



# ROBUST RURAL-URBAN UPDATE

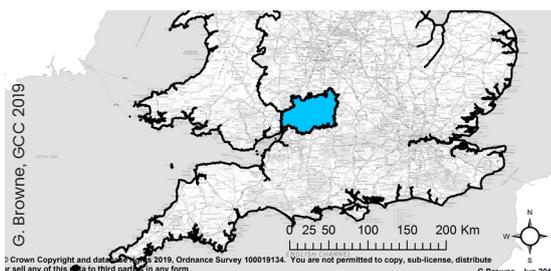
Rural-Urban Outlooks: Unlocking Synergies (ROBUST) is a European research project that advances our understanding of the interactions between rural and urban areas. Its main premise is that strong, mutually-supportive linkages between rural and urban areas are key to realising smart, circular and inclusive development for a sustainable Europe. ROBUST kicked off in June 2017 and will run until November 2021. The project brings together 24 European partners representing both research- and practice-oriented organisations. They work with 11 regional Living Labs and five Communities of Practice.

## Living Lab – Gloucestershire

Gloucestershire's Living Lab (LL) is a place-based arena of experimentation led by the University of Gloucestershire's Countryside and Community Research Institute and Gloucestershire County Council (GCC). We initiated governance experiments to improve rural-urban links. These links related to (i) sustainable food systems, (ii) ecosystems services, and (iii) business models/labour markets. The themes represent material or functional flows of goods and services between rural and urban areas. Our LL covered four phases:

1. Envisioning (Oct '18 – Feb '19 when the LL ideas were jointly formulated, discussed, agreed and articulated in a Research and Innovation Agenda).
2. Experimenting (Mar '19 – Sept '19) covering background research, consultations, prototype thinking and ideas testing.
3. Experiencing (Oct '19 – Mar '21) when the experiments were implemented and refined.
4. Reflecting (proceeded throughout; final evaluation in May 2021).

We engaged with a wide range of stakeholders, using participatory methods such as workshops, stakeholder mapping, focus groups etc. and used the LL as a 'safe space' to initiate governance innovations.



## Governance Innovations



The culmination of the LL was innovation in two distinct governance arrangements:

### (i) School meals procurement

GCC issues a commercial contract which governs the supply and preparation of around 18,500 school meals in over 180 primary schools in the county every school day. Already, local procurement and ethical considerations such as fair trade are specified in the contract. As part of the LL, we developed wording in the contract re-issue (July 2021) which would enable GCC to benefit from policy and IT innovations. The latter, called Dynamic Procurement System (DPS), is a new digital logistics system that enables smaller and local producers to sell to the public sector. It allows pre-qualified producers to offer foods as and when they are available, consolidating variations in seasonal availability (and price) on a daily basis to ensure consistency of supply. Our work with GCC and its partners contributed to the location of the South West Food Hub in the region, as part of a government-led pilot to institute the DPS across all public food procurement sectors.

## (ii) Nature-based flood management

The governance of flood risk along the catchments of the rivers Severn and Wye is channelled through a body called the Regional Flood and Coastal Committee (RFCC). RFCC members include elected councillors from 8 local authorities and technical experts from state, private and civil society sectors. The RFCC allocates flood risk investment in the catchment. Our experiment led to the initiation of a new sub-group of the RFCC which will provide guidance on the allocation of resources to support nature-based flood risk solutions in urban and rural areas. This is important because nature-based solutions (e.g. attenuation ponds - photo below, sustainable urban drainage, bankside habitat restoration) are considered marginal, compared to engineered flood protection, in their protection of downstream urban property. This is because implementation, maintenance and monitoring require a multiple landholders, technicians and citizens over extended periods. The sub-group will systematically review and suggest nature-based interventions at the outset of any works; and regularly link flood authorities to share good practice of emerging techniques and data.

These were the most explicit innovations flowing from the LL, although work also helped inform Gloucestershire's food and climate change strategies.



## Beyond ROBUST

We secured innovations that could be imbedded/adopted to existing governance structures, so they don't need separate funding, staff or capacity to survive. In addition, DPS and nature-based flood risk are regarded as 'hot' regional and national topics addressing multiple policy objectives, e.g.:

- including small and medium-sized enterprises efficiently in public procurement
- reducing carbon emissions in food chains and flood engineering
- increasing seasonality in public menus
- supporting post-Covid agricultural innovation
- advancing knowledge of nature-based flood impact and climate adaptation capacity
- increasing knowledge and applications of rural-urban ecological interdependencies in urbanisation and rural land management regulation

GCC can offer leadership and experience in realising these objectives in practice. The LL has demonstrated that strengthening rural-urban links requires cross-sectoral alliances across administrative boundaries and can be a low-risk way to create meaningful incremental change. Not all our plans worked. LLs need to be prepared for shifting political priorities, and for challenges in securing commercial participation in experiments that have largely socio-ecological benefits. With the DPS, the substantial market potential and enterprise diversification was a draw to farmers, as was the location of the South West Food Hub.

## ROBUST Final Conference

The ROBUST Final Conference will take place online on 21 and 22 September 2021.

For more information visit [rural-urban.eu](http://rural-urban.eu)

## Local Contact Information

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## Learn more about ROBUST

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To learn more about the ROBUST project and to get the latest information about cutting-edge research on rural-urban issues visit [www.rural-urban.eu](http://www.rural-urban.eu)



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