mainstreaming green infrastructure in the planning system

Guest Editor Alister Scott introduces the Special Issue on mainstreaming green infrastructure in the planning system

Photo courtesy of GCV Green Network Partnership

This Special Issue of *Town & Country Planning* focuses on improving the mainstreaming of green infrastructure in the planning system. It comprises an exciting mix of academic, policy and practice articles that collectively signpost how green infrastructure can be better configured, communicated and employed to deliver better place-making and place-keeping processes and outcomes, moving outside its traditional environmental silo to infiltrate economic, social and health agendas.

It is here that the 'mainstreaming' concept needs to be unpacked as all too often it is a term that is loosely used and falsely claimed. Mainstreaming is about taking a concept that is accepted and used in one policy domain and embedding it across other policy domains to become accepted and used as a matter of course.[1] For green infrastructure, this means securing improved traction and subsequent adoption in the business, housing, growth, health and community sectors, for example, where the

planning system is a key driver. This necessarily involves a cyclical process of knowledge generation, communication, persuasion, acceptance and reinforcement[2] before mainstreaming can be said to have been effected.

However, green infrastructure is not yet mainstreamed in the planning system as it remains rooted in the persuasion phase. We still see research and policy investigations presenting evidence of the value and multiple benefits of green infrastructure for mental health and wellbeing, the economy, climate change mitigation and biodiversity; but often in separate claims. Indeed, there is much evidence from the research councils[3] that green infrastructure is delivering on all these aspects, but there remains widespread resistance to making things happen on the ground. In many ways, green infrastructure is still being treated as a desirable piece of infrastructure but is not yet seen as critical infrastructure in the built environment jigsaw.

Consequently, there is a need for a change in culture in which everyone gets out of their disciplinary and sectoral silos and embraces more unifying concepts such as place-making, place-keeping and multiple benefits, while being mindful of the risks of fetishising green infrastructure itself within its own silo.

'In many ways, green infrastructure is still being treated as a desirable piece of infrastructure but is not yet seen as critical infrastructure in the built environment jigsaw'

Thus the articles in this Special Issue highlight where and how we might start to address these fundamental weaknesses, illuminating successes and challenges in equal measure, with a focus on tools, policy, delivery and evaluation, and unpacking the key lessons that might lead to improved mainstreaming, moving beyond the persuasion phase.

This Special Issue is structured in three sections to aid a better understanding of green infrastructure's opportunities and challenges for mainstreaming. The first explores international perspectives using examples from Australia and Ireland, with a focus on green infrastructure case study exemplars for city growth and the development of improved health frameworks for spatial planning, respectively.

The second section of four articles assesses the efficacy of different tools developed as part of the recent Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) research funding initiatives,[4] together with one core strand of my own NERC fellowship work, which all highlight the opportunity to make green infrastructure work harder in built environment developments, raising the green infrastructure standards bar. The focus here is on co-developing tools in conjunction with the built environment professions to make them 'oven ready'.

Finally, there are three articles assessing how well plans, policies and programmes are mainstreaming green infrastructure to improve place-making processes and outcomes using examples of neighbourhood masterplanning in the delivery phase, a GI design code, and the use of planning obligations.

The articles collectively highlight exciting new mainstreaming pathways, and the key to unlocking them perhaps lies in bold new research programmes that build upon some of the insights and lessons emerging here:

- Develop a place-based and place-keeping approach.
- Better incorporate the multiple functions and benefits of green infrastructure in ***all*** policy, plans, projects, and programmes
- Use existing planning tools more effectively rather than invent new ones.
- Carry out research that involves end users from the outset and then throughout the research process.
- Focus on the delivery of green infrastructure in funding and long-term maintenance schemes.
- Secure an improved communication strategy that enables green infrastructure to be embedded in wider infrastructure arguments.

● ***Professor Alister J Scott*** *is with the Department of Geography & Environmental Sciences at Northumbria University, and currently leads the NERC-funded Mainstreaming Green Infrastructure knowledge exchange project (award NE/R00398X/1). The views expressed are personal.*

Notes

1 AJ Scott, C Carter, M Hardman, N Grayson and T Slaney: 'Mainstreaming ecosystem science in spatial planning practice: exploiting a hybrid opportunity space'. *Land Use Policy*, 2018, Vol. 70, 232-46

2 EM Rogers: *Diffusion of Innovations*. Free Press, 2003, Fifth Edition

3 A list of current NERC protects is provided at https://mainstreaminggreeninfrastructure.com/project-page.php?NERC-science-GI

4 A critical review of the 13 NERC green infrastructure innovation projects is set out in M Grace and D Proverbs: *A Review of the Natural Environment Research Council Green Infrastructure Innovation Programme*. Birmingham City University/NERC, Dec. 2017. https://mainstreaminggreeninfrastructure.com/reports/NERC%20-%20Final%20Report%20v6pdf.pdf