

Groundwork in the UK: The urban fringe and beyond

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CITATION

Jones P. (2024). Groundwork in the UK: The urban fringe and beyond. *Journal of Infrastructure, Policy and Development*. 8(14): 6378. <https://doi.org/10.24294/jipd6378>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 14 May 2024
Accepted: 21 August 2024
Available online: 20 November 2024

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Abstract: The urban fringe – the zone lying between urban areas and the countryside, - offers valuable opportunities for commercial and residential development as well as for recreational activities, but it is often characterised by a number of land use problems and environmental conflicts. Within the UK, the urban fringe can be seen as a contested and dynamic space, yet for almost 70 years statutory town planning policies for the urban fringe have been largely concerned with containment designed to stop urban encroachment into the countryside. However, in 1970s a number of experimental urban fringe management projects were established around town and cities within the UK, culminating in the creation of the Groundwork projects, and here the focus was on a wider and more flexible approach, and more specifically on providing a range of opportunities for recreation, and to attempt to reconcile environmental conflicts. This paper explores the evolution of Groundwork, and more specifically focuses on two Research Questions namely, what was the initial rationale and aims of Groundwork? and secondly what is its current focus and future direction?

Keywords: groundwork; urban fringe; urban planning; sustainable development; local communities

1. Introduction

Within the UK, the urban fringe—the zone lying between urban areas and the countryside—can be seen as a contested and dynamic space, and while it offers valuable opportunities for commercial and residential development, as well as for recreational activities, it is often characterised by a number of land use problems and environmental conflicts. Thomas and Littlewood (2010) argued that after “years of neglect” the urban fringe “has been rediscovered as an area for policy discourse”, and that the reasons for this change were the mounting pressures on the fringe from development and urban expansion, as well as a reassessment of the ecological and social value of the fringe, political concerns about health and well-being, and the need to improve resilience to climate change and flooding. These forces are still very much at work well over a decade later. While Land uses within the UK’s urban fringe vary from one town and city to another, and they have changed over time, so that it is not possible to provide a definitive, or a consistent picture nationwide. At the present time, new houses, and perhaps to a lesser extent retail and warehouse development are major land uses in many urban fringe areas, while in the past, isolation hospitals, municipal refuse dumps, sewage plants, scrap yards, and underused agricultural land which had the air of imminent urban encroachment, were all commonplace around towns and cities.

For almost 70 years the principal formal management policies for the UK’s urban fringe have been centred on the green belt—described as one of the few planning concepts to have gained widespread popular support and political purchase (Thomas and Littlewood, 2010), and as one of the central tenets of post war UK planning (Amati

and Yokohari, 2006)—which was designed to prevent towns and cities sprawling into the countryside. There is a total of 55 green belts across the UK (14 in England, 10 in Scotland, 1 in Wales and 30 in Northern Ireland). However, from the 1970s onwards, a number of initially experimental urban fringe management projects, were created, but from the early 1980s an increasing number of the Groundwork projects were established around towns and cities. Here the initial focus was on a wider and more flexible management approach, and more specifically on looking provide a range of opportunities for recreation, and to attempt to reconcile environmental conflicts on the urban fringe. While the UK's green belt and its impact has attracted enduring attention in the academic literature, after some initial interest, the Groundwork projects have been neglected by the research community and that represents a gap in that literature.

With this in mind, the aim of this paper is to explore the evolution of Groundwork, and its expansion to embrace social and business, as well as environmental concerns, outside, as well as in, the urban fringe. However, Groundwork has received limited attention to date in the urban fringe literature here the focus is largely descriptive rather than analytical. That said, the paper looks to address two Research Questions. Firstly, what was the initial rationale and aims of the Groundwork initiative? Secondly what is the current focus and future direction of Groundwork? More generally, while the paper is specifically focused on the UK, it contributes to debates about the urban fringe in other countries. Here too, there has often been policy tensions between the regulation of continuing urban sprawl and the conflicts and challenges associated with more flexible approaches to land management (e.g., Kirkby and Scott, 2023; Perrin et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2020).

The paper includes a short literature review (Section 2), a brief outline of the material and methods used in the paper (Section 3), the results which explore the initial rationale and aims of the Groundwork initiative, and its current focus and future direction. (Section 4), a reflective discussion of urban fringe management in the UK (Section 5), and some brief conclusions (Section 6).

2. Summary literature review

2.1. Introduction

Two partly overlapping themes can be identified in the literature on policy towards the urban fringe, the one, focused on statutory town planning policies and the green belt is dominant and longstanding, while the other, focused on less formal urban fringe management policies, is more ephemeral and more limited. In offering a brief literature review, the overall aim is not to look to cover all the work in the field nor to provide a comprehensive synthesis look to cover all the work in the field, but rather to highlight a limited number of important issues which provide a working context for the main body of the paper. The works cited are in chronological order in an attempt to provide some sense of sequencing.

2.2. Town planning and green belt policies

Thomas (1963) traced the origins of the London green belt from a series of green girdles and parkways in the early years of the twentieth century, through the London

County Council's launch of a green belt scheme in 1935, through Abercrombie's 1944 Greater London Plan, which contained proposals for a green belt up to ten miles wide, through the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, to green belt extensions into the early 1960s. Abercrombie's aims, for example, were to restrict the growth of London, (with the overspill population being channelled in to eight new towns, and a number of expanded towns), and to actively encourage agriculture, create recreational facilities, and enhance the natural beauty of the area. By way of a conclusion Thomas (1963) argued the ultimate success of the metropolitan green belt would depend on finding alternative sites for overspill population, and upon resolving the intense competition for land in urban fringes harmoniously.

Arguably the seminal work on the working and impact of the town and country planning system was published by Hall et al. (1973). Here the aim was to try to reach a definitive verdict on the town and country planning system created in 1947. There was a clear recognition that urban areas had been contained and that losses of rural land to urban land had been restricted, but that the effect of containment varied from one part of England to another. Perhaps more critically, the main impacts of the introduction of the planning system, namely physical containment, separation of residence and workplace, were in certain aspects perverse and certainly unintended by the planners.

Thomas and Littlewood (2010) acknowledged that 'the green belt idea was being questioned as an effective way of managing the protection and development of urban fringe areas', and argued that a new concept 'green infrastructure' offered 'a better way to plan and manage' urban fringe areas, not least in that it might 'allow for more sophisticated and dynamic understandings of such spaces' and 'enable the identification and quantification of formerly under-appreciated assets of the urban fringe, including newly identified economic benefits.' However, by way of a conclusion, Thomas and Littlewood (2010) argued that green infrastructure was not a comfortable fit alongside green belt policies, and that it was certainly too soon to suggest that green infrastructure could displace the green belt in guiding the protection and development of the urban fringe. More recently, Mace (2018) argued the green belt around London has effectively constrained land supply and has contributed to the housing crisis in the capital and in the South East of England.

Bishop et al. (2020a) suggested that "the Green Belt is one of the great achievements of post-war planning. It has prevented urban sprawl and ribbon development and is undoubtedly popular with the public", but questioned if it was still fit for purpose at a time of continuing urban growth and potentially catastrophic climate change and natural resource depletion. Further, Bishop et al. (2020b) argued that despite its undoubted achievements, it was time to review the green belt as an instrument of urban planning and landscape design, and that, urban agriculture, blue and green infrastructures, and forestation were the new ecological design imperatives driving urban policymaking. In a similar vein, Kirkby and Scott (2023) recognised that the primary goal of green belt policies in England had looked to prevent urban sprawl, but claimed that there had been recent calls from researchers to widen the scope of green belts to contribute to climate action and the provision of ecosystem services.

2.3. Urban fringe management projects

In looking to more informal policies, Jones (1987a) argued that it had been “increasingly apparent” that the establishment of green belts had failed to tackle a number of important land management problems in urban fringe areas. In many areas, these problems were seen to include piecemeal new housing development leading to the fragmentation of farming land and the deterioration of landscape quality, and to an increasing numbers of farmers with land close to towns and cities who were reporting suffering from disturbance, trespass and vandalism. Jones (1987a) reported that in 1972 the then Countryside Commission (since amalgamed with the Rural Development Commission to form the Countryside Agency) pioneered the introduction of an urban fringe management project in the Bollin Valley, to the south of the Manchester conurbation. Here the Countryside Commission worked with local authorities, farmers, and local conservation and recreation groups to provide more opportunities for informal recreation while protecting farming interests. During the mid-1970s two similar experimental urban fringe management projects were established on the fringes of Greater London at Barnet and Havering.

Elsewhere in the UK, Jones (1987b) outlined the development of three urban fringe management projects established around parts of Edinburgh and Glasgow. The Clyde Calders project was launched in 1983, and both the Edinburgh Green Belt Improvement Programme and the Easterhouse Countryside project were established two years later. The Clyde Calders project was as an inter local authority initiative covering some 40 square kilometres of countryside around the south-east of the Clydeside conurbation between Glasgow, Coatbridge, Airdrie, Hamilton and Motherwell. Each project had its own specific aim, and the Clyde Calders project, for example looked to ameliorate pressures on the countryside created by urban development via actions to sustain and enhance the viability of agriculture, to realise the recreational potential of the local countryside, to achieve the rehabilitation of derelict land, to enhance and conserve the ecological structure of the area, and to harness environmental education to benefit the countryside. The author concluded that all three projects were beginning to contribute to environmental improvement and land management in the urban fringe around Glasgow and Edinburgh, and that while they were low budget ventures, their ultimate success would depend on the completion of a much costlier complimentary programme of derelict land reclamation.

Looking outside the UK, Parker and Murayama (2006) examined the transfer and operation of the UK’s Groundwork model to Japan. Their work focused on two case studies in the Mishima and Koura prefectures, and explored the wider cultural and political issues facing the transfer of environmental action programmes. The authors concluded that while there might be significant benefits in employing the Groundwork model, there were significant barriers to the adoption of Groundwork within Japan, not least the different socio-political context for the spread of community-based schemes, and that national government would be necessary if Groundwork Japan to emulate the original UK model.

3. Materials and methods

The source material for this exploratory paper is drawn exclusively from secondary sources and while this can be seen as something of a departure from the conventional research norm the author believes it is appropriate in an exploratory paper. More specifically, the source material is a series of Groundwork reports and publications, available on the Internet. The Groundwork publications were “Our History” (Groundwork, 2024a); “Groundwork at 40” (Groundwork, 2024b); “From the Ground Up” (Groundwork, 2022); “Climate and Nature” (Groundwork, 2024c); “Ensuring Equity in the Green Transition” (Groundwork, 2023); “2023 Annual Report and Financial Statements” (Groundwork, 2023b). the author drew on these publications in exploring both the Research Questions but rather than referring in detail to these publication throughout the presentation of results below but he only specifically cited these publications in the text, when quoting directly from them.

The author took the view that the Groundwork reports and publications cited above were the organisation’s stories of their history and achievements and he looked to employ a loose version of narrative analysis. Here the author took his approach from Butina (2015), for whom “narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research in which the stories themselves become the raw data”. As such, the author was also partly following Ameel et al. (2023) who argued that urban planning was intimately bound up with storytelling. Further Butina (2015) acknowledged that while narratives are often collected through interviews, emphasised that other forms of data collection, such as documents may be used, and argued that reviewing was an important element in the data collection process. In the current exploratory study, the author’s review of the Groundwork documents generates the source material.

4. Results

4.1. Research question 1: The initial aims and rationale of groundwork initiative

The initial experimental urban fringe management projects in England outlined above provided the stimulus for the registration of Groundwork as a charity in 1981 and for the launch of Operation Groundwork at Knowsley and Saint Helens on Merseyside, the following year. This initial Groundwork area included large tracts of open countryside and good quality farmland, a number of small areas of woodland, some 25 square kilometres of heritage landscape, modern overspill housing estates, and a number of old tips and colliery pitheads. Operation Groundwork was jointly funded from a variety of public sources, but the long-term aim was to be financially self-supporting through sponsorship, receipt of standard public sector grants, and the marketing of landscape design and environmental management services. In 1982 the Government announced plans to extend the initial Groundwork initiative to five other areas in the North West of England, namely, Macclesfield, Rossendale, Salford-Trafford, and Wigan, all established in 1983, and Oldham-Rochdale, established in 1984. Just over a decade later there were 39 Groundwork projects across England and Wales, and these projects encompassed 120 towns and cities, so that 11 million people lived under the Groundwork umbrella.

All the Groundwork projects, were run by locally based trusts, and a national Groundwork Foundation, established in 1985, provided advice, technical services and continuing support for existing trusts. Essentially the trusts were run as businesses but they also had charitable status and they were perhaps best described as not-for-profit environmental businesses. Each trust had a management board of trustees drawn from the business community, local authorities, landowners, voluntary organisations and the local community. Trusts were responsible for the management of their own income and expenditure and, while much of the initial funding came from the public sector via central and local government, as individual trusts became more fully established, so they were able to raise more of their income from the private sector. In 1991–1992, the Amber Valley Trust in Derbyshire, for example, received 83% of its £270,000 income from the public sector while its counterpart in St Helens-Knowsley secured 70% of its £1 million income from the sale of its environmental and project management services and from commercial sponsorship.

The Groundwork mission was to achieve the sustained regeneration, improvement and management of the urban fringe via the development of partnerships which looked to empower people, businesses and organisations to maximise their impact and contribution to environmental, economic and social well-being. More generally, the initial Groundwork projects had four strategic aims, namely:

- the physical environmental improvement of landscapes and habitats;
- the conservation of natural resources and the improvement of the efficiency with which environmental capital was used;
- the integration of economy and environment with the goal of improving the efficiency and sustainability of economic wealth creation.
- education and community involvement in all Groundwork activities.

Under the Groundwork umbrella all the individual projects developed their own specific aims designed to meet local opportunities and challenges, but there were a number of common themes. Large scale reclamation schemes, designed to bring land back into productive and beneficial use were a major feature in many projects. One of Groundwork's largest early reclamation schemes was the restoration of Bold Moss, re-named Colliers' Moss, a former colliery site, from largely derelict land, to a community woodland, on the east side of Saint Helens. Within the Saint Helens-Knowsley area, an abandoned clay pit was turned into a commercial trout fishery, and a former quarry was reclaimed to form a country park with sporting facilities. In the Sponden Valley to the east of Rochdale, a derelict sewage works was reclaimed to form a nature reserve. Schemes designed to provide and improve recreational access and facilities on the urban fringe were a common element in Groundwork projects. The creation of greenways, linking urban areas and the countryside was important in developing the recreational potential of, and in improving the public's access to, many urban fringe areas. The disused railway line between Macclesfield and Middlewood, for example, was reclaimed and landscaped as a linear park and walkway/cycle route.

The majority of the Groundwork projects undertook small scale landscape and environmental improvement schemes and volunteer work was an important element in many such schemes. In the Oldham-Rochdale area, Groundwork adopted a strong campaign-based approach to generate volunteers, community groups and school children, and the project's work programme included dry stone walling, hedge laying

and tree planting, fencing, footpath construction and the clearing up of fly tipping sites. The restoration of woodlands and the improvement of hedgerows were widely used to enhance landscapes, shelter wildlife habitats, and improve the security of farmland, and within the Rossendale area, for example, there was extensive tree planting and neglected woodland were brought under management control.

4.2. Research question 2: The current focus and future directions of groundwork

In some areas the shortage of suitable recreational facilities for teenagers and children was seen to lead to, often wilful, encroachment onto farming land, and this led to the extension of Groundwork activities to include vacant land within built-up areas. New recreational facilities, including a BMX track were constructed, for example, at the re-named Stockbridge Village within the Saint Helens-Knowsley project. More generally, the growth in the number of Groundwork projects was accompanied by an increasing focus on environmental problems within towns and cities, as well as those on the urban fringe, and as businesses became increasingly involved in Groundwork, so there was greater emphasis on environmental improvement in promoting economic activity.

During the next three decades the scope and the focus of Groundwork expanded and in 2021 Groundwork was rebranded as Groundwork Sustainability Services. Here Groundwork's recognised that customers increasingly wanted to buy goods and services from environmentally friendly businesses, and that governments were bringing forward legislation to help businesses to meet pressing climate targets. These factors were seen to be important in not only enabling companies both to manage environmental risks and harness new business opportunities, but also in contributing to enhanced environmental community agendas more sustainably. The services offered by Groundwork include environmental consultancy, management systems, nature and biodiversity solutions for business, health and safety consultancy, local sustainability networks, and environment, health and safety legal compliance.

Groundwork's environmental consultancy services embrace carbon management, environmental training, work on resource and energy efficiency, pollution prevention and environmental accreditation. In addressing carbon management, for example, Groundwork claims to work with companies to calculate their carbon emissions and to help them to work out a pathway to net-zero emissions. More specifically, Groundwork reported on work with Woodbridge Tide Mill Museum in Suffolk to reduce its carbon footprint, and on supporting East Suffolk Council to become carbon neutral by 2030. Groundwork's environmental training has often been focused on the gap between an organisation's environmental ambitions and those of its workforce. Here, Groundwork worked with Rochdale Borough Council to roll out a carbon literacy training programme.

In many areas Groundwork is also actively involved in pollution prevention. In Cheshire, for example, Groundwork delivered a project designed to identify, and address, the underlying causes of industrial pollution from premises in the Weaver-Gowey catchment area, in partnership with the Environment Agency, United Utilities, and the private sector. Two pollution hot spots were identified in Winsford and

Sandbach, and over 100 pollution prevention recommendations were made to participating companies, and 25 improvements were implemented over a 6 week period. Groundwork also reported on working on water pollution risks with 22 companies on the Bramhall Moor, Stakehill and Roundthorn industrial estates which affected the river catchments of the Irwell and Upper Mersey rivers. The measures proposed to tackle the identified pollution problems included the removal of skips being used for the long-term storage of waste, the creation of new spill stations on the shop floor, and training focused on dealing with spills, and these measures have led to improvements in the quality of local river water.

While many of Groundwork's schemes have had a strong corporate flavour, there is also an enduring focus on people, often illustrated at an individual level, and more specifically under the banner of "changing lives" (Groundwork, 2024b). Groundwork's report on Elba Park, a country park in Sunderland developed on the site of the former Lambton Coke works, which is managed by Groundwork, for example, featured the involvement of a pensioner who had suffered Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, attributed to his military service, and who initially worked as a conservation volunteer and then subsequently played a role in the park's management. In a similar vein, one of the sessional workers at the Norton Grange Community Centre in Stockton, where Groundwork runs an eco-shop and provides an active play centre for children and lifelong learning classes for adults, recounted how she was initially drawn into the work of the centre during the Covid-19 pandemic, and how it had brought a beneficial impact to her mental health.

More collectively, Groundwork claimed that "taking a community centred approach to policy and practice will be vital to levelling up, addressing health inequalities, and supporting a just transition to a low carbon economy" (Groundwork (2022b)). Here, Groundwork outlined some of the different models, namely, community hubs; training and capacity building; community relations; connecting communities with nature; volunteer action for learning and employment; and community food growing; are applied to its community work. In illustrating community food growing, for example, Groundwork outlines how it looks to support residents to grow, harvest and cook food in five sites in Luton. The focus is on planning and cooking low cost nutritious meals to help improve diets and general levels of nutrition and on making contributions to the local food bank and to helping low income families.

Looking to the future, Groundwork's Strategy 2023–2028 (Groundwork, 2024d) codified its current mission, namely, "Groundwork supports practical action to create a fair and green future in which people, places and nature thrive." More specifically, the breadth of Groundwork's current approach is captured in its belief that "working with local communities and businesses to help them build their capacity and resilience is vital if we are to tackle hardship, achieve a just transition to net-zero and help nature recover in a way that reduces inequality and leads to better work and healthier, happier lives" (Groundwork, 2024d).

5. Discussion

Attempts to evaluate the achievements and success of the initial Groundwork projects face difficulties in that key performance indicators were never built into individual projects and there has never been a formal, annual reporting process. However, in this exploratory paper the focus was not on detailed evaluation, rather on simply providing some illustrations of Groundwork's activities. While Groundwork has stood the test of time over the last 45 years, its scope and focus has changed. Initially focused on environmental improvements, on the provision of a range of opportunities for recreation, and on reconciling environmental conflict, on the urban fringe in the north west of England, Groundwork has since developed a national profile, broadened its initial focus to embrace social issues and business agendas and extended its operations into urban areas. While Groundwork is no longer exclusively focused on the urban fringe, many of its schemes continue to have an impact on areas on the edge of town and cities. In many ways the changes summarised above suggest that Groundwork has proved its evolving value over time.

That said, three wider issues, namely, the relationship between planning and urban fringe management, Groundwork's reporting process, and its approach to net-zero emissions and nature loss, merit attention and discussion. Firstly, the most recent version of England's "National Planning Policy Framework" (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2023) make no mention of the urban fringe, or of Groundwork. Outside of England, neither the urban fringe nor Groundwork merit any attention in "Planning Policy Wales" (Welsh Government, 2024). While Groundwork (2024) has worked with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to deliver the "neighbourhood planning programme that helps local groups to develop a neighbourhood plan", Groundwork's strategy for 2023–2028 (Groundwork, 2024d), for example, makes no mention of town planning, and in the past it Groundwork, and its local trusts, often seem to have been suspicious of developing close working relationships with local planning authorities.

There is also little evidence that local authorities drew on the experiences of Groundwork in drawing up their own urban fringe plans. The Urban Fringe Action Plan for Southern Swindon, prepared for the North Wessex Downs Council of Partners, and sponsored by three local authorities, (Land Use Consultants, 2006), described the urban fringe as a "forgotten area", and outlined a number of problems (e.g., development pressures, disturbance and disruption) facing this area. However, in seeking potential solutions to these problems, and in developing an action plan for the urban fringe there is no mention of the Groundwork experience.

Nearly two decades ago, on the academic side, Gallent et al. (2006) acknowledged that planning at the edge of cities had been largely concerned with containment, but suggested that "planning had been a relatively inert force at the edge; seeking to contain but not seeking to improve or to manage", and that it could do more to create a range of social, economic and environmental opportunities at the fringe. More specifically, Gallent et al. (2006) argued the case for "spatial planning." Such an approach was seen to be about reconciling competing interests and about much more than controlling the use of land. At that time, Gallent et al. (2006) argued that the move towards a more "responsive planning system that reflects community

concerns, works more effectively with business, and through better design, is concerned with place making.” By way of a conclusion, Gallent et al. (2006) claimed that everything that planning at the edge has hitherto lacked, “long-term vision, integrated development, the management of rapid and complex change, and negotiated delivery is neatly parcelled into the notion of spatial planning,”. However, the government’s abolition of spatial planning strategies in 2010 meant that such ideas were not put to the test.

Secondly, the frequency of Groundwork’s public reporting on its progress and achievements has not been consistent over time, or between individual trusts, and there has been little independent evaluation of these achievements. On the one hand, information about Groundwork has passed into the public domain via a number of reports, many of which provided the empirical material for this paper, but these reports were not always structured according to Groundwork’s goals, rather they essentially recounted various facets of what might be described as the Groundwork story. As such this might be seen, at best, as a limited reporting process, which provides valuable insights into Groundwork’s operations, but does not allow meaningful comparisons over time or between individual trusts.

On the other hand, there has been only limited independent reporting on, or evaluation of Groundwork’s achievements. By way of an exception, the Centre for Regional, Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University and GFA Consulting (a German Consultancy), for example, were commissioned to undertake a review to explore Groundwork’s contribution to neighbourhood renewal. This evaluation was largely based on eight case studies of individual Groundwork trusts, and the results of this evaluation were published by Fordham et al. (2022), writing under the banner of the Joseph Roundtree Foundation. Inter alia, the authors concluded that Groundworks strengths included a capacity to develop trust in neglected communities, local flexibility, and independence of action, and an understanding of the policy process, and how to influence policy makers, while weaknesses included uneven links to the private sector, difficulties in recruiting, and retaining staff, and relative inattention to monitoring. Overall, the review’s messages for Groundwork were seen to be “extremely positive”, but there was a warning that Groundwork “must ensure it maintains internal capacity”, not least by “matching staff specifications to the new agenda”, and by “clarifying the circumstances where a long-term presence in a neighbourhood is required” (Fordham et al., 2002).

Thirdly, either implicitly or explicitly, sustainability has long been Groundwork theme, and its recently expressed mission to tackle hardship, and to achieve a just transition to net-zero and in helping nature recover in a way that reduces inequality, is certainly consistent with sustainable development. That said, at best Groundwork’s contribution to tackling hardship, to achieving net zero and to combating the loss of nature, may well be marginal and mixed. Marginal, for example, in that many Groundwork schemes are small scale and while the creation of pond may improve the local environment, its contribution to tackling national, let alone, international nature loss, may be very limited. Mixed, in that where a tree planting scheme or a greenway is designed to enhance amenity or to improve access for residents in conjunction with the development of a number of new houses, then the residential areas may have been

created on previously greenfield land, and the new residents may generate greenhouse gas emissions on longer journeys to work, or on their shopping trips.

More radically, there are arguments that many of the problems that sustainable development looks to tackle, such as alleviating hardship, transitioning to net-zero carbon emissions, and tackling the loss of nature, can only be addressed by systemic change. Such arguments, for example, would be rooted in the belief that nature loss can only be effectively addressed by a shift to a new global economic model, focused on cooperative endeavour rather than capitalism, on prioritising the natural welfare of the planet, in the transition to a truly sustainable future. There is little current evidence of enthusiasm across the UK for such a change, while paradoxically, Groundwork's promotion of its work to contribute to net-zero carbon emissions and to tackle nature loss might be seen suggest that these problems were being addressed within the existing economic system, and thus to negate the need for radical systemic change.

6. Conclusion

Groundwork was launched in 1981 and was initially an experimental approach designed to find new ways of improving the environment on the urban fringe in the north west of England. The Groundwork projects, were run by locally based trusts, and a national Groundwork Foundation, established in 1985, provided advice, technical services and continuing support for existing trusts. As Trusts grew in number, the range of their work expanded within towns and cities, and began to embrace social and business, as well as environmental concerns, but many of their projects still had an impact on the urban fringe. More recently, groundwork has adopted a number of sustainable development agendas, including social inclusion, the transition to net-zero carbon missions, and looking to combat nature loss.

The author acknowledges that his approach has its limitations, not least that its source material is drawn exclusively from Groundwork publications posted on the Internet. That said, the author firmly believes that it not only offers some valuable exploratory insights into the work of Groundwork, and more particularly of its contribution to the management of the urban fringe, but that it also may provide a platform for future research. Looking to the future, such research agendas might include empirical research into the long-term impact of Groundwork's initial work on the selected urban fringe areas, on the public's continuing use of recreational facilities and greenways created by Groundwork, and on the extent to which both local planning authorities, and private planning consultancies have looked to introduce the Groundwork experiences into their planning policies and strategies.

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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