



## 'A good geography is whatever it needs to be'

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## **“A good geography is whatever it needs to be”: the Atlantic Gateway and evolving spatial imaginaries in North West England**

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### **Introduction**

This chapter examines the sub-regional scale strategic spatial imaginaries that have been initiated in the area connecting the Liverpool and Manchester conurbations in North West England. Contemporary attempts to promulgate the notion of the area as an identifiable territory for the governance of economic development and planning policy are rooted in longstanding concerns about a lack of institutional cohesion, weakly developed political voice and economic decline. The desire to overcome a legacy of fractious relationships between the civic leaders of the region’s two principal cities dates back in some accounts to the opening of the Manchester Ship Canal in 1894 and inland Manchester’s wish to allow large ships to circumvent Liverpool harbour duties (Leech, 1907). More recently there have been periodic attempts to encourage the two cities to cooperate with each other and with the surrounding region, but countervailing pressures, linked to inter-urban competition and the fragmented nature of regional governance, have meant the two have often pursued separate economic development strategies. Nevertheless, attempts to cultivate new spatial imaginaries have continued, most recently in the form of private sector led proposals to develop strategic sub-regional thinking around a new inter-city economic development corridor, the Atlantic Gateway, along the axis of the Ship Canal.

The Atlantic Gateway has been far from the only alternate spatial imaginary developed in this period. The chapter begins with a broad overview of the various attempts to create new soft space governance arrangements for the Liverpool-Manchester corridor since the

1970s, before focusing in more detail on the experience of the Atlantic Gateway since its establishment in 2008. In doing so, the chapter draws on 28 interviews involving 34 key policy actors undertaken in 2012-2014. Some of those interviewed had during the course of their careers worked in multiple organisations in the area in the period since the 1970s. Interviewees came from the public, private, and community sectors, and included people involved with the Atlantic Gateway and Peel Holdings at senior levels. A workshop on sub-regional environmental issues was held in October 2012, involving eight stakeholders from government agencies, NGOs, academia and the private sector.

One of the findings of the research is the importance of a group of influential thinkers and actors in the region, who have been key to a succession of soft space governance initiatives. Some amongst this group of policy opinion-formers can trace the origins of their professional careers to the emergence of the Mersey Belt concept in the early 1970s and its rediscovery in the 1990s. Others were involved in one way or another with the Mersey Basin Campaign, a highly influential environmental organisation that had many of the classic features of a soft space. Some of them are now prominent in work associated with the Atlantic Gateway. Where much of the literature on soft spaces to date has focused on its usage in spatial planning, urban regeneration and European Commission funded initiatives (see Chapter One), this chapter reveals the importance of the interplay between these policy-led stimuli for innovation and experimentation, and the parallel role played by environmental organisations in the North West of England in creating and working with soft spaces.

### **The hard and soft spaces of planning in the Mersey Belt: a short contextual introduction**

The study area for this chapter is the loosely defined space sometimes known as the Mersey Belt or Mersey Basin, and more recently as the Atlantic Gateway. Broadly speaking, it covers the conurbations of Liverpool and Manchester and the intervening, urbanised area that links them. The chapter begins with a brief resume of the statutory spaces of planning during the study period, with a focus on sub-regional and regional issues.

In the English planning system, local government has long played a central role in strategic planning and implementing planning policies at the local level. After local government reform in 1974, responsibility for strategic plan preparation lay with county and metropolitan county tiers of government, to which more detailed local plans produced by lower tier district and borough councils were required to adhere. Subsequent local government reforms have seen a series of incremental shifts towards unitary local planning authorities in many areas, alongside remaining two-tier structures elsewhere.

At the regional scale there have been experiments in bringing together local government actors to help create regional plans with varying levels of statutory force (see Table 1 for a timeline). Regional planning enjoyed a brief period of policy prominence in the early 1970s, via the non-statutory, but at the time very influential, Strategic Plan for the North West produced (North West Joint Planning Team, 1974). After some years in which interest in regional planning fell into abeyance, local and national policy actors began from the early 1990s to explore sub-national governance arrangements for planning and economic development (see, for example, Pike & Tomaney, 2009). Initially, this took the form of voluntaristic efforts within the North West to develop discretionary cross-sectoral governance structures, but more concrete top-down reforms materialised after the election of the Blair government in 1997. The period saw the advent of Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS), introduced after 2004 to put regional scale strategic planning on a statutory footing for the first time. In the parallel area of economic development, Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), created in 1999, were responsible for producing regional economic development strategies, which coexisted – sometimes uneasily – with regional land-use plans. Before their abolition following the election of a Conservative-led national government in 2010, RDAs were proposed as the vehicles around which integrated regional land-use planning and economic development strategies would eventually be.

The surge of regional institutional experimentation through the 1990s began to diminish, initially as limited central government enthusiasm for elected regional governance began to dissipate and then more decisively after 2010 with the dismantling of what remained of

the inherited system of regional economic development and planning (see, for example, Boddy & Hickman, 2013; Pemberton & Morphet, 2013). The abolition of most of the regional tier of governance left something of a gap between the statutory spaces of national and local government (Baker & Wong, 2013). The result is that interest in sub-national territorial governance has continued in various ways. In recognition of the need for some form of continued extra-local strategic planning on land-use matters, the Localism Act of 2011 stipulated a ‘duty to cooperate’ for neighbouring authorities. This was intended to encourage local actors to develop locally-relevant modes of strategic cooperation as an antidote to the formulaic and unimaginative approaches said to characterise earlier statutory regional plans and strategies.

**Table 1: Time line of key moments in the evolution of territorial governance in North West England**

1974	Local Government reforms – creation of Greater Manchester and Merseyside metropolitan councils, plus various changes to boundaries of Cheshire and Lancashire, with areas lost and gained. For Cheshire: boundary changes in 1974 saw the transfer of Wirral to Merseyside and eastern parts of the county to Greater Manchester and Derbyshire and the addition of Warrington and district.
1974	North West Strategy agreed by the region’s constituent local authorities, including proposals for the development of the Mersey Belt.
1986	Abolition of the two-tier metropolitan counties in England, including Greater Manchester and Merseyside county councils, and their replacement by respectively ten and five unitary authorities.
1989	North West Business Leadership Team (NWBLT) established to develop a private sector perspective on economic development policy in the region.
1992	North West Regional Association (NWRA) of local authorities established to develop intergovernmental strategy in relation to policy areas like planning and economic development.
1994	Creation of the cross-sector North West Partnership, with input from NWBLT and NWRA, leading to the publication of a first North West strategy in 1993.
1998	Creation of North West Regional Development Agency (an economic development agency) and North West Regional Assembly (an indirectly elected regional chamber) by the Blair Labour government, as part of a wider programme of development of regional governance across England introduced under the Regional Development Agencies Act of 1998.
1998	In Cheshire, Warrington and Halton became unitary authorities, whilst Blackpool and Blackburn and Darwen also became unitary authorities, seceding from Lancashire County Council. Elsewhere in Cheshire and Lancashire two-tier local government remained.
2004	Northern Way initiative created, producing in the same year the Northern Way Strategy that designated eight new city-regions across the North.
2008	Abolition of the North West Regional Assembly in the wake of diminishing interest in political regionalism from central government, following a referendum in which proposals for the establishment of a directly elected assembly for the North East region were rejected.
2009	Cheshire County Council and its six remaining constituent district councils were abolished and replaced with two unitary authorities to serve West and East Cheshire.
2010-2	Coalition government’s closure of the North West Development Agency (NWDA) and the repeal of legislation enabling statutory planning on a regional basis via Regional Spatial Strategies.
2011	Greater Manchester Combined Authority created for the city-region, and subsequently allocated

	enhanced power and responsibility for nominated devolved areas, including transport infrastructure and economic development but not planning.
2011	Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) established as the main vehicle for sub-national economic development in England, replacing the former Regional Development Agencies. Three LEPs – Cheshire and Warrington, Greater Manchester and the Liverpool City Region – are represented on the Atlantic Gateway board.

Recognition of the need for continued capacity in respect of sub-national governance, in the wake of the abolition of regional structures, also provides part of the explanation for moves to place previously discretionary city-region structures on a more formal footing. Following central government's abolition in 1986 of the short-lived metropolitan counties established for Merseyside and Greater Manchester in 1974, discretionary intergovernmental cooperation across the now unitary authorities in each of the two conurbations emerged as a means of continuing to manage policy at the city-regional level. This was weakly developed in Merseyside, but the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities developed after 1986 as an important vehicle for agreeing city-regional strategy. This left Manchester much better placed when national government sought to enhance city-regional governance arrangements – in effect, embarking on a process of hardening the soft spaces of governance that had emerged to fill the vacuum resulting from the abolition of metropolitan government. In 2011 the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) became the first statutory city-regional body in England outside of London. The GMCA assumed important roles in economic development, regeneration and transport, but was given no statutory planning powers. It has a very limited degree of fiscal autonomy, linked largely to a bespoke agreement with national government, as part of a wider programme of City Deals for several English urban areas, to devolve specified powers and permit experimentation around new forms of revenue-raising capacity in selected policy areas (see Deas, 2014 for a fuller account). In the Liverpool city-region a bid for statutory Combined Authority status was submitted in 2013, covering six constituent local authorities: the five original boroughs of Merseyside plus neighbouring Halton in Cheshire.

The growing significance of city-regional governance was underlined further with the advent in 2010-11 of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) for both Merseyside and Greater Manchester. These formed part of a national network of business-led economic

development organisations established by the Conservative-led government. In both cases, the geographies employed were self-defined, reflecting local perception of the realities of economic and political space. Their effect was to split the Mersey Belt into three main areas, with the city-regions at its western and eastern edges separated by Cheshire and Warrington LEP.

The complexity of the North West's changing political and institutional geography reflects the combination of multiple reforms to the hard spaces of local and regional government. Alongside these reforms, an array of layered soft spaces have emerged, as local areas have sought to build capacity by developing alliances around new territorial institutions and policy initiatives aimed at improving the region's environmental, economic and social fortunes. The next section of the chapter reviews the evolution of soft spaces by tracking the Mersey Belt's transition from a largely public-sector led space to one in which business interests loom larger, as part of a rebadged Atlantic Gateway development corridor.

### **Mersey Belt politics: “NIMBY plus envy equals zero”?**

The Mersey Belt made its first formal appearance in the 1974 Strategic Plan for the North West as a loosely designated sub-region stretching between Liverpool and Manchester, running east-west along the Manchester Ship Canal and the River Mersey (Figure 1). Initially the Mersey Belt appears to have been envisaged as a means of managing projected population growth in the area and as a vehicle for addressing strategic economic, social and environmental concerns in a more coordinated fashion. Interviews revealed that for young planners at the time it had been an inspirational source document which was to inform much of their subsequent work in the region. One interviewee who was to go on become a key player in a range of soft space highlighted the plan's role in enthusing planning professionals:

I bought my own copy as soon as it came out. For me personally it had a big effect. It was hitting the three key issues, I thought, for our region. One was appalling air quality and that air quality was impacting most at the most disadvantaged. If you look at the smoke and sulphur dioxide maps in there it's just appalling. Secondly the very, very poor quality of the

rivers.... The Mersey particularly was one of the most polluted catchments in England probably and one of the most polluted in Europe. Thirdly was the prevalence of derelict land... So this was quite an important document for me personally... I think that was a view we shared. People were very much aware of it. .... I think we all felt that the focus on the Mersey Belt was entirely proper because... that's where these environmental problems were most concentrated, that's where the people were concentrated. You sort out the one, you help the other, and that was the kind of thinking.

Despite successive efforts to establish the Mersey Belt as a definable territorial unit around which to develop policy, there was never sufficient agreement or political will to translate the concept into an enduring material and institutional form. The absence of an institutional body in turn explains why the Mersey Belt concept became widely known among policy actors but in practice remained an indeterminate entity, lacking a clearly defined rationale or clearly delimited boundaries. There was, as a result, little follow-up work to add flesh to the concept, create ownership of it, or develop meaningful policy provisions for the sub-region.

**Figure 1: The Mersey Belt and its constituent local authority districts**



Source: Adapted from North West Joint Planning Team (1974)



This situation began to change in the early 1990s, as the Mersey Belt concept was reinvigorated via the Greener Growth agenda set out by the regional association of local authorities (NWRA, 1993). The Mersey Belt's re-emergence was further reinforced with the publication of an advisory strategic land-use framework for the North West, Regional Planning Guidance (GONW, 1996), which bore the imprint of both local and national government. It was from this point that debate began to emerge about reformulation of the Mersey Belt idea to include two parallel corridors: one, the Northern Regeneration Corridor, focusing on economic revitalisation, social wellbeing and environmental improvement; and a second, the Southern Crescent, providing opportunity to accommodate existing and future economic growth pressures and associated demand for housing development. The regeneration corridor provided a rare instance of a sub-regional soft space intended in part to address issues of socio-spatial equity. It was to cover the northern part of the Greater Manchester conurbation and extend westwards towards St Helens and the remainder of Merseyside. Here the priority would be to address localised problems of deprivation and to address the problems associated with extensive stocks of derelict and degraded land, plus a legacy of poorly maintained or under-developed infrastructure. The regeneration corridor acted as a counterpoint to the highly contentious proposal for a growth corridor, the Southern Crescent, promoted by the North West Development Agency (NWDA) as a means of accommodating unfulfilled growth pressures in the region. The vision was to be achieved through the provision of swathes of developable land needed to attract inward investment – especially in high value manufacturing – in close proximity to Manchester airport, the national motorway network, and what Halfpenny et al (2004) term the 'good suburbs' of south Manchester and the Cheshire stockbroker belt (DTZ Pineda, 2002).

This twin-track approach could be seen as a sensibly balanced commitment to the promotion of growth, on the one hand, and the stimulation of economic and social revitalisation, on the other. But it quickly fell foul of the region's strained institutional politics, and the sometimes problematic relationship between the two principal regional scale bodies, the NWDA and the North West Regional Assembly, the body responsible for preparing regional planning guidance. While the former had a private sector-led board and a primary mandate to stimulate economic growth, the latter had a broader agenda, informed by its responsibility for strategic land-use planning and its domination by local Labour politicians. Gaining sanction for a

growth focused approach to planning and development in the Southern Crescent necessitated political agreement at both local and regional levels: from Cheshire authorities seeking to relieve land shortages and ease resultant housing market pressures in a context of residents' anxiety about perceived over-development; and from a regional assembly tasked with reconciling conflicting intra-regional interests and promoting socially and environmentally balanced growth.

In many respects the twin-track strategy was one based on *realpolitik* and compromise. In this sense, the Northern Regeneration Corridor was something of an oddity, out of step with the prevailing emphasis of soft spaces on promoting economic development in areas of unconsummated growth potential. But it was also significant as a manifestation of one of the key characteristics of a soft space: the ability of public officials readily to sacrifice it in the face of disquiet. This was the experience of the Southern Crescent in the wake of heated debate at the Examination in Public at which the proposal was considered (Haughton & Counsell, 2004; Deas, 2006). Despite this fraught experience, however, interviewees revealed that many of the policies associated with this initiative continued to be pursued. Nonetheless this early soft space failed to develop into a widely accepted concept around which future policy and governance arrangements could be developed, in large measure because of local political sensitivities around the pursuit of a differentiated approach to growth management. As one former regional official argued in respect of the notion of a bifurcated, two-speed Mersey Belt (interview, 2012):

[It] won't go anywhere because north of the river [Mersey] they're all Labour, so there'll be envy, and south they're all Conservative and so there'll be the politics of Nimby [Not in My Back Yard]. Nimby plus envy equals zero.

It is in this context that subsequent private sector-led proposals were developed for an Atlantic Gateway concept, covering a similar if equally loosely defined geography. Indeed, the history of earlier frustrations in developing the Mersey Belt as a recognised governance space (or spaces) is one to which the main promoters of the Atlantic Gateway were alive, not least because of their involvement in previous attempts to develop the concept (interview, 2013):

It's not new – a lot of what we do is in some ways informed by the history of where we are, that's the geography and that hasn't changed in 150 years. There's always been a view that the whole geography of Liverpool and Manchester is of importance. That has been reflected in planning... [S]ome of this early work goes back to ... the Mersey Belt studies...[and] the whole discussion around... the southern crescent. There has always been an interesting geography... There is a book by Abercrombie where he talks specifically about this geography. So in planning terms it has a heritage all of its own (Director, Atlantic Gateway).

### **The Atlantic Gateway as a growth-focused soft space**

Soft spaces have the potential to foster consensus amongst institutions and actors where there are no major contentious issues at stake. But from its inception in 1974 the Mersey Belt concept was always viewed with suspicion by some. In an academic review published shortly after its publication, Rodgers (1975, 99) deemed the Mersey Belt “an expedient solution”, and the Strategic Plan for the North West of interest only as an imperfect analytical exercise unlikely “ever [to] be taken as the text for the day in making development decisions”. This was a judgement subsequently borne out by the inability to generate traction amongst policy and institutional elites around an agreed institutional form for the Mersey Belt or for subsequent visions of parallel growth and regeneration corridors. It was the failure to develop concrete institutional and governance arrangements for the Mersey Belt as a spatial imaginary which ultimately led to a new soft space experiment, the Atlantic Gateway.

In September 2008, the Peel Group, a major private property and land owner with particular interests in strategic transport infrastructure, launched Ocean Gateway (later rechristened Atlantic Gateway). This was an audacious vision which envisaged investment of £50 billion of public and private monies over 50 years in an area extending along the Manchester Ship Canal corridor, some of it on or adjacent to land owned by Peel. The ambitious aim was “to maximise the potential of the North West as a globally significant region and major driver of the UK economy, using the Ocean Gateway as an economic powerhouse and environmental asset to enhance, strengthen and bring together the Liverpool and Manchester City Regions” (Peel Group, 2009, 2).

Superficially at least, Ocean Gateway represented a resuscitated Mersey Belt, notably in terms of the desire to link the region's principal cities and the wish to pursue a broadly-based strategy that encompassed economic, environmental and social goals. But as interviewees noted, the emphasis was more squarely on inducing market-driven economic growth and bolstering the area's competitiveness by capitalising on untapped economic potential. Whereas the Mersey Belt in its initial form emphasised internal policy coordination and enhanced intergovernmental cooperation, the focus of the reoriented Gateway was explicitly and consciously external, seeking to compete with international rivals for private investment, skilled workers and prestige.

The territorial definition of Ocean Gateway was imprecise and loosely articulated. Its boundaries from the outset were deliberately flexible – reflected in the stress placed on functionality and the conspicuous absence of administrative boundaries in spatial representations of the Gateway (as Figure 2 illustrates). For some of its backers, this was because they “had always accepted fuzzy boundaries” on the premise that “there is not a definitive boundary” and “neither should there be, nobody wants to see one” (stakeholder meeting 2012). Instead, the premise underlying Ocean Gateway was that boundaries – sectoral and spatial – needed to become more permeable; political short-termism ought to be replaced with long-term, strategic and co-ordinated public and private sector investment based on a notion of the corridor as an integrated whole. Its backers argued that Ocean Gateway's boundaries should be adaptable, adopting appropriate geographies tailored to specific issues rather than a single geography and set of boundaries. This variable geography might mean different sets of boundaries, based on travel-to-work patterns, river basin catchments or communications networks. As one key actor put it: “a good geography is whatever it needs to be” (Director, Atlantic Gateway, 2012).

The commitment to an adaptable geometry, based on blurred and movable boundaries, is characteristic of many soft spaces. Relational thinking rather than bounded territorialisation underpinned the Ocean Gateway, as literature produced by the concept's backers testifies:

[Ocean Gateway] is founded upon a need to look beyond local boundaries, short term pressures and market fluctuations, towards an integrated and shared agenda of sustainable economic growth for the North West (Peel Group, 2009, 2).

**Figure 2: The Geography of the Ocean Gateway**



Source: Peel Group (2009b)

Despite some similarities, two key characteristics distinguish the Ocean Gateway from previous experiments at managing economic development in the Mersey Belt. The first concerns the rationale for focusing on the Mersey Belt as a strategic area for policy intervention. The Strategic Plan for the North West emerged in the context of a growing desire to induce economic recovery and address the social and environmental legacy of long-term industrial decline, in part by channelling new development to the Mersey Belt – described in one account as “perhaps the most deteriorated and polluted environment in Britain” (Rodgers, 1975, 99). In contrast, the roots of Ocean Gateway lay not in a wish to

reverse industrial decline or promote socio-spatial redistribution, but in contemporary narratives around urban economic boosterism and international competitiveness.

A second, and in some respect defining, characteristic that distinguishes Ocean Gateway from earlier initiatives concerns the role of private and public actors in its establishment. The Strategic Plan for the North West was commissioned in 1971 by state actors: central government, the local planning authorities in the region, and the government-appointed North West Economic Planning Council. By contrast, Ocean Gateway embodied private sector corporate ambition. With their extensive land-holdings along the Mersey Belt axis, dating back to the acquisition of the Manchester Ship Canal company in 1987, the Peel Group has long championed the corridor as a space at which private and public sector investment should be directed. Peel's 1983 purchase from Bridgewater Estates of significant landholdings around Manchester and Salford, and its subsequent acquisition in 2003 of the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company, means the company is a major landowner across the sub-region.

The geographical patterning of Peel's assets explains in part its desire to develop the Ocean Gateway strategy. In 2008, at around the time the strategy was coming to fruition, Peel had already begun planning a series of major developments. New deep water 'Superport' facilities announced in 2008 would enable trans-Atlantic freight to be routed through Liverpool to Manchester, across Northern England and onto Western Europe. Furthermore, a planned new deep water terminal, 'Liverpool 2', was announced in 2013, bringing with it the prospect of further development on the western edge of the Ocean Gateway. Beyond this, the Ocean Gateway development strategy also included around 50 strategic projects that cut across the three themes of transport and logistics, sustainable resources, and communities and regeneration.

In light of this ambitious development strategy, it is unsurprising that the Peel Group should lobby for official recognition and supportive reforms to policy. Interviewees argued that for a time Peel found it difficult to promote the Manchester Ship Canal corridor as a viable place to invest. Part of the motivation for the creation of Ocean Gateway therefore related to Peel's corporate aspirations, and the perception that the 'collaborative deficit' amongst the region's leading public and private actors would need to be resolved in order to help fulfil the

company's development strategy. Peel's profitability, in other words, was viewed as dependent upon greater local and national political buy-in around the Ship Canal corridor. Yet Ocean Gateway was far from politically uncontentious. Its launch from the outset forced the public sector to respond to what critics viewed as a growing private sector influence on strategic regional level policy – an influence that had potential ramifications for local democratic accountability. Initially at least, the common perception of Ocean Gateway was that it was rooted to too great a degree in Peel's narrow corporate interests – it was 'too Peel' (Dembski, 2012). In early 2009, Manchester City Council's response to the Ocean Gateway agenda was to acknowledge the economic opportunities that could benefit Manchester and the wider city-region, but to urge caution by requesting that the North West Development Agency commission a full economic, environmental and social cost-benefit analysis (MCC, 2009).

The resultant exercise saw the original Ocean Gateway rebadged as the Atlantic Gateway, in an attempt to distance the initiative from Peel and reassure potential partners about its inclusive, cross-sector and collaborative basis (NWDA, 2010a). Atlantic Gateway was launched with an independent board of leading business and political actors and its project portfolio deliberately included some projects not based on Peel land. Unlike its predecessor, it was heavily marketed as an integrated regional strategy, bearing the imprimatur not just of Peel but of multiple public and private sector actors. The North West Development Agency played an important role in promoting the reoriented Atlantic Gateway, investing significant time and energy alongside Peel to create an agenda that resonated across sectors and stakeholders. Following the re-branding exercise, the NWDA incorporated Atlantic Gateway priorities in its final Regional Strategy in 2010 (NWDA, 2010b). This act of taking ownership of Atlantic Gateway meant that the NWDA had given legitimacy, in policy terms, to an economic growth agenda that was ultimately being spearheaded by a private sector enterprise. Its effect, at local and regional level, was to lodge in the mindsets of elite actors the strategic importance of the Atlantic Gateway. And at national level, recognition of the Atlantic Gateway as an important part of local and regional economic strategy meant that the Peel Group was increasingly able to situate the Manchester Ship Canal corridor within wider government policy debates.

The rebadged Atlantic Gateway had three strategic objectives: establishing the corridor as an internationally significant investment opportunity; linking it to wider transformational economic change and opportunity; and enabling a collaborative planning and policy framework. The latter was important in view of the increasingly challenging development context that emerged after the global financial crises of 2007-08. This explains in part Peel's efforts to lobby for a more liberalised and pro-development land-use planning regime. Planning, interviewees agreed, had long been viewed as an impediment to the realisation of the Atlantic Gateway vision, with planning applications sometimes proving contentious and drawn out. The challenge of planning to the corporate ambitions of the Peel Group was illustrated when its Chairman, John Whittaker, called for the NWDA to delegate planning powers to a specialist team focusing on the development of Ocean Gateway:

Ocean Gateway should have its own planning regime led by the regional development agency and the local authorities so we can overcome individual authority objections (quoted in Barry, 2008).

The call for dedicated planning powers proved provocative but also quite possibly helped to propel Atlantic Gateway up the NWDA's list of priorities. Nevertheless, it was not until 2010, and the election of the new Conservative-led Coalition government, that a real opportunity emerged for Peel to cement Atlantic Gateway as a recognisable planning space. This came with the abolition of the NWDA as part of a wider, austerity-driven rationalisation of the public sector. The loss of the NWDA may have been a blow to the ambitions of the Peel Group given the degree to which the two exercised ownership of the reformulated Atlantic Gateway, but new opportunities also arose. One was the announcement by central government of its intention to reform the planning system by promoting streamlined administration and encouraging less bureaucratic, expeditious decision-making in order to help incentivise development. Another opportunity related to the announcement that the government was to establish new Enterprise Zones that would provide tax breaks for local companies and relax some planning regulations in designated areas. Alongside these, a third opportunity emerged in the form of the creation of the network of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). It was this in particular which provided scope for the Peel Group to attempt to influence more directly the shape of emerging economic development policy in



North West England. To the surprise of many, Peel submitted a proposal for a special purpose LEP for the Atlantic Gateway (Peel Group, 2010). This, Peel argued, would lead to the creation of 145,000 jobs, delivery of 73,000 new homes and investment of over £1 billion infrastructure.

The proposed Atlantic Gateway LEP prompted forthright opposition from many of Peel's ostensible partners in local government, concerned that accountability and transparency would be eroded. In response Peel agreed to drop its bid in order to maintain support amongst the existing coalition of public and private actors operating within and beyond the Atlantic Gateway. The compromise position was that the Atlantic Gateway would exist as a separate, stand-alone entity with which local actors could engage voluntarily – initially with a board member from each of the three main LEPs on the Atlantic Gateway board (Carpenter, 2010). By 2014, Greater Manchester no longer had such close board level ties, reinforcing the recurring suggestion in interviews that partial and hesitant support for the Atlantic Gateway concept from the conurbation's policy leaders was becoming increasingly evident.

The apparently limited level of buy-in amongst Greater Manchester's policy elites was not always echoed across the wider sample of interviewees. Views expressed revealed a broad spectrum of positions on the Atlantic Gateway, with only one overtly critical and many more balancing support for the principle with reservations about the detail of its implementation. A repeated concern was about the danger of local priorities being distorted by those of the Atlantic Gateway. Alongside this was scepticism about the putative potential benefits of proposed developments for local areas, as one interviewee argued:

...[T]here is always that fur coat no knickers kind of presentation ...[about] the jobs, the investment. Your comments about whether [our] city-region is a natural geography... well, Atlantic Gateway certainly isn't... and [there are] huge differences ... of view as you go across that geography. But the concept is an interesting concept (senior office, local authority 2013).

Another interviewee noted how the national political backing the Atlantic Gateway enjoys means that “our [local authority] capacity to influence what goes on is still limited”. One

senior local authority policy officer expressed concern that extensive cuts in local government finance, especially after 2010, meant that civic leaders might feel compelled “blindly [to] support proposals in the Gateway so they get their own slice of the pie” (interview, 2012). One of the leading political leaders in the sub-region, when questioned about his guarded support for the Atlantic Gateway, argued that the local planning system retained sufficient power to enable local authorities to be selective and fend off unwanted development, even in the face of political lobbying. However, the counter argument here is that reforms to planning policy have seen central government assume from local authorities responsibility for determining some major planning applications, compelling local actors to engage with a national planning process or lobby national government.

Ultimately, the fuzziness of Atlantic Gateway and the ability of Peel to negotiate the elaborate territorial politics of hard and soft institutions may have served to destabilise traditional spatial boundaries and to create alternative spaces for strategising and debating different futures for the Ship Canal corridor. As several Atlantic Gateway supporters reported during interviews, direct access to national policy-makers means that Peel has been able to adopt an increasingly powerful bargaining position in respect of local development:

The Atlantic Gateway strategy is effectively a conversation with national government for an economic growth narrative. (...)It is of a sufficient scale to be considered a national priority by government and the businesses within it (private sector actor, interview 2012).

Despite national political support, at the local level Atlantic Gateway remains a contested space, with support generally strongest to the west (Liverpool city-region) and weakest towards the east (Greater Manchester). There has also been some evidence of national level unease around the corporate practices and culture of Peel Holdings (see, for example, ExUrbe, 2013; House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, 2013). Although Peel is quick to refute such criticism, the point here, as some interviewees noted, is that Atlantic Gateway on occasion lacks the legitimacy needed to secure unstinting commitment amongst all of the key local economic development policy actors across the Mersey Belt area. Yet despite such sentiments, there was also a widely held view among both policy-makers and politicians that the Atlantic Gateway fills a gap in strategic thinking and provides a welcome

additional institutional framework for economic development in the region, with the potential to generate new private sector investment and to encourage national government to listen to calls for more infrastructure investment in the region. A typical view reflecting this stance was expressed by a former local planner working with an environmental group:

As a planner.... I think we should be thinking along these lines. It just seems daft that Liverpool and Manchester aren't looking at a combined act. This corridor gives a commercial edge as well. Unless there is some sort of serious sub-regional economic working there will never be a counter to London... this could be a stronger force. In principle I think the idea is good.

### **The Mersey Belt as an environmental soft space: from the Mersey Basin Campaign to 'Adapting the Landscape' and the return of Regional Parks**

One of the more successful and enduring examples of a soft space in the Liverpool-Manchester corridor has been the Mersey Basin Campaign, a highly influential partnership-based environmental initiative to clean-up the River Mersey and its tributaries. The Mersey Basin campaign was launched by the former Secretary of State for the Environment, Michael Heseltine, linked to his role as 'Minister for Merseyside' after riots in Liverpool in 1981. Concerned by the environmental degradation in parts of Merseyside, Heseltine committed to address the legacy of industrial contamination and improve the condition of the Mersey catchment. One outcome was the establishment in 1985 of the Mersey Basin Campaign as an independent body, with a range of stakeholders.

The Campaign was given a 25 year time-horizon, concluding in 2010. One of its most intriguing features was its spatial remit, based on the River Mersey and its tributaries, rather than local authority boundaries. Indeed the boundaries were treated as negotiable rather than set, being extended for some purposes, where it suited the broad goals of the campaign. For some of those involved at the time, the key priority was a pragmatic desire to get things done and to find an appropriate governance structure to achieve it. In adopting the river basin as its administrative geography, the Campaign from the start engaged with a wide range of local authorities. This geography was to prove helpful in terms of avoiding political capture of the

initiative, as was the decision to have a widely constituted membership involving actors from the public and private sectors, higher education and civil society. One consequence was the initiative's longevity: as one representative from a government agency noted, "The Mersey Basin survived [government upheavals]... over 25 years because the governance related to the problem not to some sort of political construct" (workshop meeting, 2012).

As an independent organisation, the Mersey Basin Campaign was able to attract funding from a variety of sources, most notably the European Commission and the UK government. Although its main remit was environmental remediation, from the start this was seen as necessarily linked to improving the economic conditions of the area. Whether deliberate or not, there is a clear resonance here with the philosophy of the 1974 Strategic Plan for the North West. A cleaner river would help to reinforce place attractiveness, and cleaning-up contaminated land would prove attractive to certain types of industry. This emphasis was important for the Campaign in terms of attracting external funds; environmental clean-up that could be linked to the creation of new jobs and economic development opportunities was able to draw from a considerably wider range of sources than would have been the case had the objective been simply to clean up the river and its tributaries. One interviewee suggested that the durability of the Campaign reflected its environmental emphasis: "[it was] all about the environment, no one could say no to it" (former regional official, 2012).

Other environmental groups with unusual geographies emerged at around the same time as the Mersey Basin Campaign. Groundwork Trust, for example, evolved from a local charity engaged in environmental clean-up to a major national body. Two community forests, Mersey and Red Rose, also became influential environmental initiatives, with the Mersey Forest in particular associated with growing interest in the green infrastructure agenda. In 2011, at the instigation of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs a network of Local Nature Partnerships was initiated at the sub-regional scale, again based sometimes on overlapping boundaries in a conscious attempt to reflect the messy realities of natural geographies.

An important step-change in environmental thinking in the region came with the publication of a report commissioned by the NWDA, *Adapting the Landscape from Liverpool to*

*Manchester* (NWDA, 2009). This was important because it signalled policy interest in thinking creatively about environmental issues at the landscape scale, in particular in relation to the growing national agenda around adaptation strategies in response to on-going and future climate change. Its aim was to provide “a policy framework for green infrastructure investment that can support improvements in quality of life, tackle climate change and underpin economic growth by enhancing the resilience of natural and man-made systems” (NWDA, 2009: 8). This was to be a new soft space, again with fuzzy boundaries that allowed it to reflect multiple environmental and functional geographies. Although in this case consultants provided a line on the map, those most closely associated with the new approach preferred a looser geography:

...we didn't want an administrative boundary, we wanted an environmental boundary... so we chose the geomorphological boundary. The difference, if there was one, was that the Mersey Basin Campaign had a pollution clean-up direction from day one... [I]t was directed at the river... whereas *Adapting the Landscape* was directed at the whole environment which obviously included the river and was drawn on the catchment area of the river... [S]o it was as concerned about land, energy, food, recreation and everything else that is in that document... not just the focus on the river itself (former regional actor now working in local regeneration, 2013).

*Adapting the Landscape* was subsequently embraced by powerful figures in the North West governance elite. This included the Atlantic Gateway board which very quickly adopted the report as the framework for its environmental work. The significance of this was not only that it allowed a change in the scales at which environmental policy came to be rationalised and implemented, but that it signalled the extent to which the economic development ambitions of the Atlantic Gateway coexisted with a parallel emphasis on environmental improvements:

The environmental aspect of it is really the glue that holds the whole thing together. That actually creates an environment that is both pleasant to live in, pleasant to work in, but also will ultimately attract investment. We talked earlier today about the Mersey Basin Campaign. The Mersey was at one time so filthy that it was actually impeding economic development. That cleaning up of a waterway has encouraged investment into the area and fish can now live in it. (Atlantic Gateway board member, 2013).

In 2014 the environmental sub-group of Atlantic Gateway announced an evolution in its strategy, which harked back to successive proposals to create a series of regional parks in the North West, first raised in the 1974 Strategic Plan for the North West and then in the regional planning and economic development strategies of the 1990s. For the Atlantic Gateway the regional parks concept was valuable in allowing it to link economic development projects with its efforts to promote a high quality local environment attractive to businesses and their executives who wished to live in the region. There has been a substantial degree of buy-in from local environmental organisations and statutory environmental bodies, in part because Peel Holdings introduced the notion of a voluntary 1% environmental levy which it hopes developers will contribute to help fund its environmental aspirations. In an era of reduced public financing and in the context of multi-billion pound ambitions for Atlantic Gateway investment, this is potentially a significant source of finance for environmental projects.

Interviewees revealed the importance of a small group of key individuals whose names cropped up as key stakeholders, directors or employees working across many of the sub-regional regeneration and environmental institutions. Some of these individuals could chart their involvement back to the 1974 Strategic Plan for the North West, virtually all of them had some connection to the NWDA, and many had periodically engaged with the Mersey Basin Campaign. This seemingly dense and persistent social networking, and the social and intellectual capital around it, provides at least part of the reason why the North West has been such a productive region for experimentation in sub-regional soft spaces. Crucially, this group of people was not simply concerned with ‘the environment’; all were committed to promoting economic growth and promoting urban regeneration as an integral part of their environmental work. And when they were working in economic development organisations, they carried with them a determination to integrate environmental thinking in their work.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a long-term overview of the emergence of a variety of influential sub-regional soft spaces. The experience of the likes of the Mersey Belt, the Atlantic Gateway and the Mersey Basin Campaign illustrates the diverse rationalities in the creation of soft spaces and their evolution over time. Two findings emerge in respect of this

experience. The first is the importance of environmental soft spaces both in their own right but also because of the ways in which their logics and practices have fused with ideas emerging in the fields of planning, economic development and regeneration. Until recently the soft space literature has been silent on environmental geographies. Findings in this chapter suggest not only that research effort needs to extend to soft spaces driven by environmental concerns, but that environmental rationalities play an important role in shaping how actors seek to develop new territories of governance ostensibly linked to narrowly defined economic development issues.

The second set of findings concerns the active role of the private sector not simply in engaging with soft spaces, but also in promoting them in their own right – in contrast to more usual forms of state-sponsored or state-initiated experiments in territorial governance. The Atlantic Gateway, as an initiative conceived to a large extent in the private sector, is noteworthy in terms of the scale of its ambition and its geographic reach. Whilst it is possible to identify any number of small area masterplanning initiatives that are private sector initiated, there are far fewer at the sub-regional scale. Actors associated with the Atlantic Gateway and its main private sector backer, Peel Holdings, have been enthusiastic advocates of working with fuzzy boundaries that cross-cut multiple and often overlapping functional geographies: “a good geography is whatever it needs to be”, as an Atlantic Gateway board member put it, encapsulates this approach.

The Mersey Belt experience illustrates how ideas can peak, fade, reformulate and return, while also providing inspiration for a whole series of separate but related initiatives. Arguably without the debates around the Mersey Belt when the concept first emerged in 1974, regional parks would not have been rediscovered and adapted to fit with contemporary priorities. And whilst not all calls to bring Liverpool and Manchester into a common strategic framework stem from work on the Mersey Belt concept, interview data reveals how some of the key actors involved in promoting the Atlantic Gateway were influenced by earlier work on the Mersey Belt, alongside international exemplars like IBA Emscher Park and domestic ones such as the Thames Gateway. That the Mersey Belt concept lacked formal sanction at its inception but nonetheless informed future policy-making underlines the need for caution in arriving at overly premature judgements about policy and governance efforts. Initiatives

that appear unsuccessful on initial inspection can sometimes be regarded subsequently as important in breaking new ground intellectually and politically, and in auguring the innovative policies of the future. An objective of this book is to uncover the impact of soft spaces. In respect of their consequences for wider policy and institutional development there is evidence that the full effects can take some time to become apparent, regardless of initial prognoses.

This chapter also sheds light on another objective of the book, revealing a relationship between soft and hard spaces that is characterised by marked complexity. Frequently, soft spaces have emerged out of the opportunities occasioned by rescaling of the formal tiers of government, but the picture is hugely varied and difficult to characterise in straightforward terms. For instance the Greater Manchester city-region mutated through various forms of hard, soft and hybrid soft-hard governance properties which defy description in dichotomous soft-hard terms. It is perhaps helpful to think of this diversity in terms of another of the book's objectives: identifying the ideational and spatial selectivities associated with soft spaces. The research documented in this chapter reveals the diverse rationalities invoked by those proposing new soft spaces. Public sector-originated proposals have often tended to focus on improved vertical coordination across institutions and actors, horizontal joining-up between places or diagonal integration between public and private sectors. Other proposals have political roots: the Mersey Basin Campaign and Groundwork Trust are examples of this, in both cases associated with Michael Heseltine, a leading figure in the government of the day. More recently, the Atlantic Gateway has emerged as an expression of the strategic ambitions of a major landholder in the region to create a wider alliance of local and national actors in support of its development goals.

The chapter concludes with some reflections on the impacts of soft spaces on democratically legitimated structures and institutions. The consensus underpinning the creation of new soft spaces of governance in the Mersey Belt has often been shallow, and forged for reasons of expedience. State-sponsored attempts to promote improved working relationships across the sub-region have typically floundered in some part because of the perceived impossibility of creating a workable governance framework that would be able to deal with the legacy of political and public distrust between Liverpool and Manchester. This is despite the avowed



statements of some of leading political actors, who argued during interviews that such inter-city rivalries had been subsumed to the greater good and that working relationships across the sub-region were consequently more harmonious than before. Whilst it may well be true that personal working relationships among elite actors are no longer acrimonious for the most part, there are few instances of personal goodwill translating into meaningful sub-regional structures or joint policy initiatives that bind the region's principal cities. Proposals in 2014 for a 'Manpool' sub-region drawing together Liverpool and Manchester as a counterweight to London's dominance of the national space economy stood out as merely the latest in a succession of expressions of inter-city accord that lacked any accompanying policy provisions of substance (Helm, 2014). Encouraging meaningful inter-city cooperation on sub-regional strategy remains difficult in a policy context in which local areas are encouraged to compete – and this applies to soft spaces as much as to statutory planning.

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