

Exploring The Delivery of Multiple Benefits by Catchment Partnerships in the UK – Interim Results

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Background to this briefing

This briefing marks the half-way point in a 2-year project to consider how and when catchment partnerships may enable multiple environmental objectives to be achieved when managing water quality and quantity. It summarises our research, and preliminary findings, on the work and achievements of four catchment partnerships in the UK. This builds on a report from a year ago that briefly summarises what is already known about catchment partnership working, and some of the relevant theoretical frameworks that can be used to understand and analyse them [1].

This work responds to interest from Scottish policy stakeholders in learning more about when and how we can integrate different objectives for flood risk management and water quality management, driven by the need to effectively and efficiently implement the Flood Directive (FD) and Water Framework Directive (WFD). Beyond the water sector there is a similar drive to understand if and how different goals for natural resource management can be reconciled, often accompanied by interest in involving the private sector. Many have suggested that working at the catchment scale is a key means of navigating these challenges [e.g. 2, 3] and our work with stakeholders involved in policy implementation has also highlighted this expectation [4, 5].

Focus of this briefing

Our overall research question is *“How does catchment partnership working align or help with delivery of multiple benefits, including the delivery of WFD and FD objectives?”*. To understand this, we have studied four catchment partnerships and asked:

- What goals are the partnerships seeking to achieve, do these align with WFD and FD objectives, and to what extent are the partnerships achieving these?
- What characteristics of catchment partnerships (including the sectors involved), explain these experiences and achievements?
- If and how are partnership achievements constrained or enabled by multi-level or polycentric dimensions of WFD and FD governance?

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This report summarises our initial responses to these questions, and does not present a full analysis nor reflection on relation with academic literatures (these will be presented in our later outputs – see page Next steps5). If you would like more information about the literatures and knowledge that inform this work, please see our preceding 2019 report [1].

Methodology

To build an in depth understanding of how catchment partnerships may contribute to the delivery of multiple benefits, we decided to focus on the understanding four catchment partnerships in the UK. This allowed us to explore multiple perspectives within each partnership, whilst also allowing us some ability to scope how partnerships could be differently constituted, and the effect of context – for example, the English cases participate in the Environment Agency’s Catchment Based Approach (CaBA) and have water company participation. We selected partnerships involving multiple organisations, which stated that they had multiple goals. Therefore, we excluded single issue consortia, or initiatives led by single organisations without significant decision-making input from other actors. The partnerships studied are:

- The Spey Catchment Initiative (SCI), Scotland^a
- The Dee Catchment Partnership (DCP), Scotland^b
- The Poole Harbour Catchment Initiative (PHCI), England^c
- The Hampshire Avon Catchment Partnerships (HACP), England^d

For each partnership, we first carried out a document analysis of existing secondary sources, using existing catchment plans, and websites, in order to answer a set of analytic questions about the constitution, context, progress and achievements of the partnership. We used framework analyses within Nvivo 12 to compare key characteristics of the partnerships. We then carried out semi-structured interviews with the coordinator and the main partners in the partnership: due to resource constraints we could not interview all partners, but we prioritised those who, from our document analysis, seemed to play significant role in deciding and/or implementing partnership action, and to represent a range of partner types, e.g. statutory environment agency, local authority, third sector, private sector. Interviews were guided by a topic guide informed by the literatures on environmental governance, environmental partnerships and collaboration.

These interviews took place between September and December 2019, typically lasted one hour, and were audio-recorded and transcribed. In total we carried out 21 interviews. We are very grateful to the time and willingness to engage with us offered by respondents from the four partnerships. We used Nvivo 12 to thematically ‘code’ the content of these transcripts according to themes. This work was approved by the James Hutton Institute ethics committee, and the data collected has been processed, stored and managed in compliance with the EU General Data Protection Regulation. The findings below provide preliminary reflections and some emergent themes: in this and subsequent outputs the contributions of individual contributors are anonymised.

^a <https://www.speycatchment.org/>

^b <http://www.deepartnership.org/>

^c <https://www.wessexwater.co.uk/environment/catchment-partnerships/poole-harbour-catchment-partnership>

^d <http://www.hampshireavoncatchmentpartnership.org.uk/>

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Interim findings

What goals are the partnerships seeking to achieve, do these align with WFD and FD objectives, and to what extent are the partnerships achieving these?

Our partnerships align well with the WFD and indeed often go beyond it i.e. in their attention to invasive species. To a lesser extent they also align with the FD.

We had deliberately selected partnerships that aim to achieve a variety of goals in relation to water management: when we looked closely we found they all had planned and delivered more in relation to water quality and ecology than flood risk management. This arises from both the pre-existing competence and goals of partners (e.g. Wildlife Trusts), and also from the strong driver to implement the WFD, which predates the FD. In England, the WFD has promoted the creation of CaBA funding for catchment partnerships. Biodiversity designations are also a strong driver for action, especially when statutory agencies have funding to support these: for example, for riparian tree planting. There is also significant public funding focused on implementing flood risk management, but to date this has been accessed less by the partnerships we have studied. This may change in future as Natural Flood Management becomes a more prominent part of Flood Risk Management. NFM was cited by all partnerships as something important and relevant that was already or would be soon under discussion. NFM could be very difficult to achieve – requiring cooperation from multiple actors – yet may be exactly the sort of action that partnerships are best suited to enabling and delivering.

The extent to which partnerships are achieving their goals is a much harder question to answer. It can be surprisingly hard to discern the difference made by partnerships, even by partners themselves or as academics scrutinising them closely.

This difficulty can occur for a variety of overlapping reasons: progress against goals is often not appraised or reported, sometimes actions are recorded in plans that would anyhow be taken by partners, whilst in other cases the contribution of partnerships to influencing the plans and actions of partners goes unrecognised and is largely hidden. However, common themes that many were confident to articulate were that partnerships helps to (i) to improve knowledge of and relationships between key actors working in one area e.g. between fisheries trusts and statutory agencies; (ii) implement or improve communication and engagement with land-managers, and often (iii) to aid bids for funding to implement actions. The knowledge shared is not just about datasets i.e. of water quality, but also includes less formal or tacit data such as other organisations' priorities and capacities, individuals in relevant roles and funding schemes available. Where partnerships were perceived to be valuable primarily for building connections a few interviewees questioned to what extent their persistence was needed once these had been made. However, nearly all interviewees were unequivocal that partnerships were valuable and allowed activity may otherwise not have happened – both via providing a coordinator to identify and manage bids for funding, to provide a means to pool resources (staff, expertise and funding) for specific activities.

What characteristics of catchment partnerships (including the sectors involved), explain these experiences and achievements?

Our partnerships varied widely in how long they have been in existence, how they are formally constituted, and their precise goals. They all had a core group of partners with a coordinator – but some also had a chair and/or a wider group of partners. Whatever the number and arrangement of partners, main characteristic identified as important was that the coordinator was perceived as neutral or independent. Problems had been encountered – and changes made to partnership arrangements – in

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order to ensure that coordinators were not biased to a particular partner or interest. The work of coordinators was often hidden and not easy to distinguish in final outputs and activities: but many cited examples were given of them playing a critical role in directly applying – or facilitating partners to apply – for funding that helped meet the partnerships aims. Furthermore, in some partnerships they sometimes took on the role of project manager (their capacity to do this becoming a limiting factor in the number of projects that can be running at any one time).

We aimed to explore the role of different sectors but found that typical classification of ‘private, public and third sector’ was not easy to apply in practice. For example, some charitable organisations formally represent a collection of private businesses (e.g. NFU) or may be informally be associated with both private and public interests e.g. Fisheries organisations whose members include those whose riparian rights are used commercially. Meanwhile, Water Companies in England are private sector, but the pursuit of their private interest in water quality can coincide with many wider benefits for the water environment, whilst north of the border, Scottish Water has a similar aim to some water companies but is usually be classified as public sector. In general, we found that few ‘pure’ profit oriented actors from the private sector were strongly active in partnerships, beyond the important exception of water companies in England. As a result the private sector may be relatively less involved and affected by the partnerships, except where they directly relate to their existing goals and activities: though a few key organisations do provide some core funding for coordinators, which is greatly valued. So far do not see clear patterns in how different types of partners play different roles in partnerships. It may also call into question the extent to which partnerships really bring in different actors beyond the environmental statutory agencies and NGOs, especially from the private sector. However, as some interviewees noted, this may occur more in future.

If and how are partnership achievements constrained or enabled by multi-level or polycentric dimensions of WFD and FD governance?

Multi-level dimensions of governance refers to the interconnections across different levels e.g. between national policy through to catchment partnerships. As noted above, the need to achieve the goals of the WFD is a strong driver as it is duty to implement for environmental statutory bodies, whilst it is also a goal for the English partnerships which have accessed CaBA funding. Whether or not a partnership claims independence, its ability to act is shaped by the actions that it can carry out, and this in turn often depends on what can be funded. Some actions can be carried out using in kind support from partners - for example a Fisheries Trust may install fish passes or contribute to restoration using its own staff time – but undertaking significant new and additional actions nearly always requires a bid for project funding. The key policy drivers shaping funding applied to were often cited as the WFD and biodiversity designations under Natura 2000. Since this scarce funding is normally available (often by application to some of the same public agencies), environmental policies further shape what is achieved by partnerships. So, there is a strong top-down influence from policy which enables and shapes the work of the partnerships. However, there was rarely evidence of a reciprocal link upwards, although a very few individuals have links to those shaping future policy. Partnerships receiving CaBA have to contribute to reports that could inform future policy-making, although how this process works was unclear.

Polycentric dimensions of governance refer to connections between similar levels of and types of organisation, such as between catchment partnerships. There seemed to be a clear benefit of partnerships connecting to other partnerships, especially – though not exclusively – in terms of links between coordinators of different partnerships. As noted above, the coordinators were valued and seem integral to partnerships making a difference. Individuals in these roles often had backgrounds and professional training that were not directly about facilitating partnership working but reflecting a

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specialism such as ecology. Their ability to effectively coordinate often built on informal learning within that partnership, sometimes previous roles in other partnerships, and by connecting across to share experiences with those in other partnerships. There are also links and learning within organisations - particularly staff in large statutory organisations with multiple departments, or water companies linked to multiple catchments – that aid representatives to effectively coordinate and work with others.

Lastly, we can see an interaction between the multi-level and polycentric dimensions of governance. We noted above that funding to support delivery of environmental policies is scarce, and it has been becoming increasing so in the last decade. Furthermore, all public sector parties have had declining budgets which affects their ability to use staff to support partnerships. This is a particular problem for some local authority partners. Taken together this means that some partners struggle to attend and really contribute to partnerships, whilst coordinators struggle to find ‘core funding’ for their time, either from partners or project funds.

Discussion and conclusions

Our overall research question is “How does catchment partnership working align or help with delivery of multiple benefits, including the delivery of WFD and FD objectives?” Our preliminary findings are that these partnerships can be a good way of bringing together stakeholders to articulate shared objectives. The difference made by partnerships often results from sharing different types of knowledge, improving communications beyond the partnerships, facilitating bids for funding and in some partnerships, having a coordinator who can project manage complex interventions across property boundaries.

Finally, we note here that there are many other themes in our data, some of which we may explore whilst validating and developing our analysis of answers to the research questions. These issues include but are not limited to: issues around multiple accountabilities shaping the work of partnerships; tensions between building holistic visions at greater scales whilst maintaining interest of smaller-scale and single interest partners; if and how characteristics of partnerships could or should evolve over time; the role of individual personalities, motivation and capacities in influencing partner and partnership progress; and tension between delivering achievable projects and making progress on difficult actions requiring multiple partners (such as NFM).

Next steps

The next steps in this work are to complete analysis of these preliminary findings. In summer 2020 we will then share them for ‘peer review’ with the stakeholders that contributed to this work, to confirm if the issues are captured, and provide opportunities for further feedback. We will also explore the option to share with other stakeholders in these and other partnerships, to appraise if the findings and issues resonate more widely. Our opportunities to interact with stakeholders are necessarily constrained and influenced by the current restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, so we will seek feedback and interaction remotely.

At the time of writing we have committed to provide a full report on the findings and subsequent interactions by autumn 2020, a shorter accessible briefing by the end of the year, and to submit an academic publication by March 2021. We may revise these plans in light of the restrictions on staff time arising COVID-19 restrictions, but aim to retain the general ethos of developing engagement with both academic and non-academic audiences.

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