8

Unlocking peri-urban planning potential through a landscape lens

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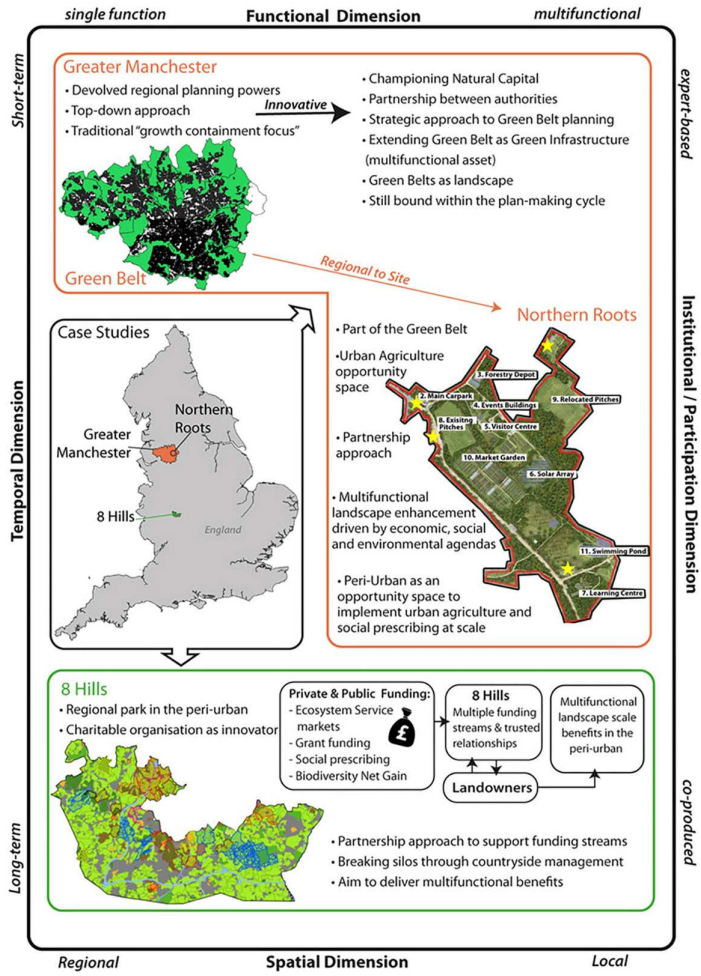
Introduction

This chapter assesses the potential of peri-urban spaces as multifunctional landscapes of opportunity and innovation. Two English case study narratives are unpacked using a multidimensional landscape conceptualisation to inform and improve peri-urban planning, exposing benefits and challenges (Figure 8.1). Both case studies are within green belts; a rare example of an explicit peri-urban policy, which seeks to prevent urban sprawl through development restrictions (Han and Go, 2019). We assess mechanisms that can extend green belt objectives to enable more positive environmental outcomes associated with green infrastructure and other societal opportunities (Kirby et al., 2023a; Kirby & Scott, 2023).

Society faces three interlinked global challenges of climate change, biodiversity decline, and poor human health and well-being (IPBES, 2019: IPCC, 2019). Currently, interventions tend to be planned, delivered, and evaluated within separate silos, located within urban or rural domains, leading to disintegrated development (Leach et al., 2019: Scott et al., 2013). Such fragmentation overlooks the hidden and undervalued nature of the peri-urban. The European Landscape Convention defines landscape as "an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of action and interaction of natural and/or human factors" (Council of Europe, 2000: 3). Yet the peri-urban as a landscape in its own right is poorly articulated in policy and plans. Consequently, we employ a multidimensional landscape lens to better unlock peri-urban potential as a positive opportunity space, holistically combining spatial, temporal, functional, and institutional perspectives from landscape-scale literatures (Figure 8.1; Carter et al., forthcoming; Plieninger et al., 2015).

For this chapter, we define the peri-urban as a transient and dynamic mosaic of land uses and landscapes extending from the urban edge into the rural hinterland, formed from multifaceted processes and occupied by a mix of values and publics. This



Source: Images adapted from National Trust (2024) and Northern Roots (2022).

Figure 8.1 Visual overview and context of the two peri-urban narrative case studies

produces places with distinctive and evolving characters and opportunities (Scott, 2019; Shaw et al., 2020). This emphasises its transitional and constantly changing nature but generates contestation around its identity, spatial extent, influence, and values which is often magnified in green belts where support for wholesale development constraint is increasingly challenged on economic, social, and environmental grounds, reflecting a wider misunderstanding of the functional potential of these landscapes (Kirby et al., 2023b).

Given that the peri-urban is one of the most dominant landscape types worldwide (Scott, 2019) with a growing research literature (Dadashpoor & Ahani, 2021; Shaw et al., 2020), it is remarkable that it remains a policy blind spot. However, much research and policy have a predilection towards either urban or rural characterisations; each with their dedicated governance frameworks and tools that are ill-adapted to the needs and potential of peri-urban (Scott et al., 2013). The consequential agency and sectoral myopia result in a disintegrated and reactive landscape that is challenging to research and plan effectively. Furthermore, many planning interventions are made with limited public engagement, magnifying current policy–practice disconnects and exacerbating conflict and perceived community impotence (Powell et al., 2021; Dockerill & Sturzaker, 2020). Collectively, this stifles the potential of peri-urban to respond to current biodiversity, climate, and health challenges, increasing regional inequalities where more innovative and holistic interventions are needed.

The following section presents and unpacks two holistic and innovative case study narratives in peri-urban spaces in England utilising our multidimensional landscape lens (Figure 8.1).

Going back to our Northern Roots in Greater Manchester

This case study involves landscape planning at two different spatial scales in Greater Manchester's peri-urban (Figure 8.1). First, the example of regional-scale strategic planning by Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) of its green belt illuminates how a relatively new regional governance framework has facilitated the production and delivery of a combined plan with a multi-functional but contentious policy agenda for the region's green belt, aiming to deliver growth and natural capital improvement. Second, Northern Roots in Oldham provides an example within the GMCA which has transformed a neglected 160-acre wedge of green belt into a multi-functional eco-park, reconnecting the urban, peri-urban and rural landscapes to the heart of the town, whilst also serving as a catalyst for the wider regeneration of the area.

At the regional scale, the GMCA consists of 10 local planning authorities and, uniquely in an English context, has delegated powers for planning, transport, health, and other services as part of a wider devolution agreement. This has led to a combined development plan for the region, "Places for Everyone" (GMCA, 2021), allowing its green belt to be planned strategically at the landscape scale, including the location of development and opportunities for compensatory environmental enhancement. The latter is particularly important given the championing of a natural capital approach by GMCA.[1] One key element of this plan was its green belt approach, involving substantial release of land for development but, at the same time, developing multifunctional peri-urban landscapes through a natural capital approach. However, through this institutional approach, peri-urban planning is bounded within shorter political timeframes, which in a peri-urban context often magnify conflict and change (Shaw et al., 2020).

Within the plan, GMCA recognises green belt as fulfilling an urban containment role but also a multifunctional landscape role, providing benefits from nature to people. Here, a key catalyst was a joined-up approach to compensatory improvement for the release of green belt for development by assessing landscapes as functional; either best placed for development, or as opportunity areas for multifunctionality; both responding to the local context. This was controversial due to widespread public and political opposition to any development of green belt. Uniquely, the GMCA plan makes explicit links between green belt policies and green infrastructure policies, with compensatory improvement closely linked to the landscape-scale strategic green infrastructure network. This is supported by opportunity mapping for the green belt, identifying possibilities for access, priority habitat planting, and climate change adaptation (Land Use Consultants, 2020). Whereas the landscape impacts of proposed habitat creation extend into long-term temporal scales, this is somewhat dependent on progressive policy evolution during the next plan period, with the policies that will shape the peri-urban landscape of Greater Manchester set within a vision up until 2037.

Institutionally, the production of the plan and development of green belt approach allowed both a strategic approach and facilitated local representation through co-production. Here, the leadership of the strategic planning portfolios by local council leaders empowered as deputy mayors provides key agency (Harding, 2020). As such, local plans produced alongside the combined plan have a consistent approach to how the green belt is treated as functional landscapes from a natural capital perspective, showing the effectiveness and importance of regional cooperation in producing policies that are consistent across jurisdictional boundaries, taking into account underlying landscape processes. However, the governance and approach are not without their challenges and trade-offs. Changes to the green belt are politically contentious, as illustrated by the withdrawal of Stockport (part of GMCA) from the combined plan due to concerns over green belt release allocations, thereby weakening its strategic effectiveness. Here, viewing landscape through an institutional dimension reveals important political and power complexities affecting landscape delivery.

Shifting the spatial and temporal scales within which we view and plan landscapes from the regional to the local can expose scalar conflict but also identify synergies and innovation through combining functional and institutional lenses within the peri-urban. Oldham sits in the north-west of Greater Manchester and is home to Northern Roots (Figure 8.1). The project centres on a multifunctional eco-park scheme that uses a wedge-type model to spatially connect the urban, peri-urban, and rural landscapes to the heart of the town. The core aim is to tackle issues around climate change, enhance the biodiversity of the area, and address the significant mental health challenges of Oldham through activities such as green social prescribing. Starting in 2017, the scheme has attracted significant investment from central and regional governments, charities, philanthropic sources, and beyond. A particularly radical component of Northern Roots is its focus on the scaling-up of urban agriculture with the creation of a short food supply chain model (Oldham Council, 2023). Not only does this project showcase attempts to reconnect Oldham with the surrounding landscapes, but it also reimagines the peri-urban as a multifunctional landscape through

the creation of new business ventures, a laboratory for radical green infrastructure activities, and an increase in its social value.

Prior to the Northern Roots vision, the peri-urban landscape was perceived to be barren; from a large, sealed landfill site to poorly maintained walkways and a patchwork of industrial relics. Indeed, much of the landscape experienced issues around anti-social behaviour with poor ecological quality. Following a feasibility study, a partnership between Oldham Council, the University of Salford, ARUP, Planit-IE, The Environmental Partnership (TEP), JDDK Architects, and others enabled the project to germinate and be delivered, connecting to the wider GMCA agenda alongside local Oldham priorities. This collaborative partnership was instrumental in generating a diversity of sustainability assets: from a solar array to high-tech growing and beyond; all within one of the most deprived areas in the country. Figure 8.1 captures the master plan to date, with large-scale urban farming and other assets currently operating on the site.

The transformation of the landscape has acted as a catalyst for further investment in Oldham, the peri-urban, and wider region. The scheme has acted as a stimulus for broader infrastructure investment, such as a new £5 million bridge to extend the regional cycling network and a green town centre regeneration plan. In this sense, the 160-acre peri-urban landscape has been instrumental in wider changes that aim to tackle issues surrounding climate change, both in Oldham and more widely across the GMCA area. Institutionally, in a similar manner to the overarching GMCA approach, the scheme was co-produced and enabled a range of actors, from community members to councillors and broader organisations, to transform a landscape with multifunctionality at its heart. To date, the scheme has created over 20 jobs, volunteer opportunities, and traineeships alongside a myriad of other benefits, ranging from direct environmental change to economic, social, and health benefits. The improved green infrastructure (GI) has also acted as a catalyst for reconnecting the peri-urban landscape to the town's core and rural areas, with improvements ranging from enhancing green corridors to general accessibility. Northern Roots provides an in-depth case study of the potential of the peri-urban to be a transformative landscape using radical green infrastructure.

Overcoming policy disintegration in the 8 Hills Regional Park

The proposed 8 Hills Regional Park explores a pioneering approach at the landscape scale to improve the multifunctional management of peri-urban land for access, nature, and climate change functions within Bromsgrove District Council and surrounding local authorities south of Birmingham (Figure 8.1). This project is in its infancy compared to Northern Roots, but it provides holistic and innovative thinking about how peri-urban landscapes might be planned and managed to deliver better outcomes for nature and people by incorporating and adapting a European regional park model to break down institutional land management silos. The initiative is led by the National Trust (NT), a major landowner charity in England.

The proposed 8 Hills area is predominantly green belt, an undeveloped open space forming a natural barrier from urban sprawl south of Birmingham. It offers access, recreation, and biodiversity opportunities. Some of the area is already heavily used for recreation within designated country parks, but farmland areas dominate and are less used where public access to greenspace is mixed. Most land is held privately, but also, uniquely, Birmingham City Council owns large tracts of land.

A pre-requisite for 8 Hills' success is the inclusion and formalisation of the regional park in the forthcoming Bromsgrove local plan, which sets the statutory framework for development over the next 25 or so years. Originally, support was forthcoming from the Council from both its political leaders and chief officers, but local government elections in May 2023 resulted in a change of political leadership of the council (from Conservative to no overall control). This now creates significant institutional and temporal uncertainty surrounding the status of the 8 Hills project, as all the plan priorities are re-negotiated, set within the proposed national reform of planning policy. Despite this, there has been significant support from the wider business community and major employers in the area, with discussions on funding packages including pilot payments for ecosystem services schemes incorporating regulating services such as water and climate and soon-to-be mandatory biodiversity net gain requirements (February 2024) emanating from the Environment Act 2021 (National Trust, 2024). Cultural payment for ecosystem service schemes have also been considered through improved access to these landscapes involving private farmland.

The NT has a dedicated innovation unit which is spearheading this ambitious initiative (National Trust, 2024). The approach of the NT has been to work with consultants on different work strands. One area of work is to devise a spatial framework to identify core principles and draft policies to inform decision-making, including the biodiversity and recreation hotspots and other ecosystem services through a mapping exercise. These will inform the evidence base for the local plan, highlighting areas of greenbelt with the highest environmental value and those more suitable for release. The other work focuses on developing an integrated green finance model that bundles private and public funding into one easily accessible pot for suppliers, enabling diverse investment. A pilot involving farmers and landowners for improved access is underway. Private payment for ecosystem service schemes synergise with the proposed national government environmental land management scheme (ELMS) as well as established section 106 planning agreements (based on betterment value of land) to support environmental infrastructure from development. This will also include biodiversity net gain from spring 2024, where developers have to deliver a minimum 10% gain in biodiversity value from developments on or off site. There is also an important knowledge exchange function evident, whereby people are made aware of the opportunities for access and enjoyment in the 8 Hills with on-site improvements in recreational infrastructure, including improved waymarking (National Trust, 2024).

The main barriers still to overcome are securing financial support from the surrounding local authorities, whose residents will gain the most benefits from 8 Hills recreational development. Here, the need to dismantle political local authority boundaries

in favour of landscape boundaries becomes an institutional priority. There are also many individual landowners across the proposed regional park area whose support is vital. Hitherto, landowner consultation has been somewhat limited, but progress made on financial incentives for peri-urban access funding might attract more landowner support. Institutional uncertainty surrounding the status of the local plan remains a significant governance barrier to overcome. Furthermore, one key conflict surrounds the financial investment model for the work, which critically depends on controversial green belt release for housing developments. Strong local opposition based on landscape, amenity, and biodiversity concerns to any releases could weaken community support for the 8 Hills scheme. Moreover, green belt releases are ultimately decided by planning inspectors in the plan approval processes and are based on identifying wholly exceptional circumstances. Here, the tension between national policy guidance for green belt protection may conflict with 8 Hills project goals.

The significance of this initiative is that it falls under the leadership and management of the NT. The 8 Hills poses a unique challenge here as the NT does not own or manage most of the land. Thus, the NT is operating outside its usual ownership comfort zone. This requires an effective partnership involving key stakeholders (public, private, and voluntary groups) across the area which is being built. The viability and resilience of this partnership depend on securing the involvement and support of landowners and wider publics.

The key lesson learnt thus far is the power of an integrated landscape vision that offers a potential model for reconnecting people with nature using a landscape-scale regional park concept. The NT has shown it is not afraid of taking bold, innovative approaches facilitated through its dedicated innovation unit.

Unlocking a future peri-urban landscape research agenda

The case study narratives have collectively exposed key components of the peri-urban that serve as important catalysts and drivers shaping successful landscape planning and management. These ingredients are now critically discussed using global literature to help prioritise an international future research agenda to better understand and utilise the potential of peri-urban landscapes. The research agenda focuses on five key peri-urban themes.

The importance of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary landscape research in the peri-urban

Our case study narratives collectively demonstrate the potential and power of peri-urban landscapes to be at the heart of multifunctional, transformative change in planning. Using a multi-dimensional landscape lens (Figure 8.1) involving spatial, temporal, institutional, and functional components provides an improved conceptualisation for interdisciplinary/transdisciplinary research to effectively "read" and make sense of peri-urban potential, moving away from the disintegration that typifies much current peri-urban policy and delivery (see, for example, Tan et al., 2023;

Leach et al 2019; Scott et al., 2013). The synergies between people, landscape, nature, economy, and place are key and mutually reinforcing in both our case studies, confirming the interdisciplinary/transdisciplinary foci needed and the key role of inclusive political and policy partnerships in their delivery (Cowling et al., 2008). When employing our landscape framework (Figure 8.1), its multifocal and multipurpose nature allows the spatial, functional, temporal, and institutional influences to work together in a virtuous circle to provide additionality, exposing scalar connections and relationships, and challenging traditional policy and institutional myopia associated with rural and urban areas that neglects the "hidden" peri-urban landscape (Carter et al., forthcoming). Furthermore, given the messy and varying nature of peri-urban spaces internationally (Han and Go, 2019; Shaw et al., 2020), the use of this landscape lens provides a structured way to research the peri-urban, allowing for common and context-specific findings to be disentangled and better understood. We argue that our conceptual framework provides a useful starting point for future research work, but pragmatically we call for improved landscape conceptualisations for the peri-urban landscape, mindful of its identity crossing both rural and urban governance frameworks and societal goals, enabling more multifunctional outcomes.

Delivering multifunctional landscapes in peri-urban landscapes mindful of tradeoffs

There has been significant research on multifunctional landscapes (e.g. Selman, 2009). But the peri-urban in general, and the green belt in particular, remain somewhat neglected. Research that has been conducted shows how viewing the peri-urban as a multifunctional landscape can support its governance (Hedblom et al., 2017). Yet multifunctionality is all too often presented uncritically as a desirable goal to pursue without recognition of the trade-offs necessary to achieve a particular vision or goal. More research is needed that examines the trade-offs involved within different peri-urban visions. For example, both case studies depended on green belt release to finance planned landscape improvements elsewhere. This generated significant public and agency opposition.

Looking more specifically at ecosystem services, there are important tradeoffs between and within cultural, provisioning, and regulating services in setting policy priorities, not to mention biodiversity goals (Spyra et al., 2021). There is a definite research gap in understanding what the various tradeoffs are; who the winners and losers are; how they can be mitigated; and the best tools and evidence needed to improve transparency and accessibility for relevant stakeholders and wider public. Furthermore, this all leads to questions of how multifunctionality is driven by a particular agency, partnership, or landscape vision; the extent to which such visions have been co-developed with stakeholders and wider publics (who was involved and who wasn't and why). The latter is especially important given that publics have contested views of multifunctionality in peri-urban landscapes (Filyushkina et al., 2022). This brings into question how participatory processes can help unite top-down and bottom-up approaches when managed effectively. Furthermore, issues of equity and enironmental/social justice are raised given that policies and subsequent landscape decisions produce winners

and losers. In both our case studies, equity issues were limited, reinforcing the significance of this research and policy gap.

There is also a deficit of data and evidence detailing the benefits delivered by particular multifunctional solutions. There has been a lot of evidence about the generic benefits from multifunctional strategies, but not evidence that quantifies or qualifies these in comparison to other options. Research is needed that assesses the different impacts from the delivery of multifunctional approaches to show their landscape and wider values and to improve mainstreaming in policy. Institutional silos are still very much in evidence, and research has a key role to play in providing evidence of the benefits and costs delivered by multifunctional solutions. Finally, there is a need to improve the existing toolset that can help to deliver multifunctionality. For example, green infrastructure has considerable potential here but also suffers from neglect and work in its own silo, including the social dimension which is important in multifunctionality (Chatzimentor et al., 2020). It rarely is integrated within green belt policy, yet forms a key part of green infrastructure networks (Kirby & Scott, 2023).

The micropolitics of peri-urban landscapes

There is a rich and fertile potential for research on the micropolitics of peri-urban spaces. Here, attention is focused on individual actions and behaviours and their interactions within and across different organisations and partnerships to assess how those actions might enable or hinder progress. This was first exposed by McAreavey (2006) in work on rural development. In Northern Roots, it is evident that the personal qualities of key staff in overcoming bureaucratic hurdles and building and maintaining partnerships across key stakeholder groups were important in the project's success, as was the wider leadership credentials of Andy Burnham as mayor and Peter Lees as the chief officer. The continuity of staff and the building of institutional capital are also important. This ties in with Scott's (2011) work examining how different leaders were responding to the challenges of the European Landscape Convention in Scotland, where the successful case studies owed more to the personalities involved going outside their established job roles rather than the governance frameworks, which actually tended to hinder rather than support such changes. In the 8 Hills case study, the establishment of a dedicated innovation unit within the NT represents a unique development that catalysed the scoping of this project, going outside usual boundaries, which allowed officer freedoms to explore new ways of solving traditional challenges. Thus, research needs to focus on how key individuals and publics interact and work within and outside their established job roles to then consider how to mainstream more successful behaviours and approaches. Here, issues of personality, character traits, and competence in transferable skills can be particularly important in understanding why some initiatives work and others do not. Consequently, research here would need to be more embedded and qualitative in nature to yield important insights. This is rare, although it is noteworthy that there has been a long-term series of research projects associated with Northern Roots (see Hardman et al., 2022).

The governance of the peri-urban landscape

Peri-urban landscapes are dynamic landscapes subject to rapid and transformative change but also sterilisation. Governance is an important research priority but needs to include both rural and urban governance models as they intersect in the peri-urban domain. Consequently, the governance systems that regulate and manage such change are important research priorities. Here, the town and country planning and resource planning systems (agriculture and forestry) should come under special scrutiny given their impacts on the landscape. It is important to understand that agriculture and forestry operations operate under a different governance framework, as many activities are not subject to planning control as opposed to urban development (Scott et al., 2013). Thus, future landscape research should focus far more on the intersection of town and country planning and resource planning. Hitherto, a lot of research has looked at these domains in isolation, yet they are inextricably linked in the peri-urban (Scott, 2019).

Our case studies show the importance of top-down and bottom-up approaches converging. In the GMCA, a top-down approach has leveraged evidence, policy, and funding whereas, more locally, Northern Roots has co-developed its vision, leading to a multifunctional and unique peri-urban landscape-based initiative. Importantly, the use of the natural capital approach across the GMCA illustrates the power of making data available for public interaction to help with policy transparency (GMCA & EA, 2018).

This issue of scale is also is a key governance consideration, with confusion often experienced when the "landscape scale" is used uncritically (Durant, 2022). Future landscape research needs to look at the scalar dependencies and interrelationships across peri-urban space, better connecting national, regional, and local dimensions within research projects as opposed to pursuing singular scales of operation. Here, peri-urban spaces rarely conform with authority boundaries, including regional/municipal jurisdictions, thus requiring research that can more carefully define the peri-urban spaces through mapping of key indicators where landscape becomes one key driver.

Within our case studies, issues of uncertainty, delay, and conflict were apparent. In 8 Hills, local government elections (2022) led to a new set of elected members with a change of political administration (no overall control), leaving the status of the development plan uncertain and subject to future delay. Crucially, the whole regional park model depended on its formalisation in this plan. Typically, development plan processes can take up to five years from start to finalisation. This means that, locally, there is a significant time lag between more positive national and regional policies for the peri-urban in guidance and their approval and use in local planning decisions. This exacerbates the temporal and scalar disconnect, as evidenced in a Welsh case study (Adams et al., 2014). Research needs to look at what alternative governance frameworks for peri-urban landscapes could be created and coping strategies that

deal with temporal and governance uncertainties and, in particular how partnership working and informal non-statutory plans might provide ways forward.

As outlined in the micropolitical section, successful initiatives have more to do with individual officers in spite of current systems rather than because of them. Thus, it is important for research to combine both micropolitical analyses with more macro assessments of governance frameworks to unpack what is a highly complex picture in peri-urban landscapes.

Building adaptive management cultures of innovation and risk taking in peri-urban landscapes

We view the peri-urban landscape as a positive opportunity space, challenging some narratives that portray it as a negative and contested space. As part of this, more research is needed that looks at case studies where risk-taking, creativity, and innovation are evident, challenging the technocentric order apparent in much planning policy to date (Qviström, 2007). Risk-taking is rare in landscape practice, particularly in local authorities/municipalities and regulatory agencies. The research priority is to learn lessons from novel projects seeking to do things differently and to try to capture the lessons learnt, especially when projects fail. This is very challenging given the way failure is seen as problematic and adaptive management strategies are rarely pursued.

Research pathways should also focus on how a culture of experimentation can be encouraged and mainstreamed, and where failure is supported within more adaptive management models with strong social learning embedded (Reed et al., 2010; Scott et al., 2013). Research needs to focus on diverse peri-urban case studies, understanding the wider governance and behaviour frameworks that might catalyse such changes (Scott, 2011). For example, the dedicated innovation unit within the NT represents an exciting response that actively champions creative thinking, risk taking and pilot projects. The GMCA also reveals the importance of a governance framework enabling innovative leadership to flourish through successive devolution deals, broadening power and responsibilities, and producing new models such as local mayors taking ownership of regional projects. But, like any innovation, it is controversial with Stockport withdrawing from the plan due to political concerns over the degree of green belt release for development.

Note

1. A natural capital approach takes the value of the natural environment and the benefits it provides for people and the economy into account in decision-making.

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