**The nature of urban rural relationships: Rethinking the urban-rural divide as new opportunity spaces[[1]](#footnote-2)**

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This talk is about responding positively to changing circumstances and, in so doing, using change to best advantage. The current economic and environmental agendas require us all to think and act differently in the way we make strategy, policy and decisions. Pretty easy for an academic to say; yet difficult for businesses, agencies and communities on the ground to actually do in practice. But as evolution dictates only the most adaptable will survive.

So in continuing this theme of acting and thinking differently I am not starting with a powerpoint lecture! The creation of Local Enterprise Partnerships offers a new opportunity space to think differently about development in our urban and rural spaces. However, to do that we need to have new glasses to start viewing the potential today within the Greater Birmingham LEP in a different way, responding positively to new opportunity spaces. So let’s take off our glasses and try my prescription pair as I try to illuminate some the blurred images you might now be seeing. These new lenses are hopefully not rose tinted nor politically tinted and are certainly not from spec savers.

The Local Enterprise Partnership is about seeing and shaping a new voluntary partnership from the outset. A partnership where agencies, businesses and communities buy into an idea where collective working can promote greater economic prosperity; where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. But we are all no doubt involved in lots of partnerships at present which make significant demands on our time; so is there anything fundamentally different about this one and why you should engage with it?

Probably not unless we actually start thinking and doing things in a different way. For example, the very fact that it is a non-statutory body suggests that it has to be really valuable for people to invest their precious time in it. Yet it is this non-statutory aspect that arguably gives it the very flexibility and adaptability that actually might stimulate new ways of thinking and working.

We are currently involved (Birmingham Environmental Partnership and Birmingham City University and others) in research funded by Rural Economy and Land Use Programme to look at managing environmental change in the rural–urban fringe; a neglected, messy, exciting and dynamic space. This requires us to look and work across several boundaries; rural/urban, academic/practice, natural /social science and different institutional sectors. In my view that experience offers some useful insights to the theme of today as the fringe itself represents a massive opportunity space ; yet rarely is it planned for as a space in its own right; it is a place to meet the needs of the growing city.

So in the spirit of today I am not advocating some elusive new idea or grandiose concept; rather re-working existing ideas, research and practice into some coherent thoughts/lessons that might help us develop ideas and unite across the urban –rural divide. So to start this journey let’s confront six key stereotypes which, in my view, inhibit constructive progress in urban and rural thinking.

1. **That there is a rural and urban divide.** People live their lives in different ways today and many actions and behaviours cut across traditional rural and urban boundaries. Compartmentalisation hides more than it reveals and indeed we need to consider more about the interactions and flows between people, place and environment. We need to understand the linkages as an interlinked system of a myriad of decisions. Rural and urban are increasingly interpenetrated to the extent that they cease to mean anything.
2. **Economics alone should not drive the partnership idea**. If our agreed starting point is that we want to maximise development opportunities in the LEP, we need to embrace the maxim that development is as much about the development of people as much as it is about business and as much as it is about place, and as much as it is about environment. Yet we readily fall into the trap of valuing what we measure rather than measuring what we value.
3. **That any single scale is the only scale of consideration**. In the past we had the dominance of the regional scale and today we see huge emphasis on the local. The current government mantra of localism, localism and localism is dangerous as surely we have to recognise the importance of neighbourhood, local, regional, national, European and global scales in the opportunities provided by the new LEP. We look outward to Europe as much as inward to our local communities of interest. Working across scales collectively is crucial to planning a long term future.
4. **That local people and communities are all NIMBYs and opposed to development.**  Much of my own research has shown that most people want ‘necessary’ development based on good evidence of need. But often vociferous minority groups are able to manipulate the planning process. The key question is then more about the way we promote and manage participation and provide the necessary information to our stakeholders and communities to enable good and transparent decisions to be made.
5. **That money makes the world go round**. Many groups spend time chasing different pots of monies to continually develop new programmes and strategies within their business or agency. Chasing money has specific requirements and can create a culture of dependency which may lead to vulnerability if funding is suddenly withdrawn. Building institutions and systems which are self sustaining is key to longevity. However, all too often structures are built solely on the grants and need continually to secure more to stay solvent.
6. **That planning and environmental concerns are somehow inimical to the needs of the development industry.** Increasingly all professions are seeing the benefits of up front negotiations and joined up ideas. This focus on inclusion about future plans at the outset allows many problems to be addressed long before they become conflicts. Indeed the environment can be at the heart of exciting new developments.

So in summary these stereotypes allow a tentative set of criteria to be advanced to help us think about realising new opportunity spaces in the new LEP. 1. Cross or challenge traditional rural/urban boundaries; 2. Promote an integrated approach embracing environmental, economic and social concerns; 3. Work across traditional sectors (e.g. planning, economic development, landscape, community; 4. Work across different scales; 5. Involve different stakeholders within an inclusive process and 6. Take a long term approach which is adaptable to change.

1. This talk is based on ongoing research as part of the RELU IV programme on managing Environmental Change at the Rural–Urban fringe. For further details and full research team details please see <http://www.bcu.ac.uk/research/-centres-of-excellence/centre-for-environment-and-society/projects/relu> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)