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SPECIAL ISSUE • Place leadership and the role of the third sector and civil society

## policy and practice

# Place leadership revisited: partnerships in environmental regeneration in North West England, 1980–2010: a practitioner perspective

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Place leadership has recently emerged as a key theme in regional development and with it a call for practical guidance for implementation in practice. Drawing on the experience of a number of novel environmental partnership initiatives in North West England in the 1980s that introduced new ideas, new ways of working and an energised popular movement relevant to all, this article outlines the history of two of these partnerships: Groundwork and the Mersey Basin Campaign from 1980 to 2010. The authors, who were involved at the time, consider a number of key factors for place leadership: vertical and horizontal partnerships; scale in landscape; the sustainability of outcomes; institutional context; and leadership itself. Some challenges of the approach are also briefly considered. We suggest that this experience has a wider relevance to current challenges in place leadership – decarbonisation, climate change adaptation and the conservation of biodiversity – offering lessons for mobilising practical and lasting change.

**Key words** place leadership and the voluntary sector • environmental regeneration in North West England • Groundwork • Mersey Basin Campaign • multi-sectoral partnerships

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## Introduction

England's North West region was at the cutting edge of environmental partnership working over three decades, bookended by the Toxteth and Moss Side riots of 1981, with the resultant appointment of Michael Heseltine as 'Minister for Merseyside', and the introduction of 'austerity' policies in 2010 by the incoming coalition government. This article outlines the history of two of these partnerships – Groundwork and the Mersey Basin Campaign – from the perspective of voluntary sector leaders who were there at the time. We explore that experience and draw out lessons for 'place leadership' that may have a relevance to contemporary challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss.

In Europe, the idea of integrated policy for place has emerged as a key theme in regional development, and with that, the recognition of the importance of 'place leadership' (Collinge and Gibney, 2010). The call is 'for a new generation of leaders operating in complex and sometimes chaotic policy environments, working across institutional, thematic, territorial and professional boundaries and with long-term, vision led agendas' (Collinge et al, 2010: 368). This requires an in-depth understanding of what place leadership is actually about 'so as to provide policy makers and practitioners not only with better evidence-based guidance on what to do but also some guidance informed by good evidence on how to go about it' (Sotarauta et al, 2017: 190).

It is in that spirit that we, as a group of practitioners, came together to pool our knowledge and experience of environmental regeneration and partnership working in North West England between 1980 and 2010. The stimulus was a conference call about 'state and non-state partnerships for effective place leadership', which identified the need for social innovation and entrepreneurial leadership in the governance of regions in transition. Non-governmental organisations and the voluntary engagement of citizens are seen as key elements in an effective response in that they carry 'the risks of social innovation which would not be done by firms or the public sector' (Potluka and Anderton, 2018: 1). We found that this notion of place leadership through partnership working connected strongly with our experience. Our objective was not to give a critical account of place leadership itself but to draw out lessons from that experience that have a strong contemporary relevance.

The geographical focus for this article is the central core of the North West region of England, including the Mersey Belt between Liverpool and Manchester. This area has seen a sequence of vision-led governance initiatives – which often ignored conventional local government boundaries – summoning a 'variety of alternative geographies into being instead' (Hincks et al, 2017: 644). Here, a series of 28 interviews with 34 policy actors revealed the importance of a small group of key individuals whose names cropped up as key stakeholders, directors and employees working across many of the sub-regional regeneration and environmental initiatives:

'Some of these individuals could chart their involvement back to the 1974 Strategic Plan for the North West, virtually all of them had some connection with the North West Development Agency, and many had periodically engaged with the Mersey Basin Campaign. This seemingly dense and persistent social networking, and the social and intellectual capital around it, provides at least part of the reason why the North West of England has been

such a productive region for experience in sub-regional soft spaces. Crucially, this group of people were not simply concerned with ‘the environment’; all were committed to promoting economic growth and urban regeneration as an integral part of their environmental work.’ (Deas et al, 2015: 41)

The authors were part of this network, having been involved, in one capacity or another, with Community Technical Aid Centres (Liverpool and Manchester), Groundwork, the Lancashire Wildlife Trust, the Mersey Basin Campaign, Mersey Forest, the Merseyside Development Corporation, the North West Partnership, the North West Development Agency, Natural Economy Northwest, RENEW North West, Sustainability North West, The Land Trust and, latterly, Keep Britain Tidy, Adapting the Landscape and the Atlantic Gateway. The authors selected Groundwork and the Mersey Basin Campaign as their case studies because they are instructive examples of partnership working, they exemplify much of what ‘place leadership’ is about, and it is here that the authors themselves played a central role.

In theorising about the nature of place leadership, Mabey and Freeman (2010) set up a 2x2 matrix – duality versus dualism and dissensus versus consensus – which defines four distinctive, but not mutually exclusive, discourses. On the face of it, we are dealing here with a ‘functional discourse’ in which ‘leadership is broadly self-evident and essentialist (a person who displays the abilities, qualities and status of a “leader”)’ and where the learning from the authors’ experience would, potentially, ‘help to equip leaders with the skills and competences to lead in cross-boundary, multi-agency environments, making for a more prosperous and healthy society’ (Mabey and Freeman, 2010: 508). However, what we were about in Groundwork and the Mersey Basin Campaign was the creation of new vehicles as partnerships to achieve regeneration of place, bringing in multiple agencies and stakeholders, and creating momentum for lasting change. This required a mode of place leadership that goes beyond the conventional ‘functional discourse’ to embrace some elements of the diametrically opposed ‘dialogic discourse’. Here ‘there is no single or static leader of place as such; rather there is a multi-actor process of “place-making” – brought about through relating and talking’. Similarly, ‘there is no “leadership” as such – only “leading” – again accomplished through negotiation, consultation and ascription’ (Mabey and Freeman, 2010: 509). The governance in our examples involved a board of ‘charity trustees’ drawn from various sectors, including local government, which carried considerable influence. But the organisations themselves had little in the way of executive power or direct access to resources; they worked through building partnerships and drawing in resources through a creative and entrepreneurial approach to fundraising and action on the ground. They pursued their aims through a pragmatic approach to making a difference in the world (Allen, 2008).

## Context: North West region in 1980

The Strategic Plan for the North West (SPNW) broke new ground by highlighting the need to improve living and working conditions in the region’s towns and cities, focusing in particular on the Mersey Belt between Liverpool and Manchester (North West Joint Planning Team, 1974). The evidence base included an inter-regional assessment across the UK, using a wide range of quality-of-life indicators, finding that the North West was worst of the English regions ‘for river pollution, air pollution,

*incidence of derelict land, general mortality, infant mortality, availability of doctors, pupil-teacher ratio and availability of open country recreation* (North West Joint Planning Team, 1974: 51, emphasis added).

The voluntary sector does not feature in the three-page list of recommendations, each allocated to particular agencies for action. The voluntary sector did of course exist and it could be influential; for example, the Civic Trust for the North West's proposal for a focus on environmental renewal in the river valleys of Greater Manchester became a key policy in the Greater Manchester Structure Plan. But the capacity of the voluntary sector was limited – for example, in the 1970s the Lancashire Trust for Nature Conservation (now the Lancashire Wildlife Trust) was a body run almost entirely by and for volunteers. Evans (1992: 120) observes that in this period 'only a handful of voluntary bodies with relatively small membership was doing anything to champion the conservation of our most spectacular countryside'. Twenty years later, it employed a professional staff of 25, enjoyed a turnover approaching £1 million a year and managed a portfolio of environmental activity. The current chief executive of Lancashire Wildlife Trust, Anne Selby, contributes a contemporary perspective later in this article; today she manages 140 staff, the Trust has 28,000 members and it has a turnover of more than £6.2 million a year.

Back in 1980, living conditions were at their worst in the inner cities of Liverpool and Manchester. Here the problems of economic decline, physical decay and social disadvantage combined to create an atmosphere of despair, compounded in Liverpool by an absence of effective leadership (Parkinson, 1990). In July 1981, riots broke out in Toxteth in Liverpool and Moss Side in Manchester. As a result, Michael Heseltine, Secretary of State for the Environment in Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government, was additionally appointed 'Minister for Merseyside'. Heseltine, and the Merseyside Task Force he established, chose to respond to the challenge of urban regeneration through a series of place-based initiatives, which included Groundwork and the Mersey Basin Campaign. While this approach received criticism at the time, in the long term this 'place-based policy' has proved to be a key ingredient in Liverpool's renaissance in modern times (Parkinson, 2019: 137).

Readers may surmise that Groundwork and the Mersey Basin Campaign were top-down, state-mandated partnerships, bypassing local government and of little relevance to the voluntary sector. In fact, local government played a key role in their gestation and subsequent governance and they enjoyed a strong voluntaristic culture. Both organisations were properly structured; institutionally separate from government; self-governing; non-profit distributing; and involving meaningful voluntary participation. That is, they incorporated the five basic features of the 'non-profit sector', in this case with an environmental focus (Salamon and Anheier, 1996). Contemporary work on place leadership stresses the need to reach beyond issues of formal authority and raises a core question about 'how individuals or groups may mobilize and coordinate transformative work in their communities that makes a difference' (Beer et al, 2018: 3). This is the question that we seek to explore in our two case studies.

## Case study: Groundwork<sup>1</sup>

The Strategic Plan for the North West highlighted the twin problems of a degraded environment and limited opportunities for countryside recreation. The Countryside Commission (a government-appointed body) had recognised the importance of an

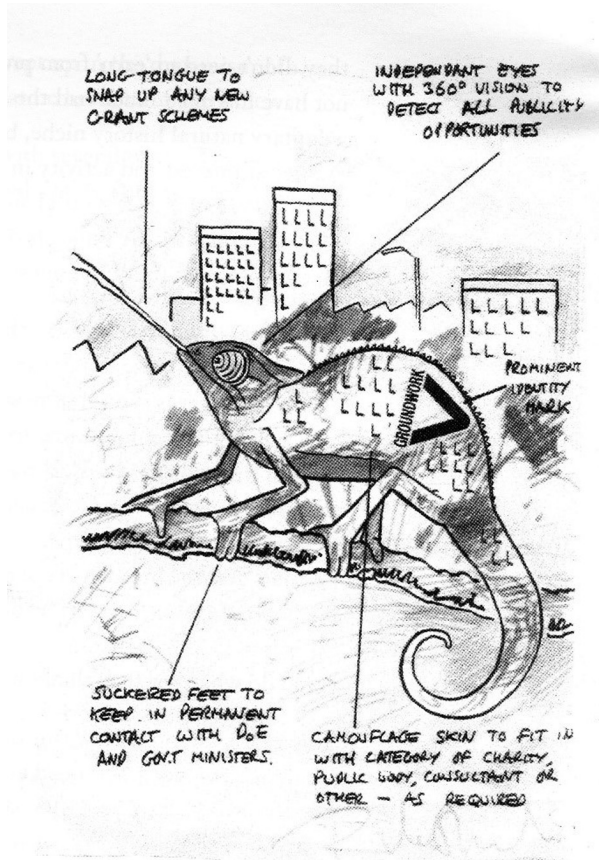
accessible local countryside for the wellbeing of townspeople (Phillips, 2012). In the UK, this territory – the peri-urban environment – is often referred to as the ‘urban fringe’. The Countryside Commission had enjoyed considerable success with a model of place leadership in which a project officer, supported by a modest project budget, worked with farmers and other local stakeholders to improve landscape care and access provision. However, this model proved ineffective at a larger scale in areas blighted by ‘complex land use issues, powerful economic forces and stressful local conditions’ (Phillips, 2012: 26). The Commission’s response was to launch a large-scale national experiment in integrated landscape management of the countryside around a medium-sized town. Following a national competition, in May 1979, the Countryside Commission selected St Helens, an archetypal industrial town with a legacy of coal mining, glass and chemical production (Barker and Harris, 1993), and Knowsley, very much the product of rapid post-war overspill development from the adjoining city of Liverpool, on the fringes between town and country (Handley, 2012).

The sizeable budget required specific approval by Michael Heseltine, who visited the area and, although impressed by both its needs and its opportunities, demanded a more innovative approach. Rather than a large team of public sector staff, the project was to be led by a small independent trust (a non-governmental organisation [NGO] and charity), which would work with a wide range of partners, including the private sector and local authorities, to achieve the project’s objectives. The participating local authorities were given a special capital allocation to enable them to carry through the large-scale programme of land reclamation and countryside schemes the project demanded. Final approval for Operation Groundwork came in 1981 and the body set up to lead it was the Groundwork Trust,<sup>2</sup> a charity and a company limited by guarantee with a public/private/voluntary sector board.

After barely a year of Operation Groundwork, Michael Heseltine revisited the area and declared himself impressed both by what had been achieved and by the potential of this public/private/voluntary sector partnership mechanism (the strapline for Operation Groundwork was ‘partnership for action’). The model was quickly replicated with new Groundwork Trusts established in the southern part of the region – in Rossendale, Wigan, Salford & Trafford, Oldham & Rochdale and Macclesfield by 1984.

Each of the new Trusts, starting from a common ‘blueprint’ derived from the Operation Groundwork early experience, was nonetheless able to adapt to local circumstances almost from the outset, building on the strengths of its different appointed executive director leaders and responding to the various local needs, challenges, economies and political cultures of their respective areas. Groundwork Rossendale was a case in point. Based in one of the smallest district (second-tier) authorities in the region, its forward-thinking planning officers had a strong commitment to ‘greening Rossendale’. Entrepreneurial in drawing in badly needed outside resources to complement their own meagre budgets, they had convinced their own councillors and built effective partnerships with the County Council, the pre-privatisation Water Authority (which owned around 25% of the land in Rossendale as water catchment), the Countryside Commission and the Department of the Environment, which administered the Derelict Land Grant and provided the new Trust with strong partnership backing from the start.

Figure 1: Groundwork chameleon



Source: Reproduced in [Menzies and Barton \(2012: 119\)](#)

Critical to success was the ability of the Trust to draw in significant additional funding from a variety of sources, including the first voluntary sector funding in the North West from the European Regional Development Fund.

The new Conservative leader of Rossendale Council was horrified, while busily cutting his own budgets, to find a body funded by government sources to deliver an environmental agenda he did not prioritise. The Member of Parliament from the same party, an increasingly strong supporter of Groundwork Rossendale, intervened directly at the request of the executive director to neutralise this obstacle.

Similarly, direct engagement with the (Labour) leader of the County Council was useful in securing higher levels of support from Lancashire. And the deliberate creation of a climate of support and endorsement from high-profile external figures – such as Richard Branson (who secured an illustrated write-up in *The Times* newspaper), Sir Hector Laing (then chair of United Biscuits and treasurer of the Conservative Party) and Derek Rayner, the chair of Marks & Spencer – together with a whole string of government and former government ministers, all helped to boost the profile of Groundwork in its own patch in its early days (Peter Wilmers, personal account).

This kind of promotional activity was not without its critics, especially among established voluntary organisations that resented what they saw as Groundwork's

privileged access to resources as a result of government patronage (Collis, 1990). This was well expressed at the time by the then director of the Lancashire Wildlife Trust, who portrayed Groundwork as a chameleon 'able to change its appearance when required from a business to a charity, to an arm of the local authority, to a quango – because it was all these things and none of them' (Sharland, 2012: 122) (see Figure 1).

The planning and ecological ethos pioneered by Operation Groundwork gradually moved Rossendale's partners away from their traditional engineering approach to derelict land reclamation to a more subtle ecological way of working with nature at a landscape scale. This was complemented by a deliberate strategy of community engagement through formal and informal mechanisms, which was also in time adopted by Groundwork's partners. For example, an 'Access Rossendale' forum was established by the Trust, bringing together all the competing interests in access to the countryside and securing agreement on priorities.

And this in turn led to the development of the 'Rossendale Way' as an early example of a local medium-distance footpath network promoted by an award-winning guided walks programme and an illustrated publication produced by a team of volunteers promoting Rossendale as a walking destination (Goldthorpe, 1985).

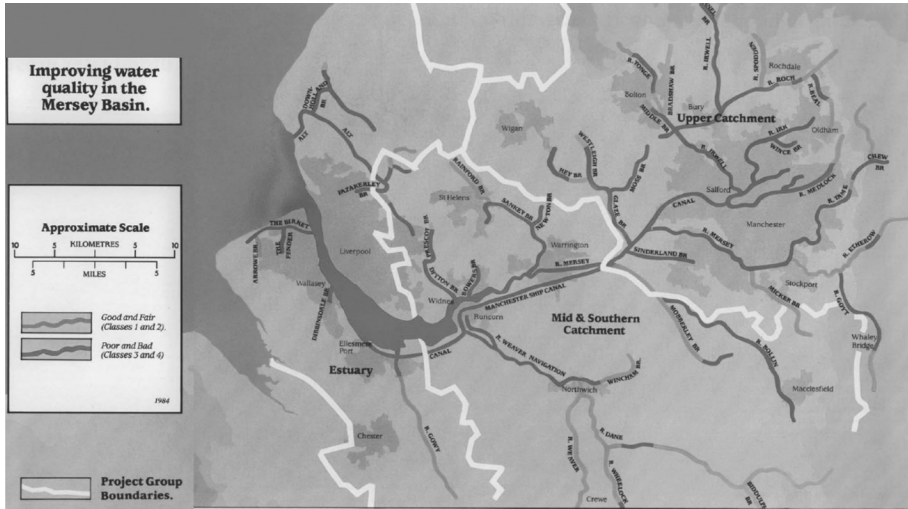
The desire not only to maximise physical improvements to the local environment, but also to move the perception of Rossendale locally and beyond from grimy and rundown to an attractive area in which to live and invest, led to the development of complementary programmes working on 'hearts and minds'. These ranged from environmental education activity in Rossendale schools to an 'interpretation programme' looking at the human impact on the Rossendale Valley. The Rossendale Country Fair was reinvented as a major annual weekend event and the publication of a series of postcards of the valley illustrated its attractions in a simple but effective way.

But perhaps the most powerful means of community engagement was the development of a partnership with the then Manpower Services Commission, enabling the Trust to employ teams of unemployed local people for one or two years on their Community Programme Intermediate Labour Market employment and training scheme, which rapidly grew to more than 100 employees, and thus enabled the Trust to deliver major programmes of environmental, educational and interpretative work. As a result, the Trust was able to scale up its work very significantly and deliver substantial on-the-ground impact. By becoming the third-largest employer in Rossendale for a 10-year period, the Trust was able to build direct links with almost every family in the valley, place 82% of its employees in full-time jobs or education and deliver £10 investment into the environmental regeneration of Rossendale for every adult resident – a very substantial impact.

Like Groundwork Rossendale, all the Trusts in the North West thrived, their success welcomed in terms of partnership cohesion as well as environmental, social and economic outcomes. By 1986 there were 12 local Groundwork Trusts, including four outside the North West, and, by the millennium, Groundwork had expanded to a federation of some 46 Trusts across much of England, Wales and Northern Ireland, collectively with a turnover of £90 million a year and 2,400 staff.

This rapid growth of the Groundwork network was not mandated by government, nor were significant financial inducements on offer. It was because this approach to place leadership offered a positive opportunity to areas blighted by a degraded environment and structural unemployment that it could be tailored to their own local distinctiveness. Fordham et al (2002: 5) 'found Groundwork [was] committed

**Figure 2: Water quality in the Mersey Catchment at the start of the Mersey Basin Campaign (when it ended in 2010, the vast majority of the red catchments had turned to blue)**



Source: Government Office for the North West (1986), (Available at <https://www.merseybasin.org.uk/archive/items/MBC010.html>)

to working with communities ... and particularly effective in helping create a holistic approach to area regeneration'. Key ingredients for effective place leadership included a responsiveness to the needs of community, an ability to raise funding and resources to make things happen and a culture 'seen as more risk taking than other organisations' (Fordham et al (2002: 9).

Post 2010, however, the progressive withdrawal of the central government core grant, financial pressures on local authorities and the shift to a contracting culture, forced Groundwork to change substantially to survive: some Trusts closed and most of the remainder amalgamated into a handful of Trusts with much greater geographical coverage and with governance moving from the local to the (sub-)regional level. The demand for increased operational efficiency and the need to compete for work have eroded the spirit and practice of partnership as described in this article and distanced the charities from local 'ownership'. That said, the Groundwork movement has survived the period of extensive neoliberal austerity and maintained its ethos as a social enterprise cum charitable partnership, and much good work continues today.

### *Case study: the Mersey Basin Campaign*

By the early 1980s, water quality in the rivers of the Mersey catchment was generally bad and the Victorian infrastructure of sewers and sewage treatment works were dilapidated and no longer fit for purpose (see Figure 2).

The government-led 25-year, £4 billion Mersey Basin Campaign kicked off in 1985. Like Groundwork, it was envisaged by Michael Heseltine as a partnership between the public, private and voluntary sectors. Its initial objectives were:



- to improve river water quality to at least Grade 2 (fair) standard by the year 2010 so that all rivers and streams are clean enough to support fish (see [Figure 2](#));
- to stimulate attractive waterside developments, for business, recreation, housing, tourism and protecting our heritage.

Following the establishment of the Campaign's Voluntary Sector Network in 1987, a third 'hearts and minds' objective was added:

- to encourage people living and working in the region to value and cherish their watercourses (Government Office for the North West, undated, but c1990).

From the outset, the Campaign was coordinated by a Campaign Unit in the Government Office for the North West, which established four public sector-led catchment groups. North West Water (the principal regional water utility whose major infrastructure investment programme was crucial to success) was progressively brought into the Campaign's structure and, following strong lobbying at the inaugural Campaign Conference, the Voluntary Sector Network was formed. The network grew rapidly, attracting a widespread membership of voluntary organisations. In 1990, the network was constituted as an independent charity, the Mersey Basin Trust. Facilitating the multi-sectoral partnership resulted in the further establishment of the Campaign's Business Foundation in 1991. This completed the governance architecture for the first half of the Campaign. At its peak in the late 1990s, the Mersey Basin Trust had more than 500 members drawn from recreational, nature conservation, heritage, sporting and community organisations and schools throughout the region and the Campaign's Business Foundation had some 15 blue-chip company members in the region sponsoring much of that activity.

During the last decade of the Campaign to 2010, the focus moved to a unified secretariat under a chief executive incorporating representatives of the various sectors and a single council to steer its work.

Leaders were a key ingredient of success throughout the Campaign following Michael Heseltine's initial impetus. The first chair, the head of the Campaign Unit in the Government Office for the North West (who had also been central to SPNW), the chief planning officers of Salford and Lancashire and the chair of the Voluntary Sector Network all stand out from the first half of the Campaign and many others followed. Every three years a Campaign Conference addressed by the current Secretary of State for the Environment reviewed progress and stiffened resolve.

The Mersey Basin Trust supported and stimulated local improvement activity through various programmes, including small grants, training, initiating the annual weekend of waterside activity, awards to outstanding volunteers, support for waterway clean-ups and initiating river catchment initiatives. But it also played a substantial role in brokering agreement and progress between elements of the voluntary sector whose interests differed, such as recreation and nature conservation organisations. The Campaign Unit provided the same function between public sector bodies.

An annual weekend of waterside activity took place each autumn and awards were made to outstanding volunteers for their contributions. Both an occasional *Campaign Newsletter* and the *Mersey Basin Campaign Volunteer*, latterly combined into *Source*, were newsletters that publicised, celebrated and challenged. The Business Foundation

promoted awards for good environmental business practice and the Trust’s curriculum-based *Water Detectives* was widely adopted in schools.

The Campaign was highly unusual for a regeneration programme in England as, from the outset, it had a 25-year timeframe given the scale and cost of the challenge. It is a remarkable testament to all the agencies involved that it was disbanded in 2010 having met its original objectives.<sup>3</sup>With the exception of the Manchester Ship Canal at the heart of the catchment, where particular engineering and bed-profiling issues made it particularly difficult, the whole of the catchment supported fish (and salmon returned to the Mersey for the first time since the Industrial Revolution), much of the bankside had been regenerated and public attitudes to local watercourses had massively improved (Ekos Consulting, 2006). Indeed, as Jones (2006: 1) observes: ‘The river is no longer an embarrassing liability but is now perceived as an important asset in the regeneration of this region of the UK.’

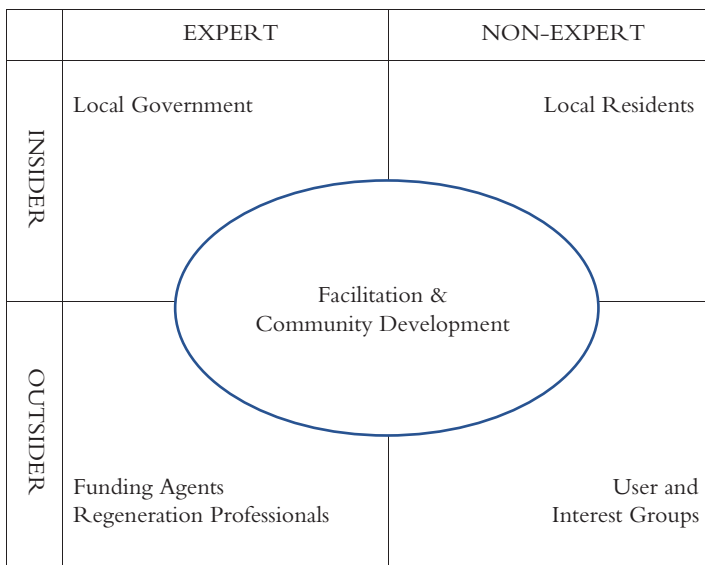
*Some key factors relating to place leadership, landscape renewal and the voluntary sector*

We now turn our attention to what we believe to be some of the key dimensions of these programmes that helped them to succeed and offer learning for successful future landscape renewal, place making and the transition to zero carbon.

*Simultaneous vertical and horizontal partnerships*

At the heart of the effectiveness of successful environmental partnership organisations of the period was an ability to manage both vertical and horizontal partnerships at the same time (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Vertical and horizontal partnerships**



Source: Adapted from Handley (2001) after Starkings (1998)

Vertical partnerships formed an axis of understanding, resources and communication between national, local and, from the late 1990s, regional government and corporations on the one hand and grassroots community projects, local businesses, landowners and agencies on the other. Various mechanisms were adopted to do so. Groundwork formed a national organisation, also a charity, as an intermediary between central government and the corporate sector nationally and the individual, local charitable trusts. The Mersey Basin Campaign was facilitated by a small unit of civil servants in the Government Office for the North West. They initiated territorial catchment groups comprising local authorities and other interested agencies, a voluntary sector network (latterly a charitable trust) and the Campaign Business Foundation, each with a small team to facilitate action.

In contrast, horizontal partnerships created a platform of collaboration between organisations with overlapping interests and responsibilities in communities, able to create structures where resources were pooled, complexities unravelled and communities given a voice. This process has already been vividly described for Groundwork Rossendale, but similar partnerships were developed and managed locally across the region. At Bold Moss in St Helens, the Groundwork Trust acquired a large area of colliery waste and tested the feasibility of land restoration using an ecologically informed and participative approach (Handley et al, 1998). Starkings reviewed the effectiveness of this approach and developed a typological framework to explore this (Starkings, 1998; see also Figure 3). The model emphasises that the reclamation community as ‘expert outsider’ is often well removed from both local residents and the user community. A reclamation scheme that seeks to overcome, rather than reinforce, social exclusion needs to engage local people in a meaningful way. Starkings concluded that the early work regarding consultation and participation undertaken by the Groundwork Trust at Bold Moss did help to bridge the gap between insider and outsider, expert and non-expert communities (Handley, 2001).

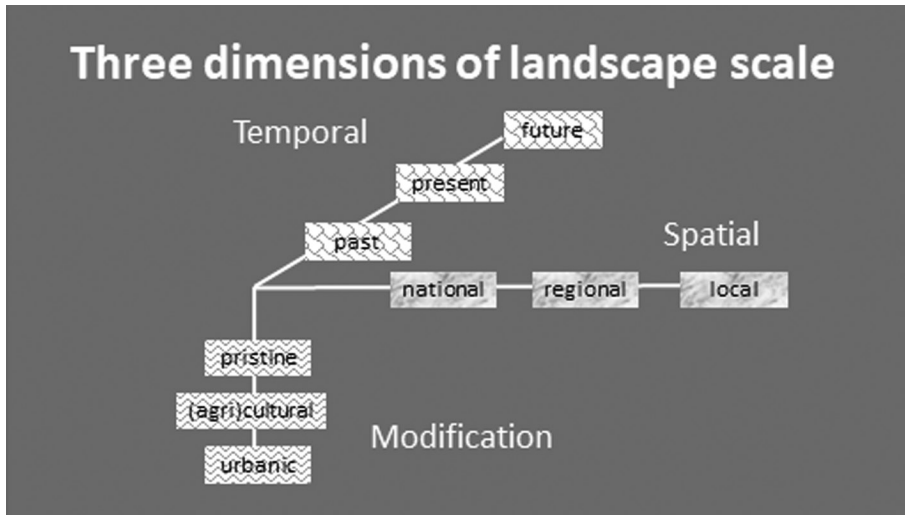
But both levels of partnership had another important function. Fordham et al’s (2002: 38) evaluation of Groundwork found, for example, that ‘there are numerous examples where [Groundwork’s] influence is extensive and evident, disproportionate to the scale of its activities’ and, as early as 1990, Collis (1990: 41), in a critique of the Groundwork movement, recognised that ‘Groundwork has many friends at the highest level in central and European government and amongst major companies’. This ability to demonstrate central government backing was critical to drawing regional and local players into the partnership, offering leverage and added value to any national investment while providing a multiplier for local resources. While Collis postulated that local authorities could achieve similar results, as in some instances they were undoubtedly able to do, he recognised, with Fordham, that in practice, it was the vertical nature of the partnership linking national government with local stakeholders that brought and held many local agencies together in an effective horizontal partnership.

### *The challenge of scale in landscape*

A key challenge in environmental regeneration is to accommodate different scales of concern and action, both geographically and temporally.

Selman (2006) explores three dimensions of scale in the landscape: temporal, spatial and the degree of modification (see Figure 4). As we have already shown, the

Figure 4: Dimensions of landscape scale



Source: redrawn from Selman (2006)

Strategic Plan for the North West highlighted the interlinked problems of pollution and industrial dereliction in the heavily modified post-industrial landscape of the Mersey Basin. This was the challenging landscape in which both Groundwork and the Mersey Basin Campaign operated during the period in question.

From the perspective of temporal scale we have focused on the period 1980–2010, but this needs to be seen against a longer sweep of history. The recent improvements in water quality and fisheries in the Mersey estuary are best appreciated against a historical perspective (Jones, 2006). The post-industrial legacy was formidable: the landscape historian W.G. Hoskins, writing about the making of the English landscape, describes St Helens as ‘the most appalling town of all’ where, in the early 19th century, ‘the atmosphere was being poisoned, every green thing blighted, and every stream fouled with chemical fumes and waste’ (Hoskins, 2013: 203–4). Towards the end of the 20th century, the scars had begun to heal and ecological surveys revealed that a rich and distinctive biodiversity had developed on the varied substrates that industrialisation had left in its wake. These areas ‘represent valuable links with an area’s history, as well as ecology, and could be exploited to develop a town’s sense of pride and place’ (Ash, 1991: 168). One way to tackle the extensive neglect and dereliction was to recognise these new qualities and to change perceptions of the landscape through a ‘policy for nature’; moving away from heavy engineering approaches to landscape renewal, instead working with nature and retaining local history.

Similarly, Groundwork Rossendale successfully challenged perceptions of ‘their’ valley. By drawing positively on the area’s industrial history and concentrating effort and resources on a relatively small area, the result was transformational, both in the landscape and in attitudes to the area. By contrast, in much larger St Helens and Knowsley, a visiting senior civil servant, accompanying the then Secretary of State for the Environment, Tom King, remarked: “This is all very well but aren’t you just lighting candles in the dark?” (John Handley, personal account) The response was to develop transformative forestry programmes tackling the widespread legacy of the coal industry and industrial decline.<sup>4</sup> This approach has been taken on and developed

very effectively by the Mersey Community Forest and the Forestry Commission (Selman, 2006: 158–60).

Partnership working across spatial scales, from the regional to the local, is no less challenging. The Mersey Basin Campaign is unusual in England, being a long-term sub-regional environmental regeneration programme. It covered some 1,080 miles (1,700 km) of river in an area containing two major conurbations and a population of more than five million people. The ability to ‘dial up and dial down’ was critical to success at all levels, as was the ability of those charged with establishing and developing the partnership to demonstrate results from the bankside micro to the catchment macro. As Kidd and Shaw (2000) conclude, the Mersey Basin Campaign’s approach has much to offer river management elsewhere, through encouraging partnership working and stimulating a sense of local stewardship.

### *Achieving sustainable outcomes*

Land restoration in the region took place at a variety of scales, from whole catchments, such as the Greater Manchester River Valleys, to individual sites. There have been challenges in sustaining the river valleys in the long term as the original joint management committees set up by the Greater Manchester Council (GMC) in the 1970s have gradually been pared back, but most of the landscape structure is retained and enjoys some management. Some, as exemplified by the Bollin Valley Partnership, still enjoy flourishing joint management arrangements.

The Land Trust, launched in 2004 as the Land Restoration Trust, again a charity established with government support in the light of the Groundwork experience, is one solution to delivering sustainable outcomes for a small number of large, intractable sites where an endowment to cover management costs is available (Bridge and Hall, 2015). It is still going strong today, responsible for 70 sites in the UK, 10 of them in the North West.

For the Mersey Basin Campaign, the framing of the Campaign’s objectives and the partnership structure have ensured that the bulk of its achievements have endured. Water quality has both a responsible body (United Utilities, formerly North West Water) and a regulator (the Environment Agency) to ensure that the one-off investment made is retained and clean rivers remain the norm. Likewise, for the other two objectives, much of the waterside regeneration has private and public sector organisations responsible for its longevity and success and the ‘hearts and minds’ campaign has fundamentally changed opinion in the region as to the value of watercourses and the need to protect them.

The ability of the Mersey Basin Campaign to deliver sustainable outcomes rested firmly on a partnership approach being hardwired into its institutional design, which in this case proved to be particularly effective (Wood et al, 1999). As previously noted, the Mersey Basin Campaign achieved the vast bulk of its objectives by the end of its 25-year timeframe and shut itself down in a deliberate and orderly way with the full consent of the partners.

### *Responding to institutional change*

The discussion on outcomes also points to some of the difficulties in sustaining environmental partnerships if the institutions on which they depend are abolished

or are no longer financially viable. The first wave of Groundwork Trusts were able to survive the abolition of metropolitan county councils in 1987 because of their strong local roots. Latterly, however, a number of Groundwork Trusts in the region have amalgamated with others to ensure continuing viability, albeit at the expense of such strong local 'ownership'.

The reasons are various, ranging from changes in government policy (the retreat from regional government in England) or funding (austerity and the growth of the contract culture) to poor leadership or management. One example, Sustainability North West, was closed down by its board when it became clear that the agenda it had pioneered had been mainstreamed by both local authorities and the private sector. Another, Natural Economy North West, was a victim of the retreat from regional government.

What is clear, however, is that the styles of working of these organisations have left a significant legacy both on the environment and communities in the region and the nature of the voluntary sector in England.

### *Leadership and partnership working*

Appropriate leadership was a critical component of successful environmental partnership working and always required an ability to nurture both vertical and horizontal partnerships; giving the time and respect to understand what each stakeholder required; finding and heading towards common ground; the ability to exhibit persistence and stamina towards agreed objectives; holistic working; and a willingness to take risks to make things happen.

For the newly appointed social entrepreneurs<sup>5</sup> leading Groundwork Trusts, success depended on creativity, getting things done, innovation and accountability being hardwired into working methods. Exploring and embracing new ways of working while maintaining accountable lines of communication to stakeholders were central to success. This meant recognising the importance of community groups, local businesses, trade unions and individuals as well as funding partners or government agencies; and being creative in bringing them together, but also at keeping them apart for different activities at different scales.

Effective leadership was a vital ingredient in our case studies and that leadership could emerge from anywhere, from academics, local authority officers or councillors, the business community, NGOs or the community. Most not-for-profit organisations, at least in the environmental sector, work to very narrow financial margins and, just as effective leadership in both governance and executive is a key to success, ineffective leadership can bring about their rapid demise. This remains true to this day.

It is an interesting question as to whether these partnership leadership skills can be learnt or are inherent to successful leaders in partnerships. Groundwork nationally, for example, placed considerable emphasis on internal networking and skills sharing, but high turnovers of staff, constant delivery pressures and the local nature of each Trust all made this hard to achieve in practice. Thus, [Fordham et al \(2002: 44\)](#) conclude: 'If Groundwork is to help develop capacity for neighbourhood renewal, it must ensure it maintains and develops its own capacity internally.'

And, of course, how to successfully conduct partnership working is itself a skill. As one New Deal for Communities chief executive put it at a RENEW North West presentation: "When I am recruiting, I look for skills and experience; but above all

what matters is an attitude of mind towards working with and respecting our partners whilst making things happen” (Phil Barton, personal account), anticipating the more recent findings of [Mabey and Freeman \(2010\)](#).

### *Some challenges for place leadership and partnership working*

In this article we have sought to draw out and examine a number of lessons from our experience, all of which seem relevant to contemporary place leadership. In addition to the factors already presented, we summarise here a number of challenges to partnership working that we experienced:

- Effective and credible mechanisms for **accountability** are vital, whether for financial, operational, project delivery or promotional success.
- Related to this is the ability to create sufficient ‘space’ for **creativity and risk taking** that the partner organisations and funders on their own would find uncomfortable, but to do so in a way that allows them to maintain confidence in the partnership.
- **Early confidence building** through successful joint working and delivery is critical to success, generating credibility and belief in the partnership ([Munro, 2018](#)). This requires the voluntary sector leader to lead beyond their authority ([Common Purpose, 2018](#)).
- **Power relationships** are important and must be understood. Not all partners are equal and managing this must be a priority for the chair and senior staff. Equally, not all partners can always get what they want and tensions must be actively managed ([Hemphill et al, 2006](#)). Building key partners into the company (legal) structure was a very helpful element of the initial design of both case studies. We return to this later in this article.
- **Financial margins were often ridiculously low**, resulting in charitable trusts with a turnover of several million pounds regularly achieving year-end surpluses of four or five figures, with consequent instability, an inability to plan and regular board discussions as to whether the organisation was financially viable.<sup>6</sup>
- **A preparedness to be open with partners** of all sorts as to the limits of what you can achieve and not to over-promise, to build trust through not having hidden agendas, to manage conflict and focus on finding common ground – all are critical to successful partnership working. As we have already seen, leadership ‘will be based on mutual trust and co-operation’ ([Stimson et al, 2002: 279](#)).
- **Securing national advocates** for the organisation and its work from government, business and public figures in order to give weight and publicity to local efforts is crucial.

### *Reflections: power, governance and opportunity*

Looking back at our work over three decades, what is most striking to us was the efficacy of the partnership models adopted. While not without their faults and a constant process of managing conflict, power relationships and resource limitations, both Groundwork and the Mersey Basin Campaign were substantially successful in achieving their primary goals of righting the legacy of pollution and dereliction in the

**Figure 5: The original Groundwork logo developed for Operation Groundwork and utilised throughout Groundwork for 15 years (partnership, action, industry and greenspace are all present)**



Source: Groundwork UK

North West while changing public attitudes, facilitating community environmental action and supporting economic activity.

To adopt [Rutland and Aylett's \(2008\)](#) binary analysis of local environmental activity,<sup>7</sup> the partnership model we have described developed both actor networks and a vehicle for national through to local governmentality. At root there was a clear, public-facing aim for both of our case study partnerships. For the Mersey Basin Campaign, it was to restore fish-life to the entire catchment as a driver for regeneration; and for Groundwork, and summed up in its original logo (see [Figure 5](#)), it was to restore derelict and neglected urban-fringe landscapes. But through time and as the interactions between agencies and sectors developed, additional aims emerged for both partnerships: local 'ownership' of watercourses in the case of the Mersey Basin Campaign; and, for Groundwork, youth engagement, environmental business support, training and education, together with a move into towns and cities – building out from the original objectives.

As we have seen, the actor networks were both national to local (vertical) and local to local (horizontal). This gave real scope for the various local Groundwork Trusts and for the Campaign's river catchment sub-regions to develop local priorities, cultures and action programmes to address local needs and to reflect the political, economic and environmental conditions in their patch. This was an important dimension of place leadership, as the authors navigated the power relationships shaped by a range of factors from national legislation and grant programmes, to local political culture. For example, managing tensions between Labour-controlled Salford and Conservative Trafford was a defining influence on the early work of Groundwork Salford & Trafford. Disparities of this kind had to be managed and shaped into action programmes by the local Trusts and their partners. It is important to acknowledge that some Trusts and some of their leadership was not as good as others in holding this all together



and making the partnership deliver. A Trust leadership that lost the support of its local authority partners would not long survive.

Governmental changes in approach and priority also had a major bearing. For the Campaign the constant challenge was to ensure that each successive Secretary of State was brought on board to back the programme. Another challenge was the total reorganisation of the water industry in 1989, splitting the functions of the previous North West Water Authority into the privatised North West Water (later United Utilities) and the regulator the National Rivers Authority, which, in turn, was subsumed into the Environment Agency in 1996. And the European Community, later the European Union, also had a major influence, both through the management of the Structural Funds in the region (there was a Mersey Basin Programme from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s) and the Water Framework Directive of 2000, which brought major changes in approach to river catchment management. For Groundwork, major changes included various local government reorganisations, an increasingly regional and sub-regional infrastructure as time went on and the advent of public sector managerialism under the Labour government from 1997. All these structural changes, and many others, needed to be navigated, local partners kept on side and financial viability maintained.

From 1997 onwards, a more managerial approach to local activity was initiated by the New Labour government, in time leading to a plethora of targets, a focus on short-term impacts (notoriously difficult to demonstrate for small partnership organisations reliant for much of their delivery on their partners), a contract culture with procurement ‘frameworks’ and competition (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). In our experience, it became increasingly difficult to develop and finance innovative ways of doing, as taking evidence and ideas to government resulted in being invited to tender for one’s own project, and often being judged on price rather than quality. Thus, for example, extensive and innovative work on environmental support to small and medium-sized enterprises by Groundwork Trusts was increasingly constrained by the emerging ‘contract culture’. Finally, as we have already noted, the advent of the coalition government in 2010 forced Groundwork away from a locally owned, place-based, enabling organisation into (sub-)regional contracting.

As one reviewer of this article made clear, governance and culture in the North West region ‘are key aspects of the context within which place leadership occurs ... and ... delineate the range of opportunities and constraints that guide the ways in which local issues may be addressed and the nature of the outcomes that might be achieved’. While in many respects both have moved on in the past decade, with a retreat from regionalism, austerity and a consequent reduction in support to tackle deprivation, social cohesion and environmental renewal, there are important lessons about what worked here and why, which it is too easy to lose from the collective memory as we face different, and still more urgent, environmental challenges.

### *The implications for place leadership and environmental renewal*

We suggested at the outset that the mode of leadership in effective place making may need to go beyond the conventional ‘functionalist’ leadership model to a more inclusive ‘multi-actor’ approach (Mabey and Freeman, 2010). As Stimson et al (2002: 279) propose: ‘[L]eadership in regional economic development will not be based on traditional hierarchical relationships: rather it will be a collaborative relationship

between institutional actors encompassing the public, private and community sectors – and it will be based on mutual trust and co-operation.’ We suggest that both Groundwork and the Mersey Basin Campaign provide useful, early experiments in putting this mode of partnership working for place leadership to the test.

The institutional framework of the Mersey Basin Campaign and its partnership approach have been proposed as an effective model for pursuing both the sustainable development (Wood et al, 1999) and management of river catchments (Kidd and Shaw, 2000). The influence of the Campaign has taken on an international dimension, particularly after the award of the 1999 inaugural Thiess International Riverprize for best river system clean-up.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the holistic approach to community regeneration developed and practised in these partnerships has been imitated and adopted by a wide range of organisations in many disciplines in the voluntary and public sectors throughout the UK (Fordham et al, 2002) – as well as being ‘exported’ to other countries, notably the United States, where a network of Groundwork Trusts thrives to this day, and Poland, where the ‘Cristy Biznes’ business environmental support network still flourishes. Groundwork’s influence has even reached Japan, where a new word ‘*Kyodo*’ has been coined to reflect the concept of partnership, which has now become a common operational term (Yoshi Oyama, 2012, in Menzies and Barton, 2012: 105).

This widespread adoption and dissemination underlines how different this approach was to what had prevailed in the field in the decades leading up to 1980 and how the practice of partnership with voluntary organisations at its heart released creativity and the opportunity to deliver multiple social, economic and environmental results from holistic projects focused around clear environmental objectives as a route to wider social and economic renewal, as well as increasing the chances for those projects to be sustainable. Arguably, this experience helped shape the diversity of not-for-profit activity in the UK which, by 2008, led the National Council for Voluntary Organisations to adopt the portmanteau term ‘civic society’ (Ridley-Duff and Ball, 2016: 15–19).

This ‘mainstreaming’ of a collaborative approach to ‘place making’ that puts expertise and resources directly into the hands of local people may have been these partnerships’ greatest legacy – it is certainly the one that would prove most at risk from the ‘austerity’ policies that were to follow from 2010 onwards. Beer and Clower (2014) deem sufficient capacity for the task to be essential and the comments of the current chief executive of the Lancashire Wildlife Trust are telling:

Government creating and supporting charities to deliver regeneration did, originally, create some resentment in the third sector ... If ‘state aid’ rules had been applied, then this would have failed the test of unfair competition. I would, however, argue that at the Wildlife Trust it made us become more focused on our ‘unique selling proposition’ and made us more competitive. We also watched how these organisations operated and learned lessons.

There was certainly more than enough work to keep us all engaged, as the environmental and regeneration task was enormous. I was privileged to serve as the Vice-Chair of the Mersey Basin Trust which did much of the mobilisation of communities to get involved in the clean-up of the river catchment. I also served on the NW Regional Assembly and later on the Board of the NW Development Agency ... on both these bodies, the involvement of the voluntary sector was taken seriously ...

Since then, the austerity measures we have seen, especially in many local authorities, has impacted on abilities to engage in environmental initiatives. Ironically the new city regions of Greater Manchester and Liverpool are bucking that trend and leadership is being shown by the new mayors. (Selby, 2019)

One critique of the multi-sectoral partnership model presented in this article is that it is inherently unstable and over-dependent on key individuals and partners, including government. The authors would make the observation that what can be perceived as a weakness is also a strength. The challenge of turning around the post-industrial landscape of the region was largely achieved between the early 1970s and the early 2000s. Polluted land was treated, water quality improved and major landscape interventions were put in place. The incorporation of a charity at the heart of these programmes ensured focus and energy, risk taking, creativity and joint effort, making the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

Finally, we suggest that this experience of place leadership has a contemporary relevance. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change calls for rapid and far-reaching transitions in land, energy, industry, business, transport and cities (IPCC, 2018: 2019) and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (ISPPBES, 2019) similarly calls for concerted and rapid action to slow biodiversity loss. Such challenges can induce despair or apathy among place leaders because they seem so unachievable. But Zero Carbon Britain (2019: 1) 'sets out the positive, connected approach we need to overcome them – joining up research and practice across disciplines, borders, sectors and scales'. We argue that this article describes models of working – a visionary strategic framework coupled with community-level engagement through vertical and horizontal partnerships – that could be used to make these transitions possible. Does central government still have the vision and confidence in local partnerships to deliver fundamental environmental improvement? A new Mersey Basin Campaign for decarbonising the region, supported by government, and led by local government, business, NGOs, academics and community leaders, could energise and inspire a successful response within 25 years. It has been done before.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> 'Groundwork' is the generic name of a series of legally separate organisations, but is frequently used to encompass the whole 'movement'. Until enforced reorganisations and reduced 'ownership' by local authorities, each Groundwork area had an independent charitable trust named after its patch and established to oversee and coordinate the work of many actors. Their company members were the national Groundwork organisation (once it was legally separated from the Countryside Commission in 1985, which held that role until then) and each local authority in the patch. On occasion, other significant public bodies were company members (for example, North West Water in Rossendale). The board of trustees was appointed by the members and included councillors, private and voluntary sector individuals and often others such as academics or consultants. The chair was usually from the private sector and never a councillor. From 1985, the Groundwork Foundation, a quasi-departmental public body, reported to the government for the funds it dispersed to the local Trusts and deployed itself. In 2000, the Groundwork movement nationally was constituted as a federation whose company members were the

Groundwork Trusts and the national body renamed Groundwork UK. In the 1990s, the Trusts in the region, together with the nationally appointed regional director, organised themselves into an advisory grouping known as Groundwork North West. In this article the term 'Groundwork' is used to encompass this movement except where clarity or accuracy requires a particular element within it to be identified.

<sup>2</sup> All subsequent Groundwork Trusts had the addition of the area in which they worked incorporated into their names.

<sup>3</sup> A legacy website was established at <https://www.merseybasin.org.uk/> and there are archives lodged at both Liverpool University's Department of Civic Design and at Manchester Central Library.

<sup>4</sup> 'Wasteland to Woodland' in St Helens and 'New Uses for Vacant Industrial Land (NUVIL)' in Knowsley.

<sup>5</sup> One definition of social entrepreneurship with which we are comfortable, although we would barely have recognised the term in the early days, is a "socially rational" form of entrepreneurship where the "capital" developed is "social", "human", "natural" and "ethical" and developed for its own sake' (Bull et al, 2010: 302).

<sup>6</sup> In England and Wales it is a legal requirement for company boards to declare every year that the company is a 'going concern' for the following 12 months if it is to continue trading, with charity trustees required to be particularly prudent. Failure to do so 'reasonably' opens the directors to personal liability should the company fold.

<sup>7</sup> Describing an exercise in local leadership of climate change policy in Portland, Oregon in the 1990s, the authors combine actor network theory – how different actors learn to move forward towards their goals together and adapt their approaches as a result of their engagement with one another – and 'governmentality' whereby the state seeks to 'conduct the conduct of its citizens' in order to achieve those objectives once agreed.

<sup>8</sup> See <https://riverfoundation.org.au/our-programs/riverprize/international-riverprize/previous-international-riverprize-winners/>

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### **Dedication**

The authors are sad to report that Walter Menzies passed away in December 2018 after 40 years of dedicated service to the environment, communities and sustainable development of the North West region. Our longstanding colleague and friend, this article is dedicated to his memory.

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