

## LESSONS AND ACHIEVEMENTS FROM THE MERSEY FOREST BY NETWORKING PARTNERSHIP FOR TWENTY YEARS

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**ABSTRACT:** In the UK, community forest projects have created an increase of new accessible open green spaces in post-industrial areas. However, there is a scarcity of sustainable funding for long-term management. Therefore, the partnership is recognized to be a key mechanism to maximize the benefits and to share the risks with a range of organization to maintain the quality of green spaces. This study is to clarify the achievements and the roles of the Mersey Forest over the last twenty years in developing partnership approaches in the Northwest of England. The study methods are based on literature reviews regarding on published literature on environmental regeneration and the data provided from the Mersey Forest, and interviews with representatives of the Mersey Forest. The first 10 years from 1994 to 2004 focused on planting trees for creating new and extending woodland. After that opportunity for large-scale new planting decreased and there was a need for managing the newly created open green spaces. Therefore, it has entered in the management phase and the role of the Mersey Forest is shifting to strengthen partnership working by providing advice to landowners. It also became clear that community forest approaches have been achieved together with landowners and partners through partnership working led by the Mersey Forest for over twenty years. Thus, the Mersey Forest has evolved from a governmental inspired organization to a community empowered organization.

*Keywords: Green Infrastructure; Environmental Regeneration; Community Forests; Post Industrial Landscapes*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 A Creation of Post-industrial Landscapes Through Environmental Regeneration in the UK

In recent years, newly created accessible green spaces have increased by community forest activities in post-industrial areas, particularly in the North of England, and it is necessary to determine the cumulative effects of changes [1], [2]. Through environmental regeneration, activities are becoming area wide and networking surrounding areas to create a landscape with local characters [3]. Newly created open green spaces can be a platform for biodiversity and culture which have possibilities to empower the community in the local area for active participation and to create new socio-economy and culture, thus, activities of environmental regeneration are reflecting the community development [2]. Post-industrial landscapes have blue (water) and green (open spaces) systems. However, in some cases, it is difficult to access due to a lack of infrastructure for people to use and not known by the local community. Therefore, it may be important to manage these newly created open green spaces through a process of creating post-industrial landscapes with a long-term vision, as well as to work in partnership with the community

in the local area.

Community forest activities are to create and manage new and existing open green spaces, including derelict under-used and neglected land, in England by forming a network of these spaces into a part of Green Infrastructure (GI), through working in partnership with organizations [3]. In recent years, institutional support for public participation is becoming important in urban regeneration areas for public benefits [4]. Regeneration of post-industrial areas in the UK has been undertaken since 1980, however, with not much provision for covering costs for long-term management [1] which is necessary for maintaining open green spaces. In addition, a partnership approach is recognized to be a way forward to balance risks and costs with partner organizations.

Environmental regeneration and post-industrial landscapes with a focus on working in partnership can be seen in the research for conserving and reusing industrial heritage [3], activities of community forests in England since 1994 [4], a way forward to form a partnership as a method of environmental regeneration in a river basin environment [5], and the approach used by environmental regeneration organizations such as Groundwork in the UK an intermediate sector organization [6]. However, there has been a change

for community forests over time particularly for financial support from the central government in recent years, and there are a scarcity and a need for a further research on recent trends and partnership working as a methodology.

## 1.2 Aims of the study and study methods

This study aims to clarify the achievements and the role of the Mersey Forest (MF) by undertaking environmental regeneration to create post-industrial landscapes over the last twenty years. The Mersey Forest Partnership was set up in 1991 with organizations in Merseyside and North Cheshire in the Northwest of England - an area containing much brownfield land. The study methods are based on literature reviews regarding on published literature on environmental regeneration and the data provided from MF, and interviews with representatives of MF, Clare Olver, and Paul Nolan OBE.

## 2. HISTORY AND ROLES OF MF

### 2.1 MF and Partner Organizations

MF covers 1370 square kilometers with 1.7 million inhabitants with a vision to create and manage open green spaces in the long term for environmental regeneration and community development in the Northwest of England (Fig.1)[7]. Since 1991, MF has been a leading partner in Merseyside and North Cheshire enabling community forest activities focusing on urban, suburban and post-industrial areas to provide open green spaces nearby the community [7]. Partner organizations include the local authorities within the MF area, the government organizations within the UK Government's Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), such as Forestry Commission (FC), Natural England (NE), and Environment Agency (EA), landowners, private companies, and the community in the local area [8]. MF does not hold any land ownership, while promoting community forest activities to create and manage open green spaces on publicly and privately owned land by partner organizations, such as local authorities, companies, and individuals. MF encourages people to become more actively involved with their local trees and woodlands through support to form 'Friends' groups, assistance to obtain funding and by providing trees for community planting [10].

### 2.2 Partnership Working with the Community

MF was established in 1991 as one of 12 community forests in England by the Countryside Commission. However, in recent years, community

forest organizations have had to become more financially independent, therefore, activities are becoming more focused on the local area [11]. Thus, networking of a partnership and working with the community in the local area is becoming increasingly important.

Fig.2 illustrates a framework showing the levels of community engagement in creating the MF. There are seven stages from Stage 7: 'Not informed but using MF', to Stage 1: 'Community ownership'. This allows a continuum of levels of participation, therefore, ranges of people can participate and to support participation in various ways.



Fig.1 A map of MF[9] with some amendments



Fig.2 A creating process of MF with the community [7]

## 3. ACHIEVEMENTS OF MF IN PARTNERSHIP

### 3.1 Newly Created Open Green Spaces by MF

Community forest activities led by the MF partnership has created three times of the number of newly planted trees since 1991 to reach 9 million trees in Merseyside and North Cheshire in comparison to the number of whole of England on average at the same time [7]. According to an awareness survey on environmental regeneration

with local residents in 2010 (1121 respondents, response rate 65%) said that the environment had improved by MF activities, and two-thirds of people had visited newly created open green spaces [7]. It also became clear that newly created open green spaces have been recognized and visited by the local community. In terms of the Woodland Access Standard, suggested by the Woodland Trust (WT), a charity organization for conserving woodland in the UK, in 2012, 23 percent of the population in MF lived within ‘500m of an accessible woodland of at least 2ha’, and 77 percent of the population lived ‘within 4km of one of at least 20ha’. This means that access to woodland is higher in MF than in England as a whole [7]. Therefore, it is evident that community forest activities have promoted to create and manage open green spaces since 1990 particularly in the Northwest of England where MF is located.

### 3.2 Plans for The Long-term and The Short term

MF reviews The Mersey Forest Plan every ten years based on the agreement between partner organizations, and minor amendments are updated on the MF website [7]. In the plan-making stage, it is compiled with partner organizations through consultation, therefore, it is a ‘locally developed plan’ which is approved by the local government [7].

The Mersey Forest Plan is a long-term and strategic guide to the work of The Mersey Forest team and partners. This is accompanied by an annually updated Delivery Plan which covers how the long-term vision of The Mersey Forest Plan will be delivered and considers the resources available at the time [7]. To achieve policies of The Mersey Forest Plan can bring many benefits, and moreover, it is also important to be in accordance with legal framework and policy contexts [7]. For example, at the national level, The Mersey Forest Plan is in accordance with the Government’s Forestry and Woodlands Policy Statement, 2013 and the National Planning Policy Framework, 2012 [7]. In addition, policies of the Mersey Forest Plan can be the ‘material consideration [12]’ on planning permission through planning system to support development control and local area planning [7].

### 3.3 Partnership of Local Authorities for MF

To undertake projects beyond local authority boundaries, such as community forests activities, the cooperation of neighboring local authorities is a statutory requirement stated by Localism Act, 2011 [7]. Local authorities in MF area have a Partnership Agreement among them to exchange knowledge and information and to share opportunities for solutions [7]. Among local authorities, Cheshire West and Chester Council (formerly Cheshire

County Council) is the lead authority providing employment, finance, and treasury for the MF team [7]. In addition, local authorities in the MF Partnership commit to investing resources: ‘core funding’. MF is taking a role as a leader to work in partnership with various organizations, to invest in resources to generate incomes by applying for external funding with partners and by securing resources from the partners to maximize benefits, and to impact on future policy-making [7].

## 4. ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON OF TWENTY YEARS OF ACTIVITIES BY MF

### 4.1 Areas of New Woodland Planting

This section tries to examine the selected data from MF for the past twenty years of activities. Fig. 3 shows area of new woodland planting in MF area since 1990/1991 to 2014/2015. It became clear that from 1993/1994 to 2003/2004 was a time of

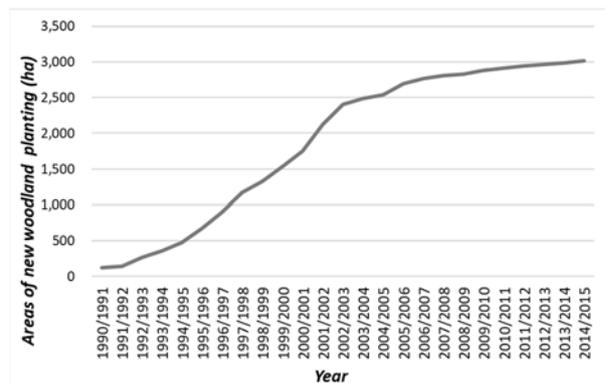


Fig.3 Areas of new woodland planting in MF (cumulative) [13]

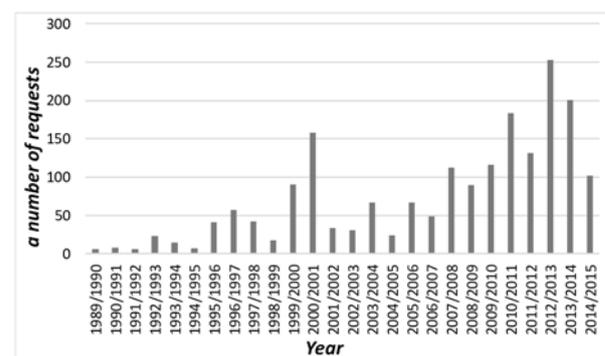


Fig.4 A number of consultations to MF (1989/1990–2014/2015) [14]

significant tree planting increasing new woodland cover from 500ha to 2,500ha. New woodland planting took place at most from 2000/2001 to 2002/2003. Since 2005, the increasing trend has ended and became stable at around 3,000ha. This trend has been seen right across England and the reasons for this are complex, including changes to

new woodland grant aid; EU Single Farm Payments acting as a disincentive for woodland planting; increasing numbers of non-farmer landowners; changes to eligibility for new tree planting grants and an increase in commodity prices.

#### 4.2 Numbers of Consultation to MF

Fig. 4 shows numbers of requests for support by landowners to the MF team between 1990/1991 and 2014/2015. From 1989/1990 to 1999/2000 were in the average of 29 cases per year, while 2000/2001 to 2014/2015 rose three times to 108 requests in average per year which may be a result of better monitoring and recording.

#### 4.3 Landuses and Landowners Consulted MF

##### 4.3.1 Types of land use

Fig.5 shows types of land use among landowners who requested support by MF between 2001/2002 to 2014/2015. Agricultural land has the highest rate to be a half of all land types during 2001/2002 to 2003/2004. At that time, funding for new planting by Woodland Grant Scheme was available and many consultations had taken place on transforming farmland to woodland. Since 2007/2008, requests for support to manage existing woodland have increased to 28 percent on average. Likewise, requests from schools have also increased since 2008/2009 to be at 28 percent on average.

Inquiries for support to improve and manage public open green spaces remain at 5 percent on

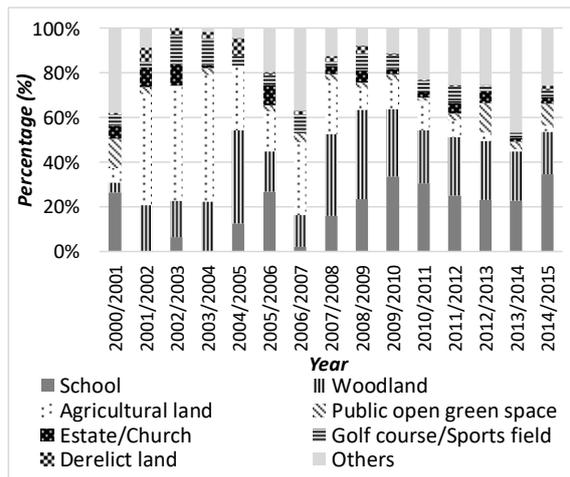


Fig.5 Land use for sites where support requested to MF (2001/2002-2014/2015) [14]

average (Fig. 5) [14]. However, there are requests for support from many other types of open green spaces, such as privately owned estate/church, golf course/sports field, and derelict land after reclamation for greening, it comes up to 13 percent in total. 29 site owners consulted MF during

2001/2002 to 2014/2015 nearly 40 percent out of 71 sites within local authorities in MF area have been selected by Green Flag Award which recognizes excellent management and high-quality green spaces [15]. The Award is recognized by The UK Government's Department for Communities and Local Government and managed by an environmental charity, Keep Britain Tidy. It has become a benchmark national standard for parks and green spaces.

##### 4.3.2 Types of landowners

In the case of local authorities and others, where landowners have many parcels of land and woodland, these have only been recorded once: 'Unique Landowners'. These landowners are frequently supported with the management and evaluation of projects at many occasions by the MF team for many separate parcels of land. There are also some sites outside of MF geographical area but participating towards the MF vision. This suggests an extending and growing network of community forests activities in the Northwest of England. Cooperation from landowners is necessary for MF covering a regional area including privately owned land, to work in partnership, and to create a network of GI of open green spaces.

##### 4.3.3 Unique landowners

Fig. 6 shows types of unique landowners from 2001/2002 to 2014/2015 by land use types who contacted MF. Of those 90 percent of the schools were state schools (including nursery, primary school, junior school and high schools), while the remaining 10 percent were privately owned. 70 percent of the woodland owners who contacted MF were private companies, including individual landowners, while 10 percent were owned by the national and local government. The remaining woodland owners included charitable organizations such as National Trust and WT and parish councils. From inquiries around agricultural land, 90 percent were primarily owned by private landowners. Of the 75 percent of support requested for public open green spaces, these were owned mainly by the national and local government; the remaining 25 percent owned by charity organizations. From support requested for estate/church managed land, 50 percent of inquiries came from church or parish councils, while 20 percent were from private companies and organizations including individual landowners; the remainder from other landowners including national and local government, and charity organizations. Inquiries from managers of golf course/sports fields, 80 percent were private companies and organizations, including individual landowners, the remainder from the national and local government, and charity organizations. 90 percent of support requested for derelict land came

for land owned by private companies and organizations including individual landowners, with 10 percent from national and local government.

In terms of landowners who contacted MF, schools and public open green spaces are mainly owned and managed by the public organizations, while other land use types are mostly owned by the private landowners. This suggests that MF has consulted ranges of partners to provide supports requested.

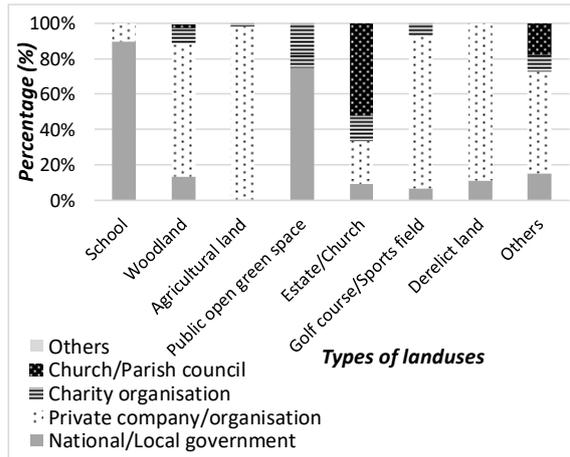


Fig.6 Types of unique landowners by land use types (2001/2002-2014/2015) [14]

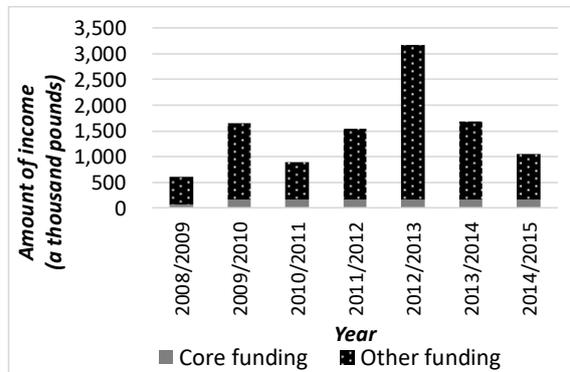


Fig.7 Funding sources (2008/2009-2014/2015)[16]

#### 4.4 Sources of funding for MF

##### 4.4.1 Core funding from local authorities

Core funding and additional funding secured from other sources between 2008/2009 and 2014/2015 are shown in Fig. 7. This shows 12 percent is core funding (resources from the local authority partners) while nearly 90 percent is funded by EU, the national government, government, charitable and private organizations. By applying for external funding with partners the total budget increased to exceed a hundred thousand pounds from 2011/2012 to 2014/2015.

##### 4.4.2 Funding from other organizations

Funding sources in percentage in total between 2008/2009 and 2014/2015 is shown in Fig. 8, and yearly based details are shown in Fig. 9. 28 percent of funding is coming from FC with the largest share, while 12 percent of funding is core funding from the local authority, and 11 percent of funding is covered from the EU (Figs. 8 and 9). Funding from the national government and government organizations in total shares a half, while 40 percent of funding is coming from DEFRA and affiliated organizations including EA and NE. About the funding from FC in 2011/2012 and 2013/2014, EA and NE in 2012/2013 have a higher rate (Fig.9), and total funding to exceed three hundred thousand pounds in 2012/2013 (Fig. 7). This is due to special projects to increase funding, such as a river improvement project of EA and a brownfield regeneration project by FC.

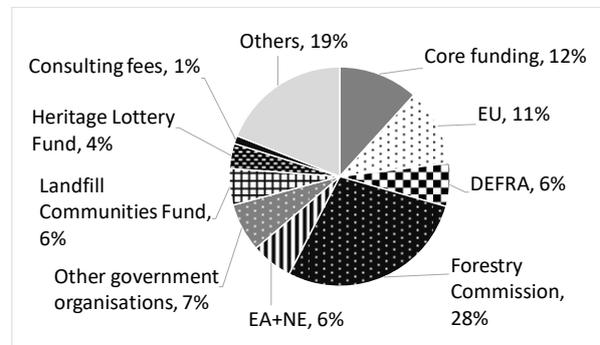


Fig.8 Funding sources (Unit: Percentage (%); 2008/2009-2014/2015)[16]

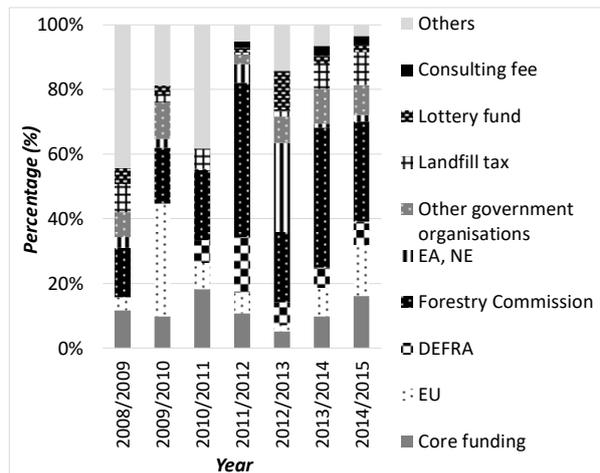


Fig.9 Funding sources in percentage per year (2008/2009-2014/2015)[16]

Between 2008/2009 and 2011/2012 the Northwest Development Agency (NWDA) funded the creation of new community woodlands on derelict land as part of its urban regeneration policy. However, NWDA was abolished in 2012 and funding for urban regeneration has since decreased. Since 2012, through the Sustainable Transport Fund,

the Department for Transport has provided funding for improvements to promote cycling and walking which has enabled the delivery of the MF street tree planting programme: Green Streets.

The prospects of EU funding are uncertain owing to the Brexit procedure and the need to pay attention to future trends. Other funding from non-governmental organizations includes Landfill Communities Fund [17] by Landfill Tax Regulations, 1996 for community and environment, and Heritage Lottery Fund through profits of the National Lottery in the UK for conserving environment, ecosystem, and heritage to be around 10 percent in total.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The data since 1991, when MF was established, has clearly highlighted the role of the MF partnership of leading a network of local governments, government organizations, landowners, private companies and the community in delivering landscape changes. It also became clear the progress of community forestry in the Northwest of the UK.

It can be divided into two phases: the creation phase, from 1994 to 2004 when there was large-scale new woodland planting, and after that when opportunities for new planting have decreased. There then became a need to manage the newly created open green spaces and woodlands delivering the MF vision 'to get more from trees' [7]. Thus, it has entered in the management phase and the role of MF has shifted to strengthen partnership working to provide advice and supports to landowners and partner organizations.

The above tendency is also evident from the funding particularly since 2008/2009, nearly 90 percent is funded by the EU, the national government, government, and private organizations while 12 percent is funded from resources by the local authority partners. Therefore, MF is applying for a range of external funding with partners and to secure resources from the partners for various activities to invest in resources previously provided by the national government partners.

It also became clear that community forest approaches have been achieved together with landowners and partners through partnership working led by MF for over twenty years. Thus, MF has evolved from a governmental inspired organization to a community empowered organization.

Future challenges to work in partnership locally for the needs from the community, to continue the quality of management of open green spaces and to utilize its resources, and to create a further network of these open green spaces into the enhancement of forming GI in the area.

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