

## Mersey Basin Campaign: a partnership approach to river basin management

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### Abstract

The Mersey Basin Campaign was established as one of a series of initiatives, launched in the wake of riots in Liverpool, that were designed to kick start the regeneration of England's Northwest. At the time, the then Secretary of State for the Environment, Michael Heseltine called the River Mersey "an affront to the standards a civilised society should demand of its environment." It was recognised that a combination of public, private and voluntary sector action was necessary, leading to the Mersey Basin Campaign partnership being formed in 1985. This partnership has developed since its inception, with changes in the governance structure of the Campaign creating wider participation from business, academia, community and voluntary groups. The partnership of the Mersey Basin Campaign brings together disparate groups and sectors to work together towards a shared mission. Today, the Mersey and its tributaries are cleaner than at any time since the end of the industrial revolution. The transformation of the River Mersey has been supported by a combination of major investment and genuine partnership working at regional and local level.

### Keywords

Catchment management; partnership; private sector; water quality

## INTRODUCTION

### Background to the creation of Mersey Basin Campaign

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the north west of England became the World's first industrialised region. The rapid industrial growth created a demand for labour and thus brought about very rapid expansion of urban areas. Domestic sewerage systems were based on untreated disposal directly into rivers and sea. Manufacturing industry became established along the region's rivers and new canal system, which became the major conduits for removing and transporting industrial wastes.

By 1869 the Mersey and the Irwell, which in 1721 supported fish as a commercial industry, had become so grossly polluted that a Royal Commission on Rivers Pollution was appointed to study and report on the problem (HMSO 1874). In so far as the problems were recognised, little priority was attached to addressing them by the municipal authorities. Certainly as late as the 1980s, the Mersey was the most polluted estuary and river system in the UK. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressive changes to legislation and institutions, including the formation of water authorities in 1974, brought about significant improvement but, even so, towards the end of the century, the region's waterways were among the most polluted in the world (MBC 1985; Kidd & Shaw 2000), and industrial decline was manifest in dereliction, poor housing and growing social problems.

These problems came to a head in the 1981 when disturbances in Toxteth, an inner-city area of Liverpool, turned into full-blown riots. In the wake of the riots, government policy began to focus

on the problems of inner cities, and of post-industrial dereliction. A number of targeted regeneration programmes and projects followed, including the Mersey Basin Campaign.

The Campaign was established in 1985, with government backing and a 25-year initial life span. Its role was to address the problems of water quality and associated landward dereliction of the River Mersey and its tributaries. (It has since expanded to include the River Ribble in Lancashire). The development of the Campaign broke new ground in British administrative practice in a uniquely collaborative programme founded on a personal initiative of a government minister, Michael Heseltine, then Secretary of State for the Environment (Wood, Handley & Kidd 1999).

### **The objectives of Mersey Basin Campaign**

The objective for this new approach was set out clearly:

*‘To rebuild the urban areas of the North West we need to clean and clear the ravages of the past, to recreate the opportunities that attracted earlier generations to come and live there and invest there...A Mersey Basin restored to a quality of environmental standards fit for the end of this century will be of incalculable significance in the creation of new employment.’ (Michael Heseltine, Department of the Environment, 1982 pp.1-2).*

He recognised, quite clearly, the interdependence of economic prosperity and quality of environment, with the Campaign conceived as a ‘sustainable development’ approach long before these words were in common currency. This translated into three key objectives for the Campaign, identified at the start of the initiative:

- to improve river quality across the Mersey Basin to at least a ‘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; and,
- to encourage people living and working in the Mersey Basin to value and cherish their watercourses and waterfront environments.

These three simple, but clear objectives have remained the same throughout the life of the Campaign.

### **The location of Mersey Basin Campaign**

The Mersey Basin Campaign covers two river basins in the Northwest of England: the catchment of the River Mersey and the contiguous river catchment to the north, the River Ribble and its tributaries.

## **THE EMERGENCE OF THE PARTNERSHIP**

The scale and complexity of the clean-up programme required to deal effectively with the gross water pollution and waterside dereliction was too great for any one authority or agency. (At the time, there was no national environmental programme for water quality improvements; that would not come until water privatisation in 1990).

*“The task of cleaning up the Mersey – the watercourses and waterside areas of the whole catchment – is a comprehensive and formidable one. The task calls for a team effort, in which the inputs of all sectors encourage each other and generate a momentum of improvement greater than could be achieved otherwise.” (Walton, 1982 p. 11)*

This recognition that a combination of public, private and voluntary sector action was necessary to bring about the total process of renewal for the water and bordering land led to a new partnership being formed in 1985. At the time, most partnerships operated just between the public (government) and private (business) sectors. The Mersey Basin Campaign partnership was conceived differently from the start. It was organised around an independent Chair leading a unit from the government's Department of the Environment.

Key partners were brought in, including the (then publicly-owned) water authority, local government authority representatives and professional officers with an advisory role from a number of non-governmental organisations. Interestingly, the partnership had no industry involvement at the time, and it wasn't until 1987 when ICI, a multinational chemical company, joined as the first industrial partner, that the private sector joined in with the work of the Campaign.

Within the context of Mersey Basin Campaign, partnership is taken to mean an agreement between two or more partners to work together to achieve common aims.

## **GOVERNANCE, MANAGEMENT AND DECISION-MAKING**

### **The organisational structure of the Mersey Basin Campaign**

The organisation of Mersey Basin Campaign has changed over its life span to reflect regional changes and developments and to build upon experience. Two major changes in structure have taken place over its 19-year history to reflect the growing and changing needs of the Campaign and the region.

1. In 1996, Mersey Basin Campaign gained some independence from government as it became an 'arms length management organisation'. This 'privatising' was considered to be necessary to allow the Campaign to be more effective for engagement of the private and voluntary sectors. Although now at arm's length, the Mersey Basin Campaign still retains its part sponsorship from the UK central government, and has enjoyed the ongoing support of successive governments since its inception in 1985.
2. A review of the partnership in 2001 brought about further changes to the governance of the Campaign, allowing even wider participation in the Campaign and its work through changes to the organisational structure, and the development of a constitution for the Campaign Council.

These two fundamental changes have led the Campaign to develop from a government-run initiative, led by an independent Chair, to its current partnership status discussed below.

### **The partnership approach**

The partnership of the Mersey Basin Campaign in 2004 is based upon active involvement through a number of organisational structures (Figure 1).

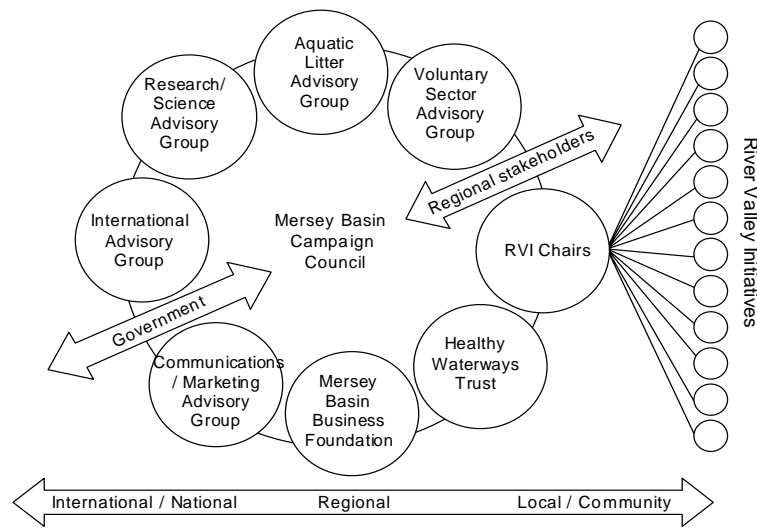


Figure 1. Organisational structure of the Mersey Basin Campaign

This partnership governance can be summarised as:

- the Council, as the formally constituted, non-executive governing body of the Campaign, determines strategic guidance and approves the annual corporate plan;
- the Mersey Basin Business Foundation (MBBF) is a mechanism for business and financial management, contracts and the employment of the Mersey Basin Campaign staff. It is the legal personality of the Campaign;
- the Healthy Waterways Trust is the Campaign's charitable arm and is a registered environmental body; and,
- five Advisory Groups providing focus for more specific policy development and guidance for the work of the Campaign.

Some partners play a key role within the Mersey Basin Campaign, sitting on the Campaign Council or as Directors of MBBF, whilst others perform more peripheral roles, acting as advisers on specific issues of the Campaign's work. The nature of the roles partners play within the Campaign's governance and management is detailed in section 3.3.

The Campaign structure also allows spatial flexibility in the partnerships. Regional stakeholders play key roles within the Campaign Council and MBBF. Local stakeholders partner the Campaign through its local River Valley Initiatives (see Wood, Handley & Kidd 1999; Kidd & Shaw, 2000; Salthouse, 2000). RVIs reflect local challenges and needs and are composed of key local partners, with the Campaign employing a number of river valley co-ordinators to support the individual steering groups and to take decisions forward through fund raising, managing projects, events and awareness raising activities.

## The decision makers and the Campaign managers

### *The Council*

The Council was set up as the governing body for the Mersey Basin Campaign within which key regional stakeholders provide strategic direction and policy guidance to the Campaign in delivering its objectives. It is an unincorporated stakeholder partnership of 38 representatives with two types of members: partners, with voting rights; and, advisers/observers without voting rights.

The Campaign sought views from across the region on the appropriate stakeholders for inclusion within the Council through a formal consultation, endorsed by government. Members to the Council are appointed as representatives for their organisations, sectors or area of interest. Core partners on the Council include representatives of the water company (United Utilities); the environmental regulator (Environment Agency); local government; the Regional (economic) Development

Agency; and a number of other public bodies (for example, English Nature). The voluntary sector is also represented on the Council, with the Voluntary Sector Forum, and advisory group to the Campaign Council, providing representation. Importantly, the Council's constitution allows its membership to be dynamic, reflecting regional changes over the 25-year life of the Campaign.

#### *The Mersey Basin Business Foundation*

The Mersey Basin Business Foundation, a non-profit making limited company, carries out the task of overall operational management for the Campaign. Directors are partners from industry, based on an initial partnership between the Campaign, ICI (in 1987), Shell (1988) and Unilever (1989). MBBF was launched as a separate and increasingly important arm of the Campaign in 1992 and now has 12 members. It actively seeks to expand the number of businesses linked to the Campaign and specific Campaign projects. Member organisations are encouraged to incorporate Campaign objectives into their daily activities and business practices. The MBBF is the recipient of the core government grant to the Campaign.

These two structures (the Campaign Council and MBBF) enable partners to work with the Campaign at different levels and degrees of commitment. The MBC has found that one of the keys to successful partnerships is ensuring there are many opportunities to build relationships with partners and connections at all organisational levels, from the top of an organisation down. For long-term commitment, we have found it essential to establish a relationship at the top of the organisation, thereby ensuring commitment throughout that organisation (Kim 2002).

### **BUILDING TRUST AND DEVELOPING A LONG-TERM PARTNERSHIP**

One potential stumbling block to good partnership working is lack of consistency between partners' objectives. Partnerships such as the Mersey Basin Campaign bring together disparate groups and sectors to work together towards a shared mission. The Campaign has its own unique objectives and mission. Partner organisations, especially core partners, generally have objectives which complement at least one of the 3 key Campaign objectives.

One of the strengths of the partnership has been the relationship between United Utilities Water plc and the Campaign. Prior to water privatisation, the North West Water Authority (NWWA) had been investing to deal, *inter alia*, with the crude waste discharges to the Mersey. Collaborating with the Campaign, industry matched NWWA's investment, cleaning up its own discharges.

On privatisation of water services in 1989, the then North West Water Ltd (which later became part of United Utilities plc) was charged with delivering a £2.2 billion, five-year investment programme to improve the region's water infrastructure and make inroads into the worst of the region's water pollution. The company's objectives mirrored those of the Campaign, and for the first time, the necessary investment existed to make these objectives a reality. The company and Campaign have enjoyed a constructive, collaborative relationship ever since, across all levels of the organisations. For United Utilities, the Campaign provides a broader context for environmental improvements, helping make connections to waterside regeneration and providing third-party publicity of the United Utilities' water quality achievements. For the Campaign, United Utilities is a core funder, the main contributor to improving water quality, and a source of support and technical advice.

But how do partners collaborate if their objectives are not the same? By establishing and identifying the benefits in working together the complementary nature of the respective organisations objectives becomes more focused and allows the partners to recognise the added-value in working together. In the case of Mersey Basin Campaign, collaboration on a project basis over the years has

allowed trust to develop between the partners through working together, producing positive results and both partners obtaining benefits from working together rather than individually.

For example, businesses are keen to work with organisations that can supply niches they do not supply themselves, for example delivering community engagement. These opportunities enable the partnership and private sector to develop shared vocabularies, finding overlaps and understanding. Such an approach enables the delivery of complex regeneration projects, which a single partner alone cannot realise.

Only once the benefits have been established can trust develop between the partners. The government origins and continued support for Mersey Basin Campaign has provided the basis from which a good reputation has been developed. This reputation has developed over time from building upon achievements in water quality improvements within the catchments and a having a good track record in project delivery. This has been achieved through working with the partners gaining continued improvements in water quality in the two catchments and large-scale regeneration programmes, especially targeted at derelict waterside environments.

## **IMPLEMENTING ACTION**

### **How do we take forward decisions and put our actions into practice?**

The Campaign is essentially a project-based organisation, with projects delivered at the catchment or sub-catchment scale. The decision makers at the catchment scale are the Council members. However, at the sub-catchment scale that decision making transfers to an individual steering group of the Campaign's River Valley Initiatives (RVI), where partners play a key role through the steering groups for each RVI, or through specific projects and action within the RVIs work. For example, a partner may provide the Chair for a RVI steering group, leading the local initiative. Alternatively, a partner may participate within a specific project being undertaken by a RVI co-ordinator, such as a clean-up event or habitat rehabilitation programme. The Campaign has found this action-led partnership approach has been successful in maintaining interest in the Campaign and its work by partners. This organisational structure provides a framework in which all partners can gain from their own inputs.

## **CHALLENGES OF WORKING IN PARTNERSHIPS**

### **Measuring success: what are the lessons learnt from partnership working?**

There are a number of benefits and difficulties from partnership working. Tippett (2001) discusses these in detail, however, they are summarised within this paper. Whilst the benefits can be visually obvious seen through the improvements to water quality within the catchments and the enhanced waterside environments currently undergoing regeneration, such as can be seen at The Quays in Salford, the difficulties tend to be less visible, but nonetheless as important. These benefits and difficulties are summarised below (see Tippett, 2001 for further details):

The benefits include:

- Partnerships produce results beyond the capabilities of the individual entities;
- It is a cost effective way of working;
- Partnerships can provide an increased knowledge base for strategic planning;
- They enhance the possibilities for integrated thinking through a combination of multiple perspectives, especially those involving all sectors;
- A partnership can ensure a broad range of support for projects;
- They can be effective mechanisms for bringing about behavioural changes, certainly within the participating organisations;

- The participants to the partnership are more easily able to view how particular actions fit into the bigger picture;
- There is the possibility of increased learning amongst the participants.

In comparison to the benefits, there are far fewer disadvantages. Partnership working can be perceived as creating “additional” work. Within a partnership responsibilities for specific work can be shifted or passed to another partner, thereby increasing the workload for partners.

There are also a number of difficulties that can be recognised in setting up and maintaining a partnership. These include:

- It takes time to develop a working relationship within the partnership;
- Continuous effort and attention are required in order for the partnership to remain viable;
- It is very difficult to maintain enthusiasm over a long period of time, especially with those connected only tangentially to the initiative;
- Both the partnership and the external context change over time;
- The timetable of development needs to be driven by participants’ needs rather than by the often rigid requirements of funding deadlines;
- It is often difficult to measure and cost the added value brought by the partnership;
- The benefits tend to accrue over the longer term rather than immediately;
- There is a need to credit partners amongst whom the responsibilities are shared.

These difficulties can be overcome by ensuring effective management and ownership of the partnership by the partners. A clear vision, which is understood and shared by all the partners, with broad and ambitious goals is needed thereby ensuring expectations are managed, and preferably, exceeded.

### **What are the critical success factors?**

There are a number of factors that have contributed to the successful long-term partnership that is the Mersey Basin Campaign, that have allowed the improvements within the region, to the extent that in 1999, Mersey Basin Campaign won the inaugural World River Prize. These include:

- The partnership approach – the Campaign is a partnership that includes government, agencies (such as the Environment Agency), local authorities, businesses – corporate bodies such as United Utilities and, of course, local communities;
- A clear vision from inception with an undiluted focus on water, watersides and communities;
- A realistic timescale for change to occur; the Campaign was set up as a 25 year initiative;
- Continued government support – successive governments and individual ministers have strongly and actively backed the Mersey Basin Campaign;
- Strategic influencing followed through with delivery - the Campaign operates at the global, EU, national and regional level but also through 19 locally driven, locally focused river valley initiatives working at the grassroots level;
- An evidenced based organisation, with strong scientific and technological innovation such as the oxygenation of the Manchester Ship Canal at The Quays at Salford;
- Resources – the current five year Asset Management Programme of the water company, United Utilities, exceeds £2 billion for 2000 – 2005 investment;
- Leadership – the succession of government appointed, independent chairs of the Campaign leading the partnership with determination and drive.

## CONCLUSION

The Mersey Basin Campaign was set-up by the British government in 1985 as a partnership to tackle the legacy of Industrialisation in Northwest England. This partnership has changed over the life span of the Campaign, building from its government roots to reflect the complexity of the twin problems of poor water quality and industrial dereliction. The partnership recognises the interdependence of economic prosperity and quality of the environment and the need for a sustainable development approach. This required a combination of public, private and voluntary sector action within the partnership. The current governance structure of the Campaign provides a number of opportunities for partners to work with the Campaign at different levels and degrees of commitment. MBC have found that one of the keys to successful partnerships is ensuring there are many opportunities to build relationships with partners and connections at all organisational levels.

Although there are clear benefits from partnership working, especially amongst those partners with strong similarities in organisational objectives, there are also some disadvantages and difficulties. Partnerships require time and effort in setting up and maintaining the relationship. However, a clear vision, which is understood and shared by all partners, with broad and ambitious goals can allow expectations to be managed and exceeded and the partnership to strengthen.

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