

ACTION PARTNERSHIPS

Mersey and Ribble River Basins

Date: From 1992

Background:

The Mersey Basin Campaign set up the Action Partnership model (formerly called River Valley Initiatives) as a way of delivering the aims of the Campaign locally. It was felt that this approach would enable local people and organisations to identify more closely with the objectives of the Campaign and take action themselves.

A framework was set up whereby local partnerships could form. They would establish the issues and opportunities in an area and identify ways in which improvements could be made, harnessing the assistance of local volunteers, businesses, local authorities and non-governmental organisations.

The Bollin River Valley Initiative was the first to be set up, in 1992, joining forces with the well established Bollin Valley Partnership. In all, there have been 20 Action Partnerships at various times during the Campaign's life.

Action Irwell
Action Alt
Action Bollin
Action Calder
Action Sankey
Action Glaze
Action Worsley Brooks

Action Douglas & Yarrow
Action Etherow & Goyt
Action Irk & Roch
Action Medlock & Tame
Action Mersey Estuary
Action Ribble Estuary
Action Ribble

Action River Darwen
Action Wirral Rivers
Action Rossendale Rivers
Action Upper Weaver
Action Weaver Valley
Action Manchester Waterways



Set-up of Action Partnerships:

For an Action Partnership to be established, it was important for there to be evidence of local interest in taking action on watercourses. This might be shown

by a number of agencies or organisations already taking an interest, by projects being planned or taking place, or by concern over water-related issues.

Typically, the Campaign approached key organisations such as the Environment Agency, United Utilities (water company), British Waterways, local authorities, environmental organisations such as Groundwork and voluntary sector groups to see if they would support an Action Partnership in their area. A meeting was then convened for key personnel from interested parties, plus the Mersey Basin Campaign itself.

From this meeting, an Action Partnership steering group would be established. It would meet quarterly to determine the strategy that the initiative was to follow and to make decisions about the general operation of the Partnership. The steering group would have input into the action planning process and in reviewing progress. The steering group meetings also acted as an important mechanism for information exchange by partners – for example, flagging up where a partner organisation could assist with a particular project.

Aims and objectives:

Clear aims and objectives were set for each partnership by the steering group. These reflected local needs and aspirations, but also met the wider aims and targets of the Mersey Basin Campaign. They commonly followed these themes:

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

Action Plan:

Each Action Partnership produced an action plan that showed how its objectives were translated into policies and actions. This could either be developed under a number of themes e.g. water quality, habitat, education, awareness, or be area-based, dividing the river catchments into geographical sections e.g. river stretches, tributaries.

Action Alt (then Alt 2000), produced a 'blueprint document' that divided the rivers into sections. For each section, there was reference to:

- outline of the section
- work completed so far
- issues identified under the headings: water quality, habitat, access, education, awareness
- organisations involved
- ideas for future projects/activities.

The projects developed by the Action Partnerships were on a variety of scales, from small-scale local projects addressing local issues and engaging local communities, to large-scale strategic projects. The project coordinator did not necessarily have to deliver the projects themselves, but aimed to promote innovative ideas and support partners in delivery.

Project Coordinator:

Appointing a coordinator to develop projects, partnerships and funding packages and to act as a point of contact for the community has been essential to achieving progress in the Action Partnerships. The coordinator can also help resolve any conflicting interests between partners.



Action Partnership Coordinators 2003

Management:

The Mersey Basin Campaign provided line management and organisational back-up for the project coordinators where it had funded the post. A representative from the Campaign's central office team sat on each steering group and the partnership was led by a local chair. The chair of each steering group reported on the progress of their Action Partnership through a Chairs' Group. A representative of this group reported directly to the Mersey Basin Campaign Council, the governing body of the Campaign.

Sub-groups:

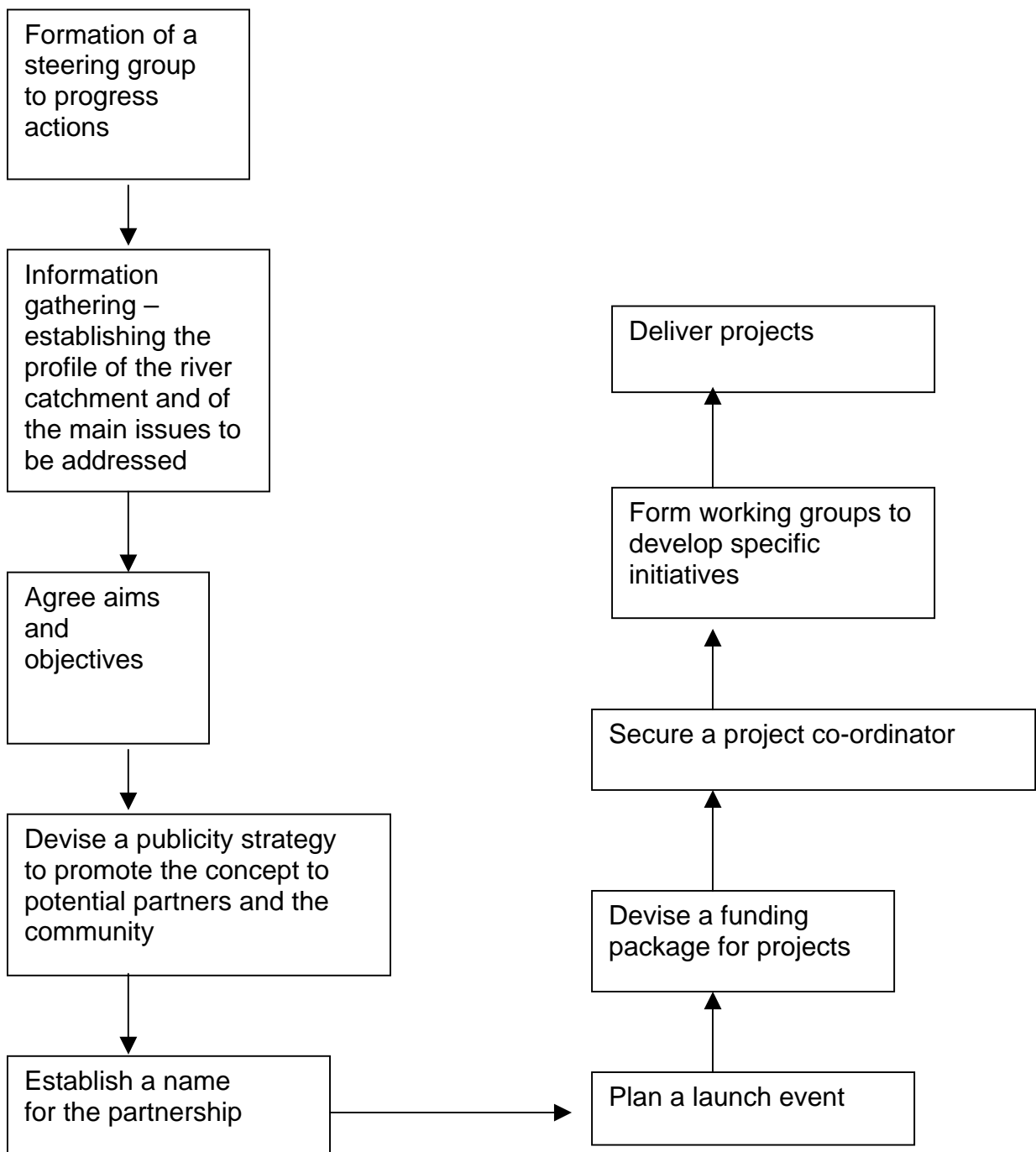
Where the membership of the steering group was large, it has been helpful to establish a **project officer group**. This consisted of a small number of representatives of the steering group which helped to deal with the day-to-day

running of the Action Partnership and to oversee implementation of the steering group's strategy. The project officer group also brought forward projects and helped coordinate funding bids.

Some of the Action Partnerships also set up **themed sub-groups** to develop projects for particular objectives e.g. access or biodiversity. Some representatives from the steering group may have been included in these, but also other specialist organisations and interests.

The set-up process:

The process of establishing an Action Partnership was determined locally, but it usually followed the following process:



Funding:

Security of core funding has been essential in enabling the long term employment of the project coordinator. The staff costs and basic running costs have been provided, in most cases, by the Mersey Basin Campaign. The Campaign also funded the staffing and project costs of three Action Partnerships, Etherow and Goyt, Upper Weaver and Medlock and Tame, for five years through a Single Regeneration Fund bid.

The exceptions have been Action Bollin, Action Mersey Estuary and Action Sankey where staff costs have been met by a number of regional and local resources.

Funding has also been secured from a range of different, often local, public and private organisations and grant schemes. In some cases, in-kind funding such as office space has also been provided by partner organisations.

Maintaining the level of funding has been increasingly difficult and this led to the amalgamation of some areas and the gradual reduction in the number of Action Partnerships.

Results:

The Action Partnerships have been instrumental in the delivery of a huge range of water based projects. Of particular note have been:

The Darwen Litter Trap – the first ever UK in-stream litter collection device that has collected 40 cubic metres of litter in 2 years, preventing widespread littering downstream. The partnership brought together £161,500 to fund this project.

The Anderton Story – an arts project that brought together the young and old to tell the story of the Anderton Nature Park and the local salt industry. £31,000 was brought together by the partnership to fund this project.

Annual Countryside Taster Day – 500 disabled children were given a taste of the countryside through activities such as archery, pony and trap rides and falconry. This has helped build their confidence to take part in countryside activities in the future. The partnership has brought in funding of £6500 each year.

You will find case studies of all these projects on www.merseybasin.org.uk.

An independent evaluation of the Mersey Basin Campaign, commissioned in 2006, found that:

- participation extended beyond core activists
- the number of volunteers taking part in Mersey Basin Week, the annual community action campaign (which has been seen as a guide to involvement levels) had increased by 100% to over 4000 participants between 2001 and 2006.
- in 2005/6, volunteer time, gifts in-kind and partner time were valued at £1,032,594.
- The ratio of government grant to match funding increased from 1:3 to 1:7 when in-kind contributions were included. A large part of this was volunteer time. These figures are higher than for similar organisations.

Who was involved:

Many different partners have been involved on steering groups and in projects throughout the Mersey and Ribble Catchments. However, there have been certain partners in common across the Action Partnerships, including:

Environment Agency, British Waterways, United Utilities, local authorities, Groundwork Trusts.

Future care:

Following the closure of the Mersey Basin Campaign in March 2010, the majority of the Action Partnerships ceased to exist. Exceptions to this include the work of Action Bollin and Action Mersey Estuary which were to be continued, in part, by the Bollin Valley Partnership and Mersey Waterfront respectively.

Future care has been a consideration of all Action Partnership projects and agreements have usually been made during the design stage as to who was to adopt the physical improvements made. In the few case where the Mersey Basin Campaign had adopted a management role, future management agreements were sought prior to the Campaign's closure in 2010.

The major legacy of the Action Partnerships is the increased capacity of numerous community groups. In many cases, these are able to continue the work of the Campaign in their locality.

Lessons Learned:

Successes:

- Working in partnership was the key to making projects happen.
- The Action Partnerships were highly productive. They focussed on delivery of waterside improvement and community awareness projects.

- Clear objectives enabled the partnership to maintain its focus.
- The impartiality and flexibility of operation of the Action Partnerships has meant that projects have been facilitated more quickly than other organisations might have been able to achieve.
- The project coordinators have been essential in providing support to voluntary groups. Having connections with a cross sector partnership has allowed the coordinator to link groups up with the relevant officers in local authorities and government organisations.
- The project coordinators have also supported local authorities and government agencies in achieving on-the-ground action by providing a community connection. This may be assisting with community consultation or bringing in local groups to run a project.
- Bringing together funding packages has been a key role of the Action Partnership and has made possible projects on a range of scales. This has might have involved attracting cash and in-kind assistance from steering group organisations and local businesses or writing funding bids. The non-profit status of the Mersey Basin Campaign has allowed it to tap into wider funding sources than many of its partners.

Issues:

- It has often been difficult to find the cash funding to employ a project coordinator.
- The geographical spread of the Action Partnerships across the Mersey Basin Campaign area has reduced over time, largely due to financial constraints. Within each area, the reactive nature of the Action Partnership has limited the spread of activity.
- Involvement of the private sector on steering groups and in projects has been very limited.
- Action Partnerships need to be continually reviewed for effectiveness, maintaining the links with the wider community and ensuring that the Action Partnership continues to consider community needs and views.
- As the Action Partnership has no powers or project funding, it is highly reliant on the action of other organisations that have different agendas and accountabilities. This makes work programming very unpredictable.