

Going with the Flow: Key issues for catchment and landscape partnership working in the UK

Kerry Waylen¹, Keith Marshall¹, Alba Juarez-Bourke¹
& Kirsty Blackstock¹, Rory McLeod²

March 2022

Contact: Kerry.Waylen@hutton.ac.uk

(1) Social, Economic and Geographical Sciences Department,
The James Hutton Institute

(2) The Scottish Forum on Natural Capital, for ECom



This briefing summarises key themes from a recent workshop convened to discuss partnership working in the UK, focusing on key insights and implications to improve future practice.



Contents

Why was this workshop convened?	1
How was the workshop structured?.....	2
What was discussed at the workshop?	3
What does this mean for the future?	4
Acknowledgments	5

Why was this workshop convened?

This briefing is the result of a virtual workshop, in January 2022, held to share current experiences and expectations of partnership working across the UK.

Within and beyond the UK, expectations about how to achieve ‘joined up’ environmental management are increasingly focused on catchment and landscape partnerships. It is hoped partnerships can work with multiple sectors and stakeholders to tackle complex and persistent problems, such as diffuse pollution, low flows and flooding simultaneously. In the face of these expectations, examining and sharing practitioners’ experiences is essential.

The workshop was jointly convened with [ECom, the Ecosystem Services Community Scotland](#). This event marked the end-point of 6 years of Scottish Government funded research at the James Hutton Institute into how to [integrate water management goals](#) and achieve [holistic, ‘joined-up’ governance of our natural resources](#). In the last three years, our research has explored if and how catchment partnerships can achieve this joined-up management, and we used our findings to shape the themes of the workshop. The themes in this briefing reflect the practitioners’ discussion, rather than our direct findings: for more information about our research and outputs, please see the webpages linked above.

Going with the Flow: Key issues for catchment and landscape partnership working in the UK

How was the workshop structured?

The aim of the workshop was to facilitate discussion on developments and challenges experienced by cross-sectoral catchment and landscape partnerships. There was a particular focus on how such partnerships may support policy implementation, Nature-Based Solutions and a green recovery.

The event was initiated by three speakers who each gave five-minute talks on key themes identified as topical challenges from our research (see below bullets for summaries). This was followed by plenary discussions, and four breakout sessions considering the themes of; (i) Partnerships as policy implementers, (ii) The experience and potential of private sector involvement, (iii) Hybrid financing for riparian restoration at scale, and (iv) Future partnership needs.

- Penny Lawson, coordinator of the [Spey Catchment Initiative](#), spoke about “**Partnerships as policy implementers**”. She explained how catchment partnerships can play an important role in mediating and strengthening the links between policies, implementation agencies, and those who carry out actions on the ground. Partnerships both interpret policies for land managers and feed implementation opportunities back to the statutory agencies; additionally, they provide a forum for collaborative decision-making and coordinate activities with land managers; and may obtain funding not so easily accessed by partner organisations working by themselves. She noted that private sector bodies with their own objectives for sustainability and net-zero are increasingly engaging with partnerships, potentially contributing valuable new resources and experience.
- Fiona Bowles, previously of Wessex Water and recent chair of the [Poole Harbour Catchment Initiative](#) spoke about “**The experience and potential of private sector involvement**”. The Poole catchment encompasses three principal private sector interests: the water industry, agriculture, and shellfish fisheries. The Initiative helps mediate across these sectors and their impacts and dependences on different parts of the catchment: it has also initiated contacts with other private sector businesses (cosmetics and brewing) to form more cross-sectoral links. Partnership working connects groups from regulators to customers and can facilitate approval processes and project initiation. Recognition of shared problems and innovative ideas to tackle them has led to the innovative [EnTrade](#) scheme where farmers and business bid for pollution offsets, and a [Poole Harbour Nutrient Management Scheme](#) to pilot a Defra nitrate trading scheme, with funding from Triodos bank. Policy changes requiring biodiversity net-gain and enabling natural flood management are providing new opportunities. There are questions about what other approaches, schemes or partnerships might be useful to engage with: e.g. some initiatives might productively link to Local Enterprise Partnerships, but some businesses prefer to use national accreditation schemes for water stewardship rather than engaging with local processes.
- Ruchir Shah, the Director of External Affairs at the Scottish Wildlife Trust, spoke about “**Hybrid financing for riparian restoration at scale**”. The Trust is a lead partner in [Riverwoods](#), a Scottish riparian restoration network initiated in 2019. It has attracted members from agencies and NGOs from across Scotland. This aims to ease land-managers’ access to restoration-relevant funding, including private finance, and participate in restoration activities. A sub-group is developing novel ways to finance projects more quickly and at larger scales. This may be enabled by blended finance models whereby philanthropic sources provide grants or act as guarantors to de-risk private partner investments; Riverwoods is also exploring social bridging finance to support demonstration projects that facilitate public sector engagement.

Going with the Flow: Key issues for catchment and landscape partnership working in the UK

The workshop was attended by 28 individuals from a range of organisations and with a variety of roles including partner representatives, coordinators, policymakers, and land managers. The majority were partnership members and staff from various UK statutory environmental agencies, with representatives from environmental NGOs, private sector interests, academia, and the Scottish Government. Their diverse backgrounds allowed for a range of perspectives and ideas to be shared.

What was discussed at the workshop?

The following points highlight key themes that recurred across the workshop.

1. How do partnerships interact with policy?

Partnerships are usually initiated and present themselves as independent of policy. However, they all achieve their aims by accessing public grants and funds linked to environmental policy goals (such as the Water Framework Directive) so tend to support policy implementation. Furthermore, they are seen to act as a bridge between local and national priorities, to shape how policy is delivered. There are often few formal opportunities to feedback learning to policy, though the routes that exist are valued (e.g., via CaBA processes in England, and input into River Basin Management Plans in Scotland) and some partner representatives may be able to feedback via their own organisation. Knowledge of, and links to, non-environmental policies tend to be weaker, and some of these policies can act as barriers to activities tackling environmental harms.

2. What funding mechanisms are or would be useful?

Public sector funding is the dominant source of resources (and influence) on partnerships at present: this encompasses a range of types and sources but is usually associated with environmental policy delivery, especially the Water Framework Directive. However, there was great interest in other sources. As post-CAP [Environmental Land Management Schemes](#) takes effect in England, there may be greater scope to fund activities through a blended finance model. Other opportunities for realising catchment-based Natural Capital benefits that might be sold either locally or nationally include carbon, biodiversity, water quality improvements, and flood minimisation. These can allow businesses to offset some of their environmental impacts, improve the quality of their raw material requirements, or provide developers with opportunities for biodiversity net gain. Motivations for private finance to invest in partnerships or their projects arise from different incentives including reputation and legislation in relation to land rights and responsibilities. However, whilst schemes focused on carbon sequestration or offsetting may create opportunities, their narrow focus risks a lack of integration with water quality, quantity, and wider environmental outcomes. They also fail to address the social and economic outcomes required to achieve a Just Transition. Therefore, new markets need regulating, with agreed standards that include meeting Environmental, Social, and Corporate Governance (ESG) requirements.

In general, interest in private sector partnering and resources greatly exceeds experience: as such, partnerships would benefit from pooling their growing expertise in developing and working with novel funding processes to realise the potential benefits.

3. What are the current and future roles of the private sector?

The socio-economic geography of landscapes – especially in terms of economic activities and regulatory context – strongly shapes the private sector actors involved in or working with partnerships. For example, in England, some water companies are a significant source of resources and support for catchment partnerships. It was thought that large companies such as these may tend to be better able to invest in issues of importance to them, versus small companies.

Going with the Flow: Key issues for catchment and landscape partnership working in the UK

Some private land managers (farmers, foresters, estates) and tourism providers welcome the role catchment partnerships can play in providing a space for awareness raising and coordination of activities. Tools such as collaborative opportunity mapping (e.g. on where to restore floodplains for most benefit) may help better demonstrate benefits to local land based businesses and encourage investment. This also helps make connections between different sectors and policy areas, though there were unanswered questions about how to enable investment from urban beneficiaries that benefit from upstream measures, and how this might be applied in different settings.

Some partnerships reported being approached by businesses to help fulfil their sustainability objectives. However, there are often mismatches in relation to capacity and scale; businesses often seek large, long-term projects that most partnerships are not currently able to deliver. Some new initiatives may help address scale mismatches: for example, Landscape Enterprise Networks (LENS) are being piloted in Wessex, and other areas of the UK, which aim to connect large-scale beneficiaries (e.g. agri-food processors) with groups of providers (e.g. individual farmers) in the landscape. Another example is English CaBA partnerships working with county-level Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs) to link so that environmental projects can benefit from Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs).

4. What is needed for partnerships to succeed?

As noted above, most (though not all) partnerships fund many of their activities – and their core costs – from public sector funds linked to environmental policy delivery. Reducing or removing this funding may jeopardise partnerships' progress. However, there are also many other policy changes that affect partnerships, via law, incentives and advice. In particular, post-CAP agricultural and other land use policies were expected to affect what partnerships could do, depending on how far land-managers were empowered to plan for the long-term, and were encouraged to collaborate at the landscape scale. Helpful examples mentioned included Welsh agricultural partnerships, and the [Burren Programme in Ireland](#) which gives advice and resources to help farmers support habitats and biodiversity. This was seen as preferable to funding short-term, standalone projects or activities.

A catchment might not be the best or only way to define a partnership boundary, especially where there are lots of small coastal rivers. Larger catchments such as the Spey, Tweed, and Dee, as well as many English catchments, seems to work well, while [Argyll and the Isles Coast and Countryside Trust](#) works well at a "landscape scale". Therefore, attention to how partnerships are bounded and may overlap with each other will be useful: for example for Scotland there was curiosity about how Regional Land Use Partnerships, Nature Networks to be set up by local authorities, and catchment partnerships might overlay and interact.

What does this mean for the future?

For the workshop participants, there was no doubt that partnerships are making valuable progress in helping to achieve integrated and inclusive management of our natural resources.

Firstly, the value of partnership in making connections across levels, from policy-making through to action by land-managers, was undoubted. However, the difficulty in resourcing these connections was also a common theme – fostering capacity and providing stability is an important goal for those who seek to enable partnerships.

Secondly, the experience of partnerships in connecting across sectors – and especially the private sector – seems to be providing opportunities to unlock valuable resources, experience and commitment. However, working with the private sector is still a nascent issue for many partnerships, with some

Going with the Flow: Key issues for catchment and landscape partnership working in the UK

making more progress than others. This may partly be due to a lack of opportunities to learn and reflect on cross-sectoral engagement, and perhaps also relates to varying regulatory contexts – for example biodiversity net gain policies and water services privatisation south of the border sometimes produce positive opportunities absent in Scotland.

It is clear that important questions remain about how to organise and enable partnership working. In particular there were questions raised over how post-CAP agricultural policies will affect land-managers and create opportunities for partnerships; the role of partnership working in relation to potential natural capital markets, and new financial mechanisms. To tackle this, sharing future experiences will be valuable, as well as future research findings. For example, in the future Scottish Government Strategic Research Programme (SRP) there will be research on the use of natural capital data, and on integrated land management; relevant research is also happening elsewhere in the UK and Europe.

One thing that was both noticeable and encouraging was the level of engagement in the issues across a range of organisations and actors, and the enthusiasm for raising issues and sharing recommendations for ways forward. Establishing or reinforcing communities of practice around partnership working might be one way of continuing such dialogue. Models and experiences of partnership working vary, but even those partnerships which seem relatively innovative or unusual in their activities still find themselves asking if they could do more or work differently – providing a space for reflection and peer support can be valuable for all.

For all partnerships, it is perhaps important that they and their supporters do not expect too much, too quickly, in terms of innovative mechanisms they develop, levels they link to, sectors they engage with and actions that they achieve. Partnerships are showing promise in improving catchment and landscape management, but these types of ‘wicked’ problems tend not to have quick and easy solutions. Just as rivers may flow slowly and meander through parts of landscapes, it is inevitable that partnership progress will not always proceed linearly or provide a quick flow of solutions to our sustainability challenges.



Acknowledgments

We are very grateful for the time and insights from the workshop speakers and participants, and to ECom (a [working group](#) of the Scottish Forum for Natural Capital) for their support in organising the workshop. Our time was funded by the Rural & Environment Science & Analytical Services Division of the Scottish Government, as part of the 2016-2021 Strategic Research Programme. This briefing corresponds to the final deliverable of Research Deliverable 1.2.4 Objective 1.2: more information about this project and its other outputs is available from

<https://www.hutton.ac.uk/research/projects/waterintegration>



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
gov.scot

