of objectives, the RVIs depend very heavily on the ability of the RVI organisation to generate local interest and action. All the RVIs reviewed have a local steering group, which is primarily there to determine the strategy the RVI is to follow and to make decisions about its general operation. Its composition reflects the local partners involved, though all have a core membership with at least one representative from the following organisations:

- the MBC;
- relevant local authorities;
- the EA;
- North West Water.

Variation in the role of the steering groups is evident in terms of the frequency of meetings and their remit in relation to the daily running and management of the RVIs. The partnership approach may necessitate the establishment of a broadly configured steering group, though this may prove unwieldy in terms of day-to-day management or detailed project development. The creation of smaller subgroups developing programmes and projects relating to specific themes, for example education, publicity, access and funding, seems to be desirable in terms of operational efficiency.

As the RVI partnerships move from initial establishment and strategy development towards implementation, the potential workload of an RVI increases dramatically. It is at this stage that the role of individual project officers becomes more and more critical. All but one of the RVIs (the Bollin) employ such a person. Edward-Jones (1997), in her review of river valley activities in Scotland, felt that the project officer was probably the single most important factor that could help account for the success or otherwise of an initiative. The project officer's role is one of co-ordinator and facilitator rather than manager. Project officers deal with the day-to-day aspects of the initiatives and are there as a general point of contact.

Notwithstanding the personal qualities of individual project officers, their effectiveness appears to a large extent to depend on the nature of their position. This has been very variable, ranging from situations where they are engaged on a part-time or even voluntary basis, or as a student placement, to situations where the project officer has a fixed-term full-time contract. The critical factor in the employment status of the project officers is the level of funding that the RVI has been able to attract. Edward-Jones (1997) has suggested that to employ an individual and provide them with access to basic office facilities would cost approximately £30 000 per year. Notwithstanding the fact that many RVIs have been provided with office space, the employment costs themselves are not insignificant. Nevertheless, the use of packaged arrangements between the partners has enabled project officers to be employed in some capacity in most cases. For example, the Weaver project officer is funded by the MBC and the EA, whilst North West Water provides an office and the use of a telephone and fax as payment in kind. The contract for the Sankey NOW project officer was funded by a partnership between the MBC and Pilkington.

The funding situation seems to be improving, with a number of parties beginning to commit themselves to funding the initiatives over a longer time scale. The EA is becoming an important provider: with Sankey NOW it will provide £7500 per year over 3 years towards the project officer's costs; in the case of the Weaver it is at least £5000 per year; and in the case of the Darwin it is £2000 per year. At the same time, some RVIs have attracted significant private sector funding: for example, Riva 2000 obtained £6000 from Associated Octel and Vauxhall, and Sankey NOW attracted £8500 from Pilkington and £20 000 from Allied Domecq and the Groundwork Foundation. In addition, the public sector is providing some matching funding: £3000 from the CoCo for the Darwin and £5000 from Vale Royal Borough Council for the Weaver. Such

contributions, whilst a significant improvement over early funding patterns, in the main help to cover basic running costs. With some security for the project officers concerned, there is some optimism that the RVIs will be able to attract funding from other sources so that strategies and programmes can be operationalised.

### **Scope of Action**

Much of the early effort of the RVIs reviewed was directed towards clarifying appropriate aims and objectives, and developing and fine-tuning organisational and operational matters. However, early evidence of practical action related to the goals of the RVIs is also felt to be very important in order to help publicise the initiatives and attract more partners into the programmes.

Table 3 provides a summary of the types of strategy and information documents produced by the six RVIs. These range from specific project-related documents, such as the Alt 2000 European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) delivery plan, to descriptive reports which are more sources of information about the RVI area, for example the Sankey RVI Working Paper. The majority of the documents do, however, contain some form of strategy framework within which the RVIs are intended to operate, although this may be subject to change as the RVIs evolve. In addition to these broader policy documents, a whole range of publicity material has been produced.

From a project point of view, the majority of the RVIs appear, so far, to have very few schemes either under way or planned which would not be happening independently of the RVI. The large-scale infrastructure projects of North West Water, for example, are part of the company's long-term capital expenditure, which reflects, in part, the strategic objectives of the MBC but to date has not readily been directed to address the local objectives of individual RVIs. Similarly, schemes such as the reinstatement of meanders by the EA, whilst working towards RVI objectives, are dependent on EA expenditure and reflect the EA's own project priorities. In such instances the main role of the RVI partnership is to fine-tune projects to accomplish wider RVI-related goals. Factors which may account for this current lack of RVI-specific projects include: the early development of the RVIs; shortage of funding; and the lack of commitment by partners, due in the main to time constraints rather than lack of enthusiasm.

### **An Evaluation of the MBC and the RVI Approach to River Management**

From the above review it can be seen that the MBC and its associated RVIs present an innovative approach to river management, and that, although there may be limitations and difficulties associated with this experience, it does potentially offer some useful lessons which might assist the development of more effective river valley management in the UK and elsewhere.

It could be argued that one of the most significant limitations of the MBC and the RVIs is their scope of interest. Table 4 compares their objectives against Merritt's (1997) six spheres of water resource management. This indicates that important river management issues related to the husbandry of water resources

TABLE 3. Summary of strategy documents produced by the RVIs

RVI	Type of strategy document	Date published	Author	Life of document	Review procedure
Bollin	<i>Position Statement</i> : catchment data; opportunities and problems; general suggestions for way forward; no specific 'strategy'.	June 1996	MBC	Indefinite	No plan for review at present
Alt	(1) <i>Alt 2000—strategy for action</i> and <i>Alt 2000—catchment data</i> : aims and objectives; summarises key opportunities and problems; general strategy for future; catchment data. (2) <i>ERDF Delivery Plan</i> : ERDF projects; lead agencies; expenditure profile; timing/outputs.	1993	Groundwork	Indefinite	Reviewed as initiative progresses by steering group.
Weaver	<i>Strategy Plan and Information Document</i> : catchment data; opportunities and problems; possible projects: lead agencies' time scale.	1995/1996	Alt 2000 project group and managing agent	April 1996 to March 1998	Quarterly review procedure.
Sankey	<i>Strategy Plan and Information Document</i> : catchment data; opportunities and problems; possible projects: lead agencies' time scale. (1) <i>Sankey River Valley Initiative: working document</i> : aims and objectives; catchment data. (2) <i>Action Plan</i> : overall RVI strategy.	October 1995	Gillespies Environmental Consultants	Indefinite	Possible project list is currently under review.
Sankey	(1) <i>Sankey River Valley Initiative: working document</i> : aims and objectives; catchment data. (2) <i>Action Plan</i> : overall RVI strategy.	September 1995	MBC	Indefinite	No plans for review as it is an information document.
Riva	(1) <i>Wirral River Valley Study</i> : aims and objectives; catchment data; opportunities and problems; strategy for action.	Ongoing	Steering group	Indefinite	Constantly under review.
Riva	(1) <i>Wirral River Valley Study</i> : aims and objectives; catchment data; opportunities and problems; strategy for action.	June 1995	University of Liverpool students	Indefinite	None

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TABLE 3. (continued)

RVI	Type of strategy document	Date published	Author	Life of document	Review procedure
	(2) <i>Fender Valley Study</i> : aims and objectives; catchment data; opportunities and problems; strategy for action.	June 1996	University of Liverpool students	Indefinite	None
Darwen	<i>Darwen River Valley Initiative—working plan</i> : aims and objectives; catchment data; opportunities and problems; action plan.	April 1996 (2nd draft)	Darwen RVI project officer	Indefinite	

*Note:* MBC, Metropolitan Borough Council.

*Source:* Kidd *et al.* (1997).

and flood protection appear to be omitted from both the MBC and the RVI objectives and that nature conservation considerations are not strongly emphasised at the MBC level. These omissions may be justified by the extreme degree of concern over water quality in the Mersey Basin, which was the most polluted river system in Europe. The visionary and promotional nature of the MBC and RVIs may also, to some extent, demand a simplification of the environmental issues to be addressed and an initial focus on those that are felt to be most prominent within regional and local communities. However, for a holistic approach to river management to be achieved, all aspects of river management should ideally be addressed, but the MBC experience perhaps suggests that, in order to engage people in this process, a staged or multi-level approach might be appropriate. This could entail the full spectrum of management issues being encompassed on a gradual or phased basis. Alternatively, objectives could be broadly phrased, allowing a public focus on prominent concerns but underlying action across the full spectrum of river management issues.

In terms of the extent of public sector control and the effectiveness of the partnership approach, the MBC and RVIs present some interesting insights. What is clear is that the public sector has played a critical role in both the formation and nurturing of the MBC and the RVIs. However, particularly since the creation of Mersey Basin Campaign Limited, the involvement of the public sector has become quite diffuse, and control could not be said to lie strongly in public sector hands. The configuration of the three core MBC organisations provides a solid foundation for the involvement of all sectors and can be seen to have been successful in this respect. For example, private sector organisations, North West Water at the MBC level and major local employers such as ICI at the local level, have been very prominent in shaping and facilitating the work of



TABLE 4. Spheres of water resource management and MBC and RVI objectives

Sphere of water resource management	MBC objective	RVI objectives
Purification of water from effluents	Improved water quality	Improved water quality
Conservation of natural habitats		Enhancement of conservation sites
Husbandry of water in its supply and use		
Protection of water's hydrocyclical capacity to renew ground and surface water		
Supplying water to meet society's biological, cultural and economic needs	Attractive waterside development	Landscape improvement
	Environmental awareness	Improved access Community involvement
Protection against floods		

the MBC and the RVIs. Similarly, from the voluntary sector perspective, some local Groundwork Trusts have played a critical role in the operation of individual RVIs. In these respects the MBC and the RVIs present a valuable model of partnership approaches to environmental management at both strategic and local scales. On the one hand, they illustrate that much can be achieved through partnership working and that such amorphous arrangements can stimulate a sense of shared responsibility and action. On the other hand, they demonstrate the complexities that this entails, including difficulties in assembling funding, defining appropriate management structures and maintaining the momentum of activity over time.

The MBC and its RVIs also present a useful example of a tiered approach to river management which integrates strategic basin-level action with supportive measures related to individual watercourses. As we have seen, a comparison of the MBC and RVI objectives reveals substantial consistency. Whilst it is noted that the RVI objectives tend to be more detailed and to some extent place a different emphasis on areas of concern in comparison to the MBC as a whole, such variations can be seen to reflect local circumstances. With proper oversight this variation should be regarded as a very positive feature of the MBC/RVI model, as it appears to overcome problems faced elsewhere in trying to engender a sense of local identity with strategic river management objectives. The presence of an MBC representative on each of the RVI steering groups provides an appropriate mechanism for ensuring continuity of action between the strategic and local scales whilst allowing local objectives to be developed which are felt to be relevant to the communities concerned.

One of the major reasons for focusing on the experience of the MBC's RVIs in this paper was to establish the extent to which they presented a valuable

model for engendering local environmental stewardship, and in this respect the analysis of experience to date is somewhat inconclusive. The review of the first six RVIs to be established indicates that, so far, few projects have been initiated which would not have taken place without the existence of the RVIs. In addition, many of these projects have been carried out by major organisations such as local authorities, North West Water and the EA, which would not necessarily require this local tier of organisation in order to engage with the objectives of the MBC. On the basis of these findings it could be said that the RVIs have not demonstrated an ability to mobilise local community action.

However, at this point it is worth reflecting on Peter Walton's comment noted earlier about the MBC as a whole, which indicated that, during the first few years, much time was spent spreading awareness of its vision and persuading organisations to work towards its objectives. Today the benefits of these efforts are very apparent. Few people in the North-west are unaware of the general direction of the MBC, and major organisations from all sectors are openly supportive of its efforts and undertake complementary action where appropriate. The RVIs have been developed to translate these successes to the local scale. In this context it should be recognised that even the oldest of the RVIs has only been established for 6 years, and that it is only recently that proper staffing for some of the initiatives has been secured. The review indicates that considerable groundwork related to the basic establishment and strategic direction of the initiatives has taken place over the ensuing period, but that it is important to acknowledge that, in addition, significant effort has been directed to local publicity and networking. This has resulted in some successes in terms of community involvement.

The most visible signs of success are in Alt 2000. In part this can be attributed to strong local champions and substantial European Union Objective 1 programme funding, amounting to £250 000 over 2 years. Here there is community involvement at steering group level, with the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV) and the North West Ecological Group both having local representatives on the committee. Alt 2000 also maintains positive community links through a loose network of local organisations which are more informal RVI partners. In this case the project officer acts as facilitator and point of contact for the groups. It is the active utilisation and expansion of this network that appears to be critical to stimulating a sense of local environmental stewardship. The constant raising of awareness and participation through publicity and events is also thought to be vital. Successful community participation events on the Alt have included: the involvement of primary schools in stream clean-ups; tours by environmental theatres in schools; stream clean-ups organised by the BTCV; publicity events, clean-ups and community barbecues organised by the North West Ecological Group; 'Alt walks' organised by Knowsley Rangers; and 'Environment Week' walks organised by a local access group over the past 3 or 4 years. Alt 2000 is, therefore, a practical example of how notions of local environmental stewardship for local watercourses can be brought into reality. The critical factors in this process seem to be time, consistency of effort and appropriate resources, particularly in the form of staff input.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored some of the complexities and difficulties of incorporating the principles of sustainable development into the management of rivers. These principles emphasise the need to: take a holistic approach which incorporates economic and social as well as environmental concerns; develop mechanisms which are consistent with the scale of the natural processes involved; encourage action which is cross-sectoral in character and involves partnership; and engender a sense of shared responsibility and stewardship at the community level. These themes have been examined as part of a brief review of river management activity in the UK since the 1970. This indicates that, although there has been significant innovation during this period, mainstream river management activity, currently the responsibility of the EA, has a number of limitations, particularly in relation to encouraging partnership action and stimulating a sense of local stewardship. The experience of the MBC and its associated RVIs presents an interesting alternative model of river management which appears to address these issues. Three lessons in particular can be derived from this experience that could be helpful in other contexts. First, there is a need to devise mechanisms which reflect the varying priorities of different types and scale of community and facilitate their involvement, whilst at the same time ensuring broad consistency with strategic objectives. Secondly, awareness-raising in the form of publicity, events and projects is critical to the active involvement of organisations at all scales, and this should be regarded as an integral component of river management, not as an optional extra. Finally, it must be recognised that it takes time to engender a sense of local stewardship, and consistency of effort and appropriate resources, particularly in the form of staff input, are critical. If active river management programmes are to be developed, they must therefore take a long-term perspective and properly acknowledge the resource implications entailed.

## Postscript

In October 1999 the MBC was awarded the International River Prize for the best river management initiative in the world at a ceremony in Brisbane, Australia. The MBC continues to extend its RVI coverage, with at least 20 planned by the end of 2000.

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