

Improving Governance through Coastal Partnerships in the UK: a decade of evolution and future scenarios

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Coastal governance exhibits particular challenges due to the different legal and policy contexts which exist for terrestrial and marine planning. UK Coastal Partnerships promote collaboration for sustainable management of coastal and estuary ecosystems. This paper tracks their evolution over the past ten years following a publication in *The Geographical Journal* under a similar title (Stojanovic & Barker, 2008). It describes patterns in the evolution of Coastal Partnerships considering their internal and external operating environment. The results indicate a 50% decline in the number of partnerships overall, with many changing their name, orientation and geographical extent of operation. The causes of this evolution are evaluated alongside an assessment of the changes in coastal governance over the past decade in the UK. Future scenarios are then considered in the context of the evolving terrestrial and marine, legal and policy environment. This review concludes that there has been significant change in the evolution of Coastal Partnerships operating at the local level over the past decade, to more regional and diverse forms of engagement with coastal communities and stakeholders. It also poses questions about the adequacy of leadership to steer the future direction of Coastal Partnerships.

KEYWORDS: Coastal Partnerships, Integrated Coastal Management, coastal and marine policy, governance, participation, UK.

Introduction

The place where land meets sea – the coast – is a particularly dynamic environment with a unique set of issues. From the perspective of social, economic and environmental geography, marine and terrestrial ecology, the coast is the meeting point for many disciplines and interests. Management and decision-making is challenging due to multiple uses of the coastal zone requiring a multidisciplinary understanding of change to ensure resilience of coastal systems (Berkes *et al.* 2002). The Royal

Geographical Society document much of this academic and public policy related research through the increasingly active Coastal and Marine Working Group¹.

This paper provides an updated commentary on the position published in *The Geographical Journal* (Stojanovic and Barker, 2008) titled ‘Improving governance through local Coastal Partnerships in the UK’. There has been substantial change in the evolution of Coastal Partnerships over the past ten years. This paper therefore provides an update of the current position across the UK, commenting on the reasons for a significant decline in these initiatives with an explanation of the reasons for their evolution and the formation of other initiatives. The final section of the paper considers the coastal governance context and possible future scenarios for the remaining partnerships.

Background

Local Coastal Partnerships were formed during the 1990s with a common purpose to promote awareness of the value of the coast and improve co-ordination between multiple users to promote sustainability. Initially funded by government nature conservations agencies, they gained strong support from local government in their geographical areas of operation – typically estuaries or distinctive areas of coastline. However, since the early-mid 2000s, local government budget cuts, followed by further and ongoing public sector austerity measures, have eroded the funding base on which they originally operated. There has been significant change to the existence and operational objectives of the Coastal Partnerships as a response to this weakening public sector support, which will be discussed in this paper.

Defining the Coastal Partnership

There is no widely recognised definition of a Coastal Partnership which becomes a challenge when categorising their evolution. Previously they were described “as an approach within the regional and local scales of government in the UK, where the issues of coastal management are translated from policy into plans and actions by distinct organisations for discrete sections of coast and estuaries” (Stojanovic and Barker 2008). They are formed from different government agencies, local authorities, private sector organisations and interested bodies working together across the land-sea interface; recognising that more integrated management of the coast is required to produce coordinated actions and equitable solutions. Most are run on a voluntary basis, facilitating voluntary action with financial support from partners who have an interest in their role to support statutory decision-making processes, such as through consultation exercises.

Other initiatives with coastal interests were identified in the 2008 paper to aid definition of a Coastal Partnership as a cross-sectoral initiative, compared to those with more specific sectoral foci. Over the past decade, new initiatives including Coastal Community Teams, Marine Conservation Zones,

¹ <https://coastalmarineresearchgroup.wordpress.com/> (last accessed 03/05/2017)

Landscape and Catchment Partnerships now operate in the estuarine environment or inshore waters. Their role compared to that of Coastal Partnerships and others will be considered under the external operating environment discussion below. For the purposes of this paper, the definition of a Coastal Partnership remains the same (as above) but would benefit from explicit definition in the coastal governance community.

Method for Evaluation

This research was based on previously mapped data (Stojanovic and Barker 2008) and the accompanying spreadsheet obtained from the lead author. Internet-based research initially identified the level of ongoing (if any) online activity of each partnership. An evidence-check was then undertaken with a small selection of knowledgeable professionals working with Coastal Partnerships in each region of the UK. Finally, consultation with coastal stakeholders involved with coastal partnerships through the Coastal Partnerships Network (CPN) database and wider network² was undertaken to increase confidence in the results shown through updating the original Figure 1 map presented again in this paper.

Current Position

Figure 1 shows the current position of Coastal Partnerships (Stojanovic and Barker, 2008) in three categories at the national, regional and local levels. The previous 2008 map indicated the existence of 95 partnerships of which 77 were active and 18 had gone into abeyance. At that time, 18 out of 95 partnerships were shown to have gone into abeyance. Ten years on, a further 36³ have gone into abeyance, although as discussed later, some have evolved into different forms with new titles. This leaves a remaining picture of 41 partnerships out of the original 95 identified in 2008 that still exist in the same form. The results indicate the following patterns:

- Many of the smaller scale Partnerships have been lost or subsumed under the umbrella of a more regional initiative;
- Across the devolved countries and English regions, Wales has seen most partnerships go into abeyance, followed by NW England and SW England. Least change has occurred in SE and NW England.

The graph in Figure 2 shows that over half of the previous partnerships are no longer operating. It also reveals how a report produced for the Marine Management Organisation (MMO 2013) did not

² Communications and Management for Sustainability (CMS) runs a news service for >8000 coastal, marine and water sector professionals (<http://www.coastms.co.uk/>)

³ Further research is underway to verify these figures and seek information about the causes for abeyance and continuation of remaining Coastal Partnerships; which will be completed before this paper is submitted for publication.

Figure 1 Coastal Partnership initiatives in the UK showing ten years evolution since 2008

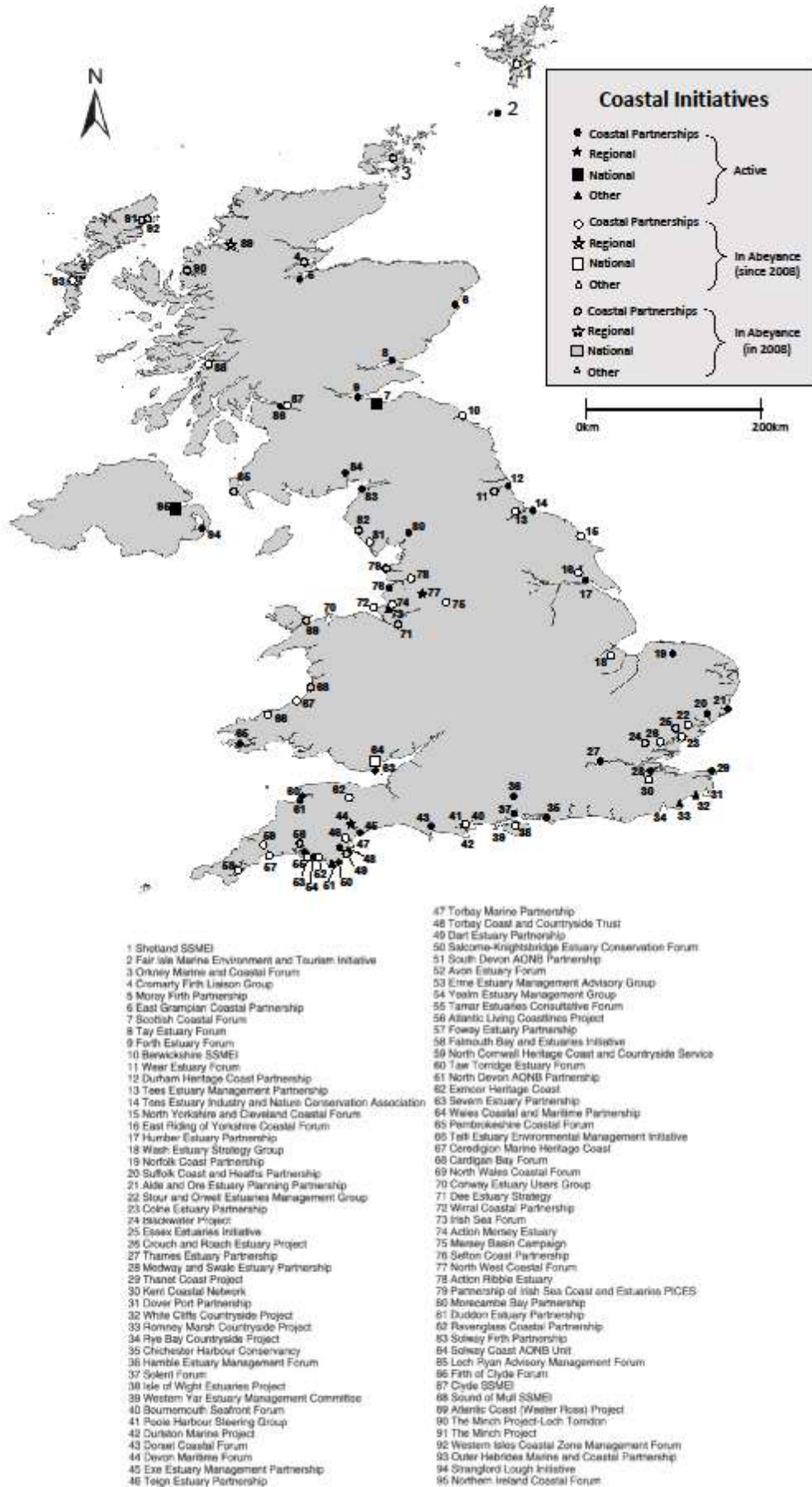
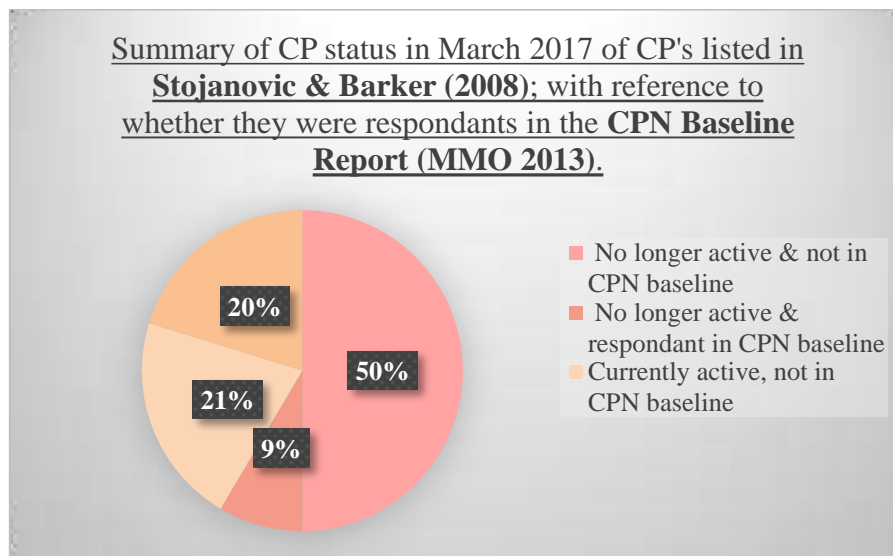


Figure 2 Coastal Partnership initiatives in the UK showing ten years evolution since 2008



include all the initiatives which have recently been discovered to be active. Further analysis of the 36 partnerships which have gone into abeyance is needed, alongside research with the remaining partnerships to indicate possible patterns which have led to their ongoing existence. The following discussion offers an insight based on the authors' personal experience and discussions with members of the Coastal Partnerships Network⁴.

Evolution

The following section describes the possible reasons behind the evolution from 2008 to the current position shown in Figures 1 and 2. As described in the original paper, this is covered in two sections relating to Coastal Partnerships: their internal and external operating environment.

Internal Operating Environment

Internal concerns the way in which a Coastal Partnership operates through its own management structures including that of its staff, hosting body and networking services such as an annual Forum and ad-hoc working groups. Further definition was provided in Stojanovic and Barker (2008).

Efficacy and efficiency

The authors previously noted criticisms of Coastal Partnerships internal operations based on research reported by Jemmett et al (1988; 1999); and Chaniotis and Stead (2007). In terms of efficacy – the ability of CPs to meet their internal goals – this has continued to be compromised by continued public sector austerity measures limiting their capacity for full service provision. In terms of efficiency, the authors identified the extensive in-kind contributions made by officers from member organisation and the high 'transaction costs' of working in partnership. However, a review of the financial benefits of

⁴ Several have agreed to be co-authors for this paper.

working in partnership was carried out and reported that member benefits ranged from £2,200 to £330,000 project investment, attributed (at least partly) to participating in their local Coastal Partnership (Entec, 2008).

Legitimacy

Research by Fletcher (2003; 2007) critiqued the ability of Coastal Partnerships to support decision-making, questioning the validity of their stakeholder representation. Several Coastal Partnerships such as the Pembrokeshire Coastal Forum, Severn and Thames Estuary Partnerships have been able to engage more business interests over the past ten years, which was a key criticism of their ability to represent the stakeholder community. However, as defined in this and the 2008 paper, the primary role of Coastal Partnerships is not to make decisions but facilitate communication and support decision-making bodies through their networking services.

Effectiveness

Concerning the ability of Coastal Partnerships to help achieve sustainable management, McKenna and Cooper (2006) question the effectiveness of non-statutory initiatives to deal with politically sensitive or intractable issues, since they are compromised by having to take a resource intensive, consensus approach. They cite this as a reason for lack of effectiveness, alongside other issues such as a lack of secure funding and work on short term projects. However, this drive towards efficiency in directly influencing sustainable management seems to miss the main objective of the partnerships – that of their co-ordinating and convening role – for which their contribution towards sustainability through networking is largely un-monitored and difficult to trace.

Bureaucracy and implementation failure

Hoare (2002) suggested that Integrated Coastal Management (ICM) plans add to a plethora of existing sectoral plans in a complex administrative situation, and can produce little return for effort, especially because Coastal Partnerships lack the manpower for stewardship of this process and have few incentives or powers to induce action from member organisations. However, as described above, their primary purpose is not to simplify governance or force action/decisions from members, but facilitate networking opportunities by providing a central contact point amidst the complex operating environment. Despite the availability of well-developed criteria (Pickaver *et al.* 2004; Stojanovic *et al.* 2004) there is little monitoring to prove whether or not they are doing this in areas where they continue to operate.

External Operating Environment

External factors drive the need for better planning and management of the coast (Shipman and Stojanovic, 2007) and this continues to be complex, as will be discussed in this section.

Constraints on Coastal Partnerships

There is no overall national programme to support the work of UK Coastal Partnerships. The UK Department of Environment Fisheries and Rural Affairs (Defra) has offered ad-hoc support such as the study into the financial benefits of working in partnership (Entec, 2008) and supported costs of the national Coastal Partnerships Forum hosted by the Coastal Partnerships Network (CPN). Aside from this, central government have not subsidised Coastal Partnerships at the local level since the initial 'pump-prime' funding. There is no statutory requirement for local authorities to invest in Coastal Partnerships in the absence of framework legislation for Integrated Coastal Management (Gibbs 2003; Shipman 2007).

There is a lack of sustainable financing mechanisms, and this has diverted much staff time towards securing ongoing core funding (McGlashan 2003; McGlashan and Barker, 2005). Furthermore, there is no professional training programme to strengthen the capacity and skills of Coastal Partnership officers to deal with the complex inter-disciplinary issues and skills required to deliver their ambition objectives. In summary, the external operating environment does not provide any leadership or legislation to support the work of Coastal Partnerships.

Actions to deliver coastal sustainability

There has (still) not been any comprehensive review of the performance of Coastal Partnerships in the UK. A variety of methods have been used to assess their effectiveness (e.g. Putnam 1993; Lowry *et al.* 1999; Stojanovic *et al.* 2004), with a number of these studies using the methodological perspective of critical realism (e.g. Sayer, 2000) to demonstrate that the existence of structures and mechanisms has causal tendencies. The only comprehensive documentation of their work was undertaken by the (now defunct) UK charity CoastNet through the publication of their UK Coastal Management Directory (1998) and Good Practice Guide (CoastNet, 2004) containing over 80 examples of good practice. This noted contributions to strategic management such as the development of estuary and coastal management/action plans, supporting consultation processes, and developing codes of conduct with the community. Contributions to technical management were also noted including condition assessments; monitoring reports; and on-the-ground projects such as coastal habitat or cultural heritage restoration, tourism and access improvements and promotion of sustainable farming techniques.

In the absence of any statutory or formal role for Coastal Partnerships to facilitate stakeholder engagement and influence decision-making, many have continued to focus on bottom-up community engagement projects. Translating the benefits into outcomes for society and the natural environment is problematic (Bower and Turner 1998) but may include benefits such as more environmentally sensitive development more sustainable fisheries and recognition of the benefits of sensitive coastal tourism to society and economy.

Summary

In 2008 the authors suggested that external constraints have been the primary cause for the internal failures reported in the literature. From the above review it would appear that external factors have further compounded the challenges faced by Coastal Partnership Officers to retain the existence of their Partnerships. Further evaluation of the context for coastal governance is therefore presented in the next section.

Coastal Governance Context

The concept of 'governance' highlights that partnerships form one element within efforts of the state, economic actors and civil society, which define the values, legislation, policies and institutions for coastal planning and management. In this sense, the 'improved' governance highlighted in this paper can be seen as processes and structures that work towards effective, efficient, equitable and legitimate sustainability outcomes (Adger et al. 2003) which have been reviewed above for the evolution of CPs over the past decade. Other theories of collaborative governance are also relevant to the discussion (e.g. Ansell and Gash 2007). This section therefore considers how the legal and policy framework for coastal planning and management has changed over the past decade and whether there is still a niche for Coastal Partnerships in the future.

The evolving legal and policy framework

Over the past decade there have been significant changes in legislation and mechanisms to support implementation, especially for the marine environment, which have changed the external operating environment for Coastal Partnerships.

At the national level, these include the UK and Scottish Marine Acts (MaCAA 2009) which introduced a new Marine Management Organisation (MMO) for England, with a requirement for marine plans by 2020. Several authors have commented on the failures of the Marine Acts to drive the simplification of marine and coastal management (Appleby and Jones 2012; Boyes and Elliot 2014; 2015). Terrestrial planning has evolved substantially over the past decade with the Localism Act (2011) introducing Neighbourhood Plans and Community Plans and at the time of writing there is a plan evolving in Essex which spans the land-sea interface. With the loss of regional government in England some regional perspective is now gained through Local Enterprise Partnerships and Local Nature Partnerships who operate across counties.

At the European level, implementation of the second phase of the EC Water Framework Directive (European Commission 2000) has led to establishment of the Catchment Based Approach (CaBA) with the establishment of Catchment Partnerships, some operating in the estuarine/coastal area. Ongoing implementation of the EC Habitats Directive implementation continues to be supported with several Coastal Partnerships providing secretariat services for the monitoring and condition assessment of European Marine Sites. The newly established EC Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP)

Directive (European Commission 2014) sets targets for marine plans for all inshore and offshore waters around the UK by 2020. The MMO are responsible for delivery and have utilised Coastal Partnerships in some areas of the country to support their stakeholder engagement work.

Coastal Community Teams and the Coastal Communities Alliance

UK government has recently increased investment in the coast through the establishment of Coastal Community Teams (CCTs⁵) - a local partnership consisting of the local authority and a range of people and business interests from a coastal community who have an understanding of the issues facing that area and can develop an effective forward strategy. The teams include a range of local stakeholders and have broad support. They choose their own priorities, but areas of focus include: enhancing the attractiveness and accessibility of public areas; providing increased community facilities; promoting the visitor economy; encouraging sustainable uses of heritage/cultural assets, and; creating links to support the growth and performance of the retail sector. They are supported under the umbrella of the National Coastal Communities Alliance (CCA) who coordinate and lead the national Coastal Communities Teams program⁶.

Catchment Partnerships

Catchment Partnerships have evolved for nearly all main rivers in England and Wales over the past decade. Integrated management at the scale of the river basin now includes stakeholder engagement mechanisms with catchment coordinators for 100 river catchments in the UK. They benefit from the Environment Agency's remit to deliver the catchment-based approach driven by the EC Water Framework Directive (2000). There is potential for more linkage between the efforts of Catchment and Coastal Partnerships, with evidence of collaboration emerging, for example through the Thames and Severn Estuary Partnerships.

Coastal Partnerships Network

Since publication of the original paper, individual Coastal Partnerships have come together through an annual forum initiated in Bristol in 2008 under the banner of a Coastal Partnerships Working Group (CPWG). This has evolved into the Coastal Partnerships Network (CPN) and provides some national co-ordination and leadership, increasing opportunities to influence and work with central government.

Future Scenarios

Considering the evidence presented above which shows significant losses and evolution of the Coastal Partnerships; the following future scenarios appear to exist for the future.

⁵ <http://www.coastalcommunities.co.uk/coastal-community-teams/> (last accessed 03/05/2017)

⁶ <http://www.coastalcommunities.co.uk/about-us/> (last accessed 02/05/2017)

Diminishing Coastal Partnerships

Coastal Partnerships may continue to diminish based on the constraints on their internal operating environment which are due (at least in part) to the external operating environment. Key factors have been described above and can be summarised as: lack of leadership from UK government; local government budget cuts and public sector austerity measures; limited support from the private sector; and increasing focus on marine planning (offshore). The challenges for integrating terrestrial and marine planning are likely to re-surface when these plans start to be implemented, so the currently diminished role of Coastal Partnerships may be re-visited by UK government in a few years' time.

Different Umbrellas

As shown by the map in Figure 1, several Partnerships have morphed into a different role, whilst retaining some of their original objectives. Potentially due to the loss of regional government, but more likely due to limited access to funds, Coastal Partnerships in Devon, Cornwall, Suffolk, Essex and NW England have rationalised into fewer partnerships with fewer secretariat staff. An umbrella service usually remains available to convene Forum meetings as necessary and possible. Depending up on what (if any) future role there is for the very localised Coastal Community Teams, this trend may continue.

Opportunities

The following opportunities can be suggested based on the discussion above:

- Greater synergies and joint working between Coastal Community Teams and Coastal Partnerships, possibly engaging more strongly with Local Enterprise Partnerships and/or Local Nature Partnerships at the regional level.
- Greater collaboration with Catchment Partnerships to link the watershed and coastal ecosystem.
- Closer relationship between the MMO and Coastal Partnerships in England; possibly evolving closer to the Scottish approach where the partnerships morph into Marine Planning Partnerships and gain statutory basis for their plans (which include part of the coastal zone).
- Establishment of charity/company status with a board of trustees to formalise the role bringing greater recognition, status and accountability, as demonstrated by some of the more prominent partnerships (e.g. Pembrokeshire, Thames, Solway).
- Focusing more on the promotion of community-based and 'bottom-up' approaches based on commons theory (e.g. Ostrom, 1990) to work towards sustainability taking a different approach, possibly through developing a natural capital approach to partnership working (see Acreman *et al.* 2017) and/or utilising Community and/or Neighbourhood Plans
- Building on the work of the House of Common Environment Select Committee (1992), Gibson (1993; 2003) and bringing international experience from the United States, South

Africa and the Mediterranean (amongst others) to establish a legal framework for ICM⁷ to work towards a greater statutory basis and leadership frame for Coastal Partnership effort.

- Assessing the feasibility in UK law for the coastal/estuary ecosystem to gain its own legal personality (Stone, 1972; 1999 and Warnock, 2012) as recently demonstrated in New Zealand and India by rivers gaining their own human rights⁸. The Coastal Partnership could be a spokes body for the ecosystem unit, able to be represented in a court of law. This would provide more status and accountability towards sustainability.

The above opportunities are not mutually exclusive. Some options maybe compatible with others, such as the establishment of a charity/company with trustees who focus on community participation whilst providing services to the MMO, ideally under a national legal framework.

A common thread presented by all these options is the need for stronger status and leadership, which has been shown to be lacking. The need for greater science-policy interaction is often recognised (e.g. Bremer and Glavovic 2013) as a requirement for evidence-based management and this is a role that Coastal Partnerships are well placed to coordinate at the ecosystem scale. However, there is little discussion about the potential need for greater legal status to be assigned to the coast or institutions which champion it. There is no overarching legal recognition which matches the importance of the coastal zone. Current emphasis is very much on the need for marine plans (e.g. Collins 2012; 2013). Once they are prepared and entering their implementation phase after 2020, it is predicted that renewed focus will be needed on coastal governance; in the space where terrestrial planning meets marine planning – at the coast – if sustainability objectives are to be pursued.

Conclusion

This paper has evaluated the evolution of Coastal Partnerships from their position a decade ago. The role of Coastal Partnerships to pursue the three tiers of economic, social and environmental sustainability remains unique, but a UK-wide analysis of current Coastal Partnership activity revealed that approximately half of the original partnerships have gone into abeyance or evolved into different umbrella organisations. Internal weaknesses of Coastal Partnerships which have been criticised in the literature are at least partly due to the lack of consistent investment and the changing external operating environment. A secure role within the institutional framework, which was aspired to a decade ago, did not materialise through the UK Marine Acts. However, the current coastal governance context for the continuation of the remaining partnerships illustrates some opportunities due to their convening powers to mobilise stakeholder engagement. The emergence of a national voice through the UK Coastal Partnerships Network has enabled collaboration with central

⁷ As defined in the US Coastal Zone Management Act, 1972 / South Africa's Integrated Coastal Management Act, 2008 / UNEP Protocol on Integrated Coastal Zone Management in the Mediterranean, 2008.

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/16/new-zealand-river-granted-same-legal-rights-as-human-being>;
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/21/ganges-and-yamuna-rivers-granted-same-legal-rights-as-human-beings>

government. Other international experiences may offer valuable direction, particularly as there is little scope for further legal or policy leadership from the European Commission due to Brexit plans. Finally, future scenarios for UK Coastal Partnerships are described in the absence of an ongoing legal or policy driver for Integrated Coastal Management or Land-Sea Interactions. Some of the more prevalent partnerships have established legal status through charity/company law, giving responsibilities over the ecosystem to voluntary trustees. This appears to be a promising way forward.

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