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# Sustainability Transformations in the 'Rebel City': Emotional Geographies of Place, Justice and Action in Nottingham, UK

Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

August 2025

Katie Keddie

20213251

Supervisors: Dr Chris Ives, Dr Nick Clare

School of Geography  
University of Nottingham

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## Abstract

Using a lens of emotional geographies, this thesis explores urban environmental transformations in Nottingham with a focus on place and justice. In the context of the city's ambitious target of becoming the UK's first carbon neutral city by 2028 (CN28) amidst significant challenges including a recent local authority bankruptcy, the thesis examines multifaceted environmental action from 'above' and 'below'.

The interdisciplinary study reveals how emotions of love, fear, anger and hope intersect with environmental engagement and action in varied ways, with significant implications for sustainability and justice. By engaging activists, residents, local businesses, climate experts, local authorities, community groups, and third-sector organisations, it provides a holistic understanding of action occurring in the city during the fieldwork window (2022-24) and beyond, highlighting how such action is deeply tied to emotion.

Participant accounts demonstrate how love can promote solidarity, encourage action and build social capital yet also creates forms of othering and non-belonging. Fear surrounding Nottingham's economic precarity, climate-related anxieties, and the increasing penalties associated with activism impact action and both drive and hinder engagement with climate issues. It explores how such fear can be leveraged in harmful ways, amplifying social divisions and hindering collective action. Reflections reveal how anger is directed toward local, national and global policy and practice, as well as

the injustices present within much of the environmental sector. Finally, the thesis explores hope as a sustaining yet fragile force for grassroots action.

The thesis reveals how intersecting emotions produce complex outcomes for social and environmental sustainability, contributing to the 'emotional turn' in transformation research and challenges linear and technocratic understandings of change. While focusing on Nottingham, insights extend across several urban contexts, with many cities worldwide dealing with overlapping socio-economic and environmental challenges, while acting as key sites for transformative action. Contributing to debates within sustainability science and human geography, the thesis provides insights for grassroots action and policy, highlighting the need for emotionally attuned approaches in building just place-based environmental transformations.

**Keywords:** *sustainability transformations, climate emotions, place-based, justice, carbon neutral*

## Acknowledgements

Firstly, Nick and Chris – thank you for being so patient with me, and for being such excellent supervisors throughout this journey. You believed in me when I didn't in myself, and that support will always mean the world. Thank you for lending me countless books, giving me opportunities to teach, helping me write papers, but also for everything outside of the university too – coming to my shows and sending me cute pictures from your lives (I will forever be envious of Mae's wardrobe). I truly couldn't have asked for a better supervision team. Nick – your self-deprecating humour and humility have made me feel so much less alone in my imposter syndrome and I sincerely appreciate that. Watching you teach has made me wish I was an undergrad student again so I could come along to all your lectures. Chris – your guidance over the past 6 years, from my MSc to now, will never be forgotten.

Thank you to the wider geography department and the PGR community, especially Thom Davies for your valuable input during my annual reviews; John Morris for always sending me insightful articles and Ginnie Panizzo for THE most restorative yoga sessions for our aching backs and necks when we were all spending too long hunched over our laptops. Sarah Jewitt – thank you for helping me secure my funding, believing in me before my PhD even started, and providing such valuable support to us PGRs. Jordan – thank you for coming and sitting next to me on our first day and being there ever since, whether we are grabbing coffee and cake in Nottingham or when you are halfway around the world. I know that we'll be friends for life, and I really don't think I would have got through all this without you.

I am so grateful for everyone who has contributed to this research. Thank you to everyone at Nottingham Climate Assembly, Green Hustle and countless other community groups for their engagement with this project and for being so generous with their time and perspectives. I am still constantly inspired by your passion for making this city a better place.

Daisy, for forever being my biggest cheerleader and never failing to make me laugh. Also, for coming to sit next to me on our first day of our masters (it's clearly a theme that the very best of people just sit next to me in random classrooms at UoN). Milla – for always lending an ear and a hug when I have needed it most.

Finally, Tom, thank you for being my rock in so many ways. Your blissful lack of awareness about what I have been doing over the past few years has been a blessing, making sure I hold space for everything else that brings me joy. Thank you too for FINALLY (after years) saying yes to letting me get our rescue pup Merlin, who brings me so much happiness – he has done wonders in keeping me grounded and sane during a super tough and intense couple of months.

To my family, thank you for continuously encouraging and supporting me. Nanny, even though you just narrowly missed getting to read this, I hope I have made you proud. I can so vividly imagine the message you'd send (full of random capital letters and full stops) round to everyone letting them know that I (hopefully) passed my doctorate – and that I get my brains from you! That thought puts the biggest smile on my face. Sappy I know, but this thesis has ended up being all about emotions so what do you expect? I am nothing if not consistent.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Setting the context

With worsening climate change impacts and widening inequality increasingly impacting people and the planet, the need for transformative change is more urgent than ever. In this context, cities are positioned as critical sites for change due to their position as both key drivers for unsustainability and inequality, and spaces that hold the solutions to such crises through resistance, innovation and community and municipal action (Hölscher and Frantzesakaki, 2021). As such, they represent areas where climate policy and justice intersect in an inherently place-based manner – urban transformations are shaped not only by policy and technology, but also by the emotional and relational dimensions of place.

This thesis explores the emotional geographies of environmental transformation in Nottingham, UK – a city that perfectly exemplifies the tension outlined above. Due to its ambitious target to become the first carbon neutral city in the UK by 2028 through their Carbon Neutral 2028 (CN28) Action Plan, the city has been championed as a forerunner in bold and ambitious climate policy (Winter and Le, 2020). Yet, Nottingham is highly unequal. Decades of austerity, a section 114 notice<sup>1</sup>, deepening social inequality in communities and spatial inequalities persist within the city. It is

---

<sup>1</sup> A section 114 notice is 'a report from the council's finance officer that they believe that the authority is about to incur expenditure that is unlawful according to the Local Government Finance Act 1988. Expenditure can be unlawful for various reasons. But the primary reason why most authorities issue a section 114 notice is because they expect their expenditure to exceed their income for a particular financial year – which is not permitted under the 1988 Act' (Institute for Local Government, 2024).

within this complex landscape that the local authority, residents, activists and community organisations engage with the emotional, political and technical complexities of transformation. Figure 1 outlines the key political context and timeframe in which the thesis is situated.

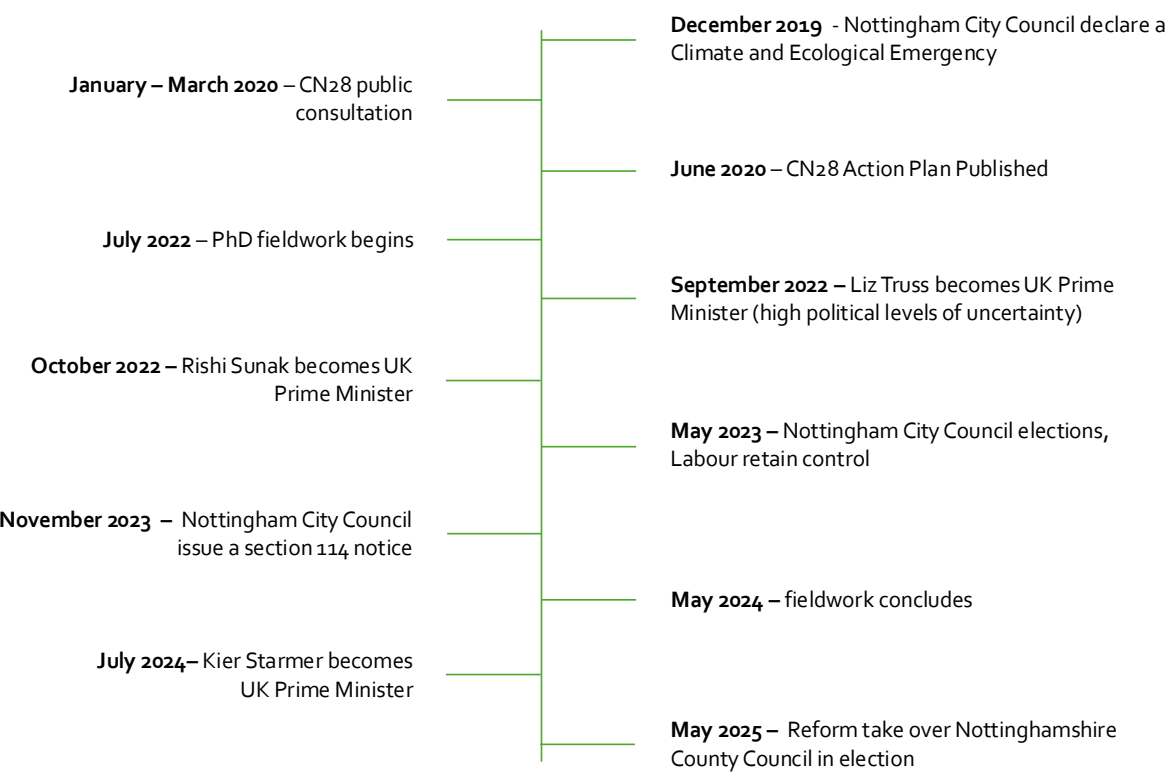


Figure 1 Timeline and political context for thesis

This interdisciplinary research draws on theory at the intersection of social justice, place and urban environmental transformation through the lens of emotional geographies (Bondi, Davidson and Smith, 2005). Rather than posing emotion as a standalone theme, it takes emotion as an analytical lens to understand how urban environmental transformation and justice are interpreted and enacted, recognising

transformation as a social and emotional process alongside its technical, policy and governance focused elements. Central to the thesis is the idea that pursuing just transformations requires not only shifts in infrastructure and policy, but also attention to the emotional and relational dynamics that underpin how people connect to place, to change and each other. By centring emotion as an analytical lens, the thesis reveals how emotions interact with place and justice to both enable and constrain transformative action. The thesis also explores the temporality of transformation processes, touching on conjunctural analysis to make sense of how histories of place and imagined futures shape transformation in the current day (Hearn and Banet-Weiser, 2020). Using theories of social justice and place allows for the contextual nuances that are essential for understanding the complexities of place-based socio-environmental transformation to be explored.

The research approach is grounded in a feminist and care-full epistemology (Wicks, Reason and Bradbury, 2008; Briggs, 2024), influenced by action research where work is done *with* participants rather than *on* them. Drawing from feminist geographies and intersectionality, it acknowledges how climate (in)justice intersects with broader inequalities of race, class, gender and ages, especially within the context of today's interlinked 'polycrises' (Amorim-Maia et al., 2022). Inspired by Saville's (2021) call for 'humble' research, the thesis adopts an approach that centres participant voice.

Methodologically, the research draws from a single in-depth case study of Nottingham. It utilises a mix of semi-structured interviews, observation, workshops and document analysis. This approach enables a rich, multi-perspective understanding

of environmental transformations and their justice implications from both 'above' and 'below'. By focusing on how transformation is enacted, experienced and contested by a range of actors, the study contributes to emerging understandings of just urban transformations that are attentive to not only technology and infrastructures, but to the lived experiences, relational dynamics and emotional geographies associated with them. In doing so, it foregrounds the emotional and relational aspects of transformation, showing how attention to emotions can help guide more inclusive, grounded and effective urban sustainability interventions. The following section outlines the research aims and questions that guide the thesis.

## 1.2 Research aims and questions

In a complex urban landscape like Nottingham, which mirror the realities of many other urban areas in the UK and beyond, understanding the emotional and social implications of transformation is essential to overcome and avoid potential negative consequences of transformative action (see Blythe et al 2018; Monaco, 2025). Due to this, the thesis is concerned with understanding how just environmental transformations are felt, negotiated and contested in urban settings. To achieve this overarching aim, I used the following questions to guide the research.

1. How do different actors (both institutional and grassroots) shape, contest and collaborate around justice-oriented transformation?
2. How do place-based identities and attachments influence engagement with, and resistance to transformation processes?

3. How do historical legacies and imagined futures of a 'just city' shape present day transformation efforts?

Together, these questions provide a framework that engages with how differing actors, temporal and spatial dynamics and emotional entanglements of place-based identity and attachment shape urban transformations.

### 1.3 Thesis structure

To explore the research questions, the thesis is comprised of nine chapters. Following this introduction, **chapter 2** outlines the key literature that the thesis draws on. It first explores sustainability transition literature and its critiques, before exploring just urban transformations. It also outlines key literatures around grassroots movements, alternative imaginaries and emotional geographies, introducing concepts of place and identity that are central to the thesis.

**Chapter 3** introduces the Nottingham case study, providing the contextual backdrop for the thesis. It introduces the city's bio-physical, demographic and political landscape and interrogates how inequality is experienced in the city. It also provides a historical overview of activism within the city, exploring Nottingham's 'Rebel' identity. It then introduces the city's climate initiatives and ambitions at both local authority and grassroots levels.

In **chapter 4**, the methodology used within the thesis is presented, grounded in a reflexive, feminist and care-full approach. My research framework is introduced before considering my research design and philosophy. The rationale for a single-case study

design is explored, before introducing the qualitative mixed methods approach used, comprising of interviews, observant participation, collaborative workshops and document analysis. This section also explores how data were analysed as well and how research ethics were approached.

**Chapters 5 to 8** present my empirical findings. Following Bondi and Davidson's (2005) call to take the emotionality of research seriously, I begin each empirical chapter with a personal reflection – this aligns with the feminist approach and recognises the researcher as emotionally entangled with the research rather than a detached observer. Each chapter centres a key emotion that has emerged in an inductive way throughout the research – love, fear, anger and hope. These emotions, while broken up into chapters, are not discrete or bounded categories, but act as umbrella terms used to organise key themes. Such a structure mirrors the emotional complexity of transformation processes and action in Nottingham.

**Chapter 5** focuses on love, highlighting how it is enacted through community, rebellion, collaboration and plurality within Nottingham. It explores love's influence on senses of belonging and non-belonging, how attachments to place can motivate place protective action, the influence and legacy of the rebel identity as well as how different actors come together to promote diversity and inclusion within environmental movements.

Fear is discussed in **Chapter 6**, highlighting how it can operate as a barrier and a motivator to creating change. The chapter examines how fear emerges in a variety of ways – fear linked to austerity and the erosion of public services, fear of change, and

fear in increasingly harsh penalties for activists. It also explores how fear of 'the other' can create tensions within community green spaces, with detrimental effects for justice and equity.

**Chapter 7** focuses on anger, exploring how it is felt by multiple actors at multiple scales. From anger at local government to wider disillusionment at the capitalist system, the chapter explores how anger can be a generative force, helping to sustain action. The chapter also discusses how the personal identities and characteristics of multigenerational activists shape feelings and expressions of anger.

Finally, **Chapter 8** centres hope as a force for sustaining action amid austerity, inequality and climate anxiety, while acknowledging that hope can often be fragile. Plural visions of a just future for Nottingham are presented, representing the hopes of actors involved within this research.

Although presented separately, these emotions are of course inextricably linked. Thus, **Chapter 9** presents a synthesis and conclusion, drawing connections across the thesis. It also presents broader implications for policy and theory in the field of just environmental transformations and suggests future avenues for research.

## Chapter 2: Literature review

The increasing need to address intersecting and multifaceted environmental, social, and economic challenges means that creating environmentally and socially sustainable and just futures is a major concern across several disciplines in both physical and social sciences. Given the nature of these intensifying issues, the urgency of systemic change is increasingly widely acknowledged. In this context, the concept of 'transformation' rather than more incremental notions of 'transition' is gaining increasing attention. While transitions frameworks have been influential in shaping policy and research agendas, they have been critiqued for their limited structural analysis, heavy focus on technology and weak engagement with power, justice and agency (Brand et al., 2019; Feola, 2020).

This chapter outlines key debates from transition and transformation scholars, considering the importance of justice when implementing change, especially in urban areas. It also focuses on the importance of emotion in navigating transformation, exploring the ways in which emotions are intertwined with people, places and spaces – each empirical chapter begins with a short literature review engaging with individual emotions and how they emerge within specific contexts, therefore here I introduce the overarching concept of emotional geographies. In introducing key concepts covered in the thesis, this chapter sets the foundation for the following empirical chapters.



## 2.1 Sustainability transitions

The notion of 'sustainability transitions' has been gaining traction over the past two decades in light of emerging public and scientific interest in large-scale shifts towards a more sustainable future. Often grounded in systems theory, transition studies typically aim to explain how societal sub-systems including energy, agriculture, mobility and urban infrastructure might shift towards more sustainable configurations (Holscher et al., 2018). Perhaps the most prominent socio-technical transition concept is 'The Multi-level Perspective' (MLP) (Rip and Kemp, 1998; Geels, 2002). With origins strongly rooted in technology studies, this model involves change at multiple levels, including niches (micro-level), regimes (meso-level) and landscapes (macro-level) (Patterson et al., 2018; Laakso et al., 2021) (figure 2), with the hope that such progress will help to overcome the lock-in to unsustainable, carbon focused production and consumption (Foxton, 2013).

Increasing structuration  
of activities in local practices

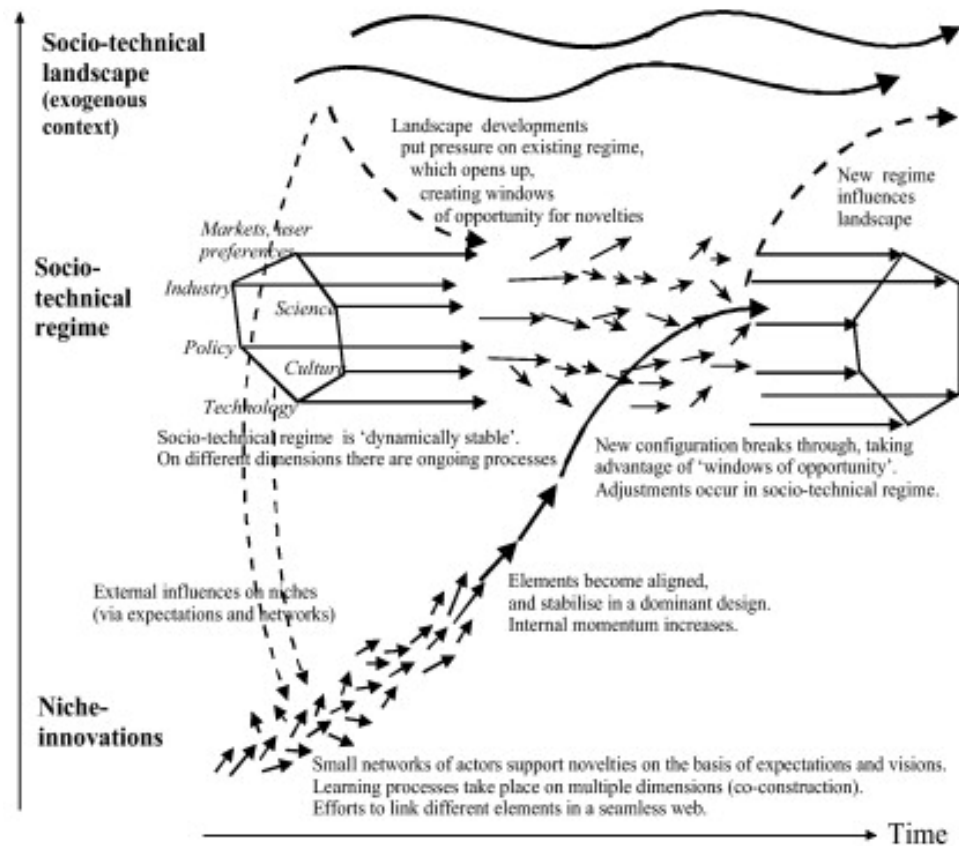


Figure 2 Multi-Level Perspective on transitions (from Geels, 2011)

However, like much of the transitions literature, the framework has faced numerous critiques, largely based on its lack of attention to agency, power<sup>2</sup> and politics, and its over emphasis on technology as a source of change (Genus and Coles, 2008; Fischer and Newig, 2016; Upham et al., 2020; Huttunen et al., 2021). While it has been recognised that transitions to low carbon energy systems for example is essential to tackle climate change (Scoones et al., 2020), this focus may neglect the cultural,

<sup>2</sup> With some key exceptions such as Flor Avelino, as much of their work does focus on this dynamic.

societal, economic and political variables that significantly influence environmental changes (Genus and Coles, 2008; Foxon, 2013; Ghosh and Schot, 2019).

Such shortcomings reflect a broader tendency in sustainability literature to adopt a post-political stance, not paying enough attention to power and justice. As Avelino et al (2024) argue 'issues linked to justice are frequently glossed over, implicitly addressed, and instrumentalized in favour of ecological improvements or profitability' (p.21), therefore ignoring important geographical considerations of space, place and power. Indeed, Greenberg (2013) has long highlighted a major problem with such framings, asking 'what is to be sustained and what is not? And who gets to choose and who does not?' (p.56) stressing the importance of not just aiming to sustain but to make things better, linking with a growing body of work in 'critical sustainability'.

## 2.2 Sustainability transformations

Perhaps due to these shortcomings, sustainability transformation literature is increasingly foregrounding the equity concerns that are linked with climate change (Patterson et al., 2018). This builds on its beginnings which focused more on ecological transformation and faced critiques for ignoring the drivers of unsustainability like capitalism (Pereira et al., 2015; Brand, Görg and Wissen., 2019; Feola, 2020).

While transition literature generally focuses on technocratic solutions, transformation takes a broader view, focusing on power relations, values and institutions (Hölscher, Wittmayer and Loorbach., 2018). Transformation can be understood in a variety of ways – O'Brien (2012) suggests a transformation can be defined as a 'physical and/or qualitative changes in form, structure or meaning-making' but also as a psycho-social

process that involved the 'unleashing of human potential to commit, care and effect change for a better life' (p.670). This aligns with Westley et al's (2011) definition of transformation as entailing 'radical, systemic shifts in deeply held values and beliefs, patterns of social behaviour' (p.762) as opposed to incremental and manageable shifts associated with transitions (Temper et al., 2018; Grin et al., 2020).

Transformations therefore necessitate 'unruly politics', 'diverse knowledges and multiple actors' and 'challenging incumbent structures' such as lock-in to neoliberalism (Stirling, 2014 p.1) to open 'exciting spaces to (re)imagine and (re)structure radically different futures' (Blythe et al., 2018). Scoones et al. (2020) suggest that transformations can arise in varied manners, including planned interventions from policy actors, from large-scale political and economic forces and social mobilisation or from biophysical forces including climate change which are outside of the remit of control for actors and groups. Temper et al. (2018) outlines how a more transformative approach may help to overcome emancipatory struggles by marginalised classes, ethnicities, genders and sexualities, which have not historically been deeply considered in transition research.

Scoones et al (2020) suggest that there are three main approaches to transformation. Firstly, structural approaches refer to changes in the manner that production and consumption is governed and organised within societies, focusing on politics, economy and society to alter the ideological foundations of social systems (Scoones et al., 2020). This approach includes growing alternative models such as zero growth or degrowth (Kallis et al., 2012; Jackson, 2019). Systemic approaches refer to changes

targeting the interdependencies of institutions and technologies, mirroring the socio-technical and socio-ecological transitions discussed earlier. Lastly, enabling approaches focus on human agency, capacity and values to enact pathways to preferred futures – these tend to be more optimistic and directly link with activism, focusing on processes and capacity rather than solely on outcomes (Scoones et al., 2020). Enabling approaches allow a plurality of power and knowledge to be exercised in diverse forms and settings (Stirling, 2014), which may help protect transformations from manipulation and management from privileged interests (Scoones et al., 2020). While this approach is integral for empowering citizens and communities, some scholars suggest that there has not been sufficient consideration on *how* communities can enact the structural changes needed to alleviate poverty or oppression (Palutikof et al., 2015), burdening the most vulnerable with the tremendous task of transformation.

Transformation has too faced criticism – it can often also act as an umbrella term meaning it is often unclear what must be transformed, what processes this will entail and who will lead said transformation – what is being transformed, and for whom? (O’Brien, 2012; Blythe et al., 2018). Feola (2015) suggests the ‘high conceptual elasticity and lack of empirical grounding of the concept of transformation generate the risk of voiding the term of meaning’ (p.377). Vogel and O’Brien (2021) also note that while ‘scholarly literature on transformations is expanding rapidly, the concept risks becoming an empty buzzword or an alibi for superficial interventions and business-as-usual responses within research, policy and practice communities’ (p.654),

thus highlighting the importance of a greater consideration to the strategies needed to create meaningful and enduring change rather than promoting greenwashing.

To overcome these issues and ensure transformations are successful, Scoones et al., (2020) suggest we must take diverse knowledges seriously, create more equal processes of collaboration and exchange, consider politics to a greater extent and take plural pathways seriously, as there is not a singular relevant viable path to sustainable transformation. By deliberating, contrasting norms, and using techniques such as participatory scenario planning or multi criteria mapping transformations may have more chance of being successful (Scoones et al., 2020). Recently, studies have emerged showing that participatory techniques can be effectively used to align local values with the transformations needed. Rebelo et al (2020) suggested that the co-production of narratives in Portugal and Wales resulted in high levels of socio-political engagement and fostered feelings of empowerment when local actors were allowed to articulate their senses of place and shared their place-based knowledge.

Similarly, Grenni et al (2020) discovered that aspirational ideas of the future for the Finnish town Mantta were created after a series of participatory workshops. These workshops were developed considering the needs of the town's planning department, showing that positive outcomes are possible if local needs and values are deliberated (Mehmood et al., 2020). Public participation has also been cited as a key area for 'radical adaptation' in human geography processes such as New Municipalism (Turhan and Armiero, 2019). Such examples highlight how, by grounding transformations in place' it may be possible to overcome some of the vagueness associated with

transformation processes (explored in the following section). Yet, within the constraints of current political and power systems, widescale implementation of desired pathways of citizens created using co-production techniques may be difficult due to their hierarchical and bureaucratic nature (Chatterton, 2018), further highlighting the need for drastic alteration within these structures.

Consideration of the above will be vital in overcoming 'The Dark Side of Transformation' (Blythe et al., 2018) – where unintended negative consequences related to transformation including shifting burdens onto vulnerable parties, business as usual being allowed to prevail, lack of consideration of resistance and insufficient treatment of power and politics. Monaco (2025) also highlights the 'eco-blindness' that often occurs within sustainability initiatives, often overlooking the socio-cultural and territorial contexts in which they are embedded. Karen O'Brien (2012) has long suggested that 'human geographers have failed to shift the focus of the scientific discourse away from 'the environment' as the problem and towards an integrated understanding of change based on critical research on space, place, politics, power, culture, identities, emotions, [and] connections' (p.593), a problem which much of the sustainability literature also reproduces (Gillard et al., 2016). Not only are there differences in the willingness and ability to take up transformation opportunities, but the trade-offs also often created by transformative action repeatedly affect marginalised communities to a greater extent (Sovacool, 2012). Here, context and place become important considerations.

### 2.3 Placing sustainability transformations

As Creswell (2004) notes 'Place is everywhere. But place is also a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world', and as such place theory interrogates the historical, political and sociocultural elements, offering a powerful way to frame and contextualise transformative change.

Place is understood in a variety of ways through concepts such as senses of place, place attachment, place identity, as well as the social and emotional sense of belonging or non-belonging to specific places. Beyond specific bounded locales, place can also be produced by the flow of people, things, and ideas across space and time. This means that it is understood in relational to wider systemic processes, and is therefore not singular or fixed (Massey, 1994; Creswell, 2004). Such relational understandings of place therefore challenge 'one size fits all' approaches in transitions and transformations that may unintentionally create negative outcomes for justice (Grenni et al., 2020).

While its roots are firmly grounded in geography, place is increasingly considered within sustainability science and policy (e.g. 2022 IPCC report, 2025 IPBES assessment), with Pörtner et al (2022) reinforcing that to achieve just transformations, the cultural meanings, emotional attachments, and identities that are deeply rooted in landscapes and places must be considered. Abson *et al* (2017) emphasise that the success of sustainable and just transformations lies in how they reconnect and reshape relationships between individuals, communities and the places in which they are



interwoven. Despite this acknowledgment, Keddie et al (forthcoming), highlight that there remains a lack of explicit consideration of place theory in sustainability transformation literature, which mean that important nuance as well as the related reparative and contextual dimensions of justice that consider histories and power in place are overlooked.

#### 2.4 Just transformations

Critiques of much of this literature include the notion that sustainability and conservation discourse privileges certain world views), which can lead to exclusion (Friedman et al., 2018; Keddie et al., forthcoming) and the production of inequitable outcomes temporally and spatially (Bennet et al., 2019). It is widely acknowledged that the impacts of climate change disproportionately impact those who contribute least to the problem, with Davies and Mah (2020) asserting 'around the world today, ethnic minority and low-income communities continue to be disproportionately burdened by toxic pollution' (p.2), as well as a wide array of other environmental harms (Porter et al., 2020). This has led to a call for more research that focuses on the social dimensions of transformations (Lahsen and Turnhout, 2021). Just transformations 'call for radical politics of recognition that challenge structural systems of oppression and discrimination sustained in plural epistemologies' (Torrens et al., 2021).

Multiple dimensions of equity and justice have been considered within research and practice, with environmental justice scholars (Schlosberg, 2004; Bennett et al., 2016)

often citing three main components: recognitional, procedural and distributional (Jenkins et al., 2016). Recognitional justice acknowledges and respects diverse peoples (Bennett et al., 2019) – this involves the identification of interest groups and right holders that may be impacted by an initiative, paying particular attention to those who are often neglected or marginalised within conventional decision making. Methods such as stakeholder analysis, citizen science and participatory research may be useful in achieving this dimension of justice. Procedural justice is concerned with fostering participation and good governance (Bennett et al., 2019) – this asks who is involved, how are they involved, who has power, and to what end? For procedural justice to occur, diverse perspectives need to be heard, especially those typically sidelined in decision making processes (Bennett et al., 2019). Lastly, distributional justice refers to maximising benefit and minimising burdens for communities. This requires a reflection on the distribution of opportunity, wealth and power within societies, ensuring that how people benefit or incur harm from sustainability initiatives is fair across space and time (Bennett et al., 2019). While much of this literature represents an important move away from technocratic and apolitical models of urban change, even the more justice-oriented transformation frameworks remain grounded within fundamentally liberal paradigms. Due to this, they often stop short of engaging with more radical, abolitionist, or decolonial demands (Pellow, 2018, Sultana, 2022; Fitz-Henry and Klein, 2024) that require urgent consideration for truly just futures. Heffron and McCauley (2017) consider a fourth dimension that has been largely overlooked in much of the current just transformation literature, restorative justice,

which was developed during trade union movements in the 1980s. This dimension suggests that all past and potential future injustices are considered when making environmental decisions, seeking to repair, compensate for and rectify injustices that have burdened individuals, communities or nature. It also links strongly to contextual justice dimensions of justice, which consider how justice is understood and practised differently across social, cultural, historical, and political contexts (McDermott et al., 2013; Sultana., 2022), and demand more attention to pre-existing inequalities, histories and power dynamics. Intergenerational justice, or the principle of futurity is also an important and emerging consideration. Studies are increasingly calling for greater attention to be paid to intergenerational solidarity and amplification (e.g. Trott, 2024) with Wilson et al (2024) also stating: 'actions taken now to address the impacts of the climate crisis will determine the rest of their lives, highlighting the enormous stake that young people have in planning for the future. However, young people...are continually marginalised within climate decision-making processes' (p.1). This highlights a key tension, where those who are most impacted are least able and empowered to shape outcomes – such considerations may help bridge more liberal paradigms with more radical thinking within human geography, which increasingly calls for the dismantling of unjust structures and the creation of alternative future, discussed in greater detail in section 2.7.

Irrespective of which justice lens is applied, injustice is ultimately about the uneven distribution of power that different human and non-human actors hold (Arias-Arévalo et al., 2023), especially across intersecting racial, gendered and class dimensions.

Emerging from the Civil Rights movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a climate and environmental justice lens has arisen among 'grassroots activists, including Black, Brown, and indigenous groups who draw upon earlier frameworks that understand the environment more capaciously as encompassing labour rights, land rights, housing, toxics, health, and other social justice concerns' (Ranganathan and Bratman, 2021, p.7). Mikulewicz et al. (2023) add 'climate justice scholars and activists have long argued that climate change is not just an environmental issue – it is a social crisis within which multiple oppressions intertwine and interact' (p.128). These accounts highlight the need for an intersectional approach to transformation and justice, where environmental and social justice issues are treated as deeply interlinked, and where intersecting issues are acted upon concurrently. The intersecting oppressions described are not only structural, but are deeply felt, emotional processes, however emotional dimensions remain underexplored in much of the transformation literature despite their centrality in shaping engagement, resistance and visions for the future.

## 2.5 Justice in urban transformations

Cities are central to both the causes and solutions of climate, ecological and social crises (Amundsen et al., 2018; van den Heijden, 2018). Urban areas are responsible for around 70% of global carbon emissions and 75% of global energy consumption (UN, 2018), and by 2050 it is estimated that 7 billion people will live in urban areas (Ritchie, Samborska and Roser, 2024). Due to this, achieving environmental transformation depends largely on action within the urban scale (Torrens et al., 2021). Cities are 'local nodes within multiple overlapping social, economic, ecological, political and physical

networks, continuously shaping and shaped by flows of people, matter and information across scales' (Wolfram and Frantzeskaki, 2016, p.13), and given this open nature and high level of diversity, there are multiple entry points for transformation in these spaces (Hölscher and Frantzeskaki, 2021).

At the same time, cities remain highly unequal spaces – urban areas are facing several issues including poverty, poor housing conditions, homelessness, inadequate infrastructure, hygiene issues, poor water quality, uncontrolled pollution and social tensions (Ernst et al., 2016). These are pervasive problems, occurring across multiple levels and scales which directly relate to climate change, ecological, environmental and resource problems (McCormick et al., 2013). This, coupled with the fact that many modern cities have been built through several harmful processes including mass displacement, slum clearance and red lining means that today, cities are facing class struggles, racial violence, discrimination and marginalisation (Torrens et al., 2021)<sup>3</sup>. This highlights the city as an important locus for considering the politics of place, identity, representation, recognition, and legitimacy (Raymond et al., 2021).

Despite such challenges, many local governments, including Nottingham, have been celebrated for taking sustainability action when national governments fall short (van der Heijden, 2018). Novel, experimental approaches such as urban labs and action networks are beginning to transcend scale to be used globally (van der Heijden, 2016). In the UK alone, there are many urban led initiatives: community wealth building in

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<sup>3</sup> Within the Nottingham context, Lisa McKenzie in their book 'Getting By' (2015) and other works discuss how 'slum clearance' of the Victorian housing stock in St Ann's between the 1930s and 70s and following redevelopment of the area led to social isolation and stigmatisation.

Preston (Manley and Whyman, 2021), community led housing initiatives in Leeds, Bristol and Sheffield (e.g. Chatterton, 2013); The Nottingham Declaration to tackle climate change (Geart and Peverill, 2007); numerous urban farms nationally (Hardman, Clark and Sherriff, 2022) as well as ambitious urban rewilding proposals (Turnball, Fry and Lorimer, 2025). How these initiatives are diffused, shared and therefore mobilised outside of the city level, and how transformations spread from one area to another is becoming an increasingly important area of research (Lam et al., 2020). Amplification, or scaling up of sustainability programmes may be integral to increase their impact, yet Chatterton (2018) notes that we must consider how we can connect micro-level examples without losing their potency.

The work of Fainstein (2010, 2014) is especially insightful when considering justice in the urban environment. Farnstein (2014) notes that 'choosing justice as the norm for urban policy represents a reaction to the growing inequality and social exclusion arising from the use of neoliberalism' (p.6). They also suggest that current urban regimes often focus on economic growth too heavily without considering that growth promoting policies do not automatically mean the greatest good for the greatest number (2010). Policy typically engages with the idea of what 'works' in relation to a specific goal without considering broader objectives that are tied to these policies. Fainstein (2014) uses the example of urban redevelopment programmes stating that 'displacement of residents is justifiable if the majority benefits even marginally, regardless of the serious costs to those displaced and the likelihood that the displaced are already the most disadvantaged' (p.6). This connects to the concept of the 'right to

the city', which centres on the belief that all communities should have the right to participate, in a democratic and participatory manner, in controlling use of space (Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2008). This idea stresses collective power over urban space and its governance, challenging top-down and technocratic approaches. This relates to 'communicative rationality' where it is assumed that the greater the role of disadvantaged groups in policy decisions, will create higher levels of justice (Fainstein, 2014). Thus, urban transformation research must recognise the plurality of knowledges and values, opening discourse to audiences that have been historically absent from the conversation (Torrens et al., 2021). In line with this, recent scholarship has called for urban planning to be reoriented around care and responsibility. Amorim-Maia et al (2024) for example, advocate for such planning processes to not only integrate care, but to also mobilise place-based strategies to address intersecting social, environmental and economic challenges faced by communities.

However, much of the existing literature on urban transformation continues to focus on major metropolitan or 'global cities' as primary sites of innovation and leadership for sustainability. This emphasis continues, despite Robinson (2006) long having challenged such focus using their concept of 'ordinary cities, which argues for recognising a greater diversity of urban experience, and for treating all cities as site of theoretic and practical significance. Such framing champions the importance of situated and place-based knowledge, allowing for a richer understanding of how transformation and justice are negotiated in often overlooked urban contexts like Nottingham.

## 2.6 Grassroots movements

While sustainability transitions have often focused on socio-technical systems, grassroots movements highlight the overtly political, cultural and emotional dimensions of transformation (Temper et al., 2018). Such movements are central to contesting dominant systems and imagining alternative futures, redefining what counts as 'political' and expanding democratic participation (Nicholls, 2007; Koopman, 2015). As such, recent work on transformation is emphasising the capacities that empower individuals and communities to act on their own behalf (Scoones et al., 2020).

While social movements are difficult to clearly define, they usually involve collective action and organising for social change (Koopman, 2015) – Cox (2018) suggests

'movements are widespread and frequent but not routine, running throughout the social world and across societies but not homogenous...when movements organise, even if they ally across countries, the people involved do not do the same thing in the same way everywhere. They do not transmit a top-down policy decision but have to work out in many different times and places, under all sorts of pressures and with very different aims and ideas, how they should proceed' (p.9).

Movements often involve people considering how to win against people and entities with more power, wealth and authority (Cox, 2018) and thus are often considered a form of contentious politics from 'below', consisting of performances, displays and campaigns (Tilly, 2004). Such tactics are powerful, with Segal (2023) noting that 'every



protest shifts the world's balance, or at least contributes in doing so' (p.178). Scholars have shown that place plays a central role in social movement mobilisation – it is fundamental in shaping the claims, identities, and capacities of mobilised actors (Routledge, 1996; Nicholls, 2007). Geographers have also suggested that struggles are often shaped by 'senses of place' (Nicholls, 2007). This is particularly relevant within environmental mobilisations, where local ecologies, histories and injustices are often central to how movements frame their demands. As Rootes (2007) shows through a variety of case studies, senses of place often emerge and are reconfigured through collective action and resistance. Within these contexts, place becomes entangled with emotional, symbolic and political meaning.

Concerns about the environment have a long history, but the urgency of messaging surrounding climate change and its associated problems have peaked in recent years. As previously highlighted, much of the research surrounding these 'wicked problems' has been socio-technical in nature (Smith and Christie, 2021) as well as depoliticised (Pelenc et al., 2019) and consequently have paid insufficient attention to the role that social movement activity and acts of resistance have within environmental transformations (Temper et al., 2018). Scholars have long suggested that the environmental movement may be 'the most comprehensive and influential movement of our time' (Castells, 1997, p.67), yet many Western mobilisations remain homogenised by race, class and gender (Jobin-Leeds, 2016), highlighting the importance of looking at these issues through a justice and equity lens to ensure more inclusive approaches.

A promising development in this area is the global environmental justice (EJ) movement. Through what Klein (2014) calls 'blockadia', where multiple perspectives and movements from disparate actors across the world become 'interconnected pockets of resistance' (p.253), communities have been able to mobilise to defend their rights and confront the political and economic roots of crisis, moving away from a solely socio-technical lens to one more concerned with fairness, equity and emotion, giving voices to groups who may be traditionally excluded (Jobin-Leeds, 2016). The rise in popularity of this concept has been largely attributed to grassroots movements and has started to be tracked and monitored using tools such as the EJAtlas (Temper et al., 2018). The atlas is based on an 'ecology of diverse knowledges' relying on the co-production of knowledge between activists and academics, uncovering a plurality of movements that may otherwise remain hidden (Martinez-Alier et al., 2016). While these movements are local in nature, they target issues that are often contested elsewhere making a case for a global environmental justice movement with common goals and forms of mobilisation (Martinez-Alier et al., 2016).

Activist groups that dominate the European environmental movement such as Extinction Rebellion (XR) and Just Stop Oil (JSO) have historically taken a more direct and urgent approach. XR is a 'movement aiming to compel governments to take action to stop climate change and biodiversity loss through non-violent civil disobedience' (Bell and Bevan, 2021). Once one of the most well-known

environmental activist movements<sup>4</sup>, their tactics have included mass marches, occupation of public space as well symbolic actions, such as die-ins and occupying transport infrastructure which have garnered a variety of responses from the government, media and academics<sup>5</sup>. It has been suggested that their discourse, tactics and activities have largely alienated global majority and working-class people (Bell and Bevan, 2021; Smiles and Edwards, 2021) – for example the strategy of mass arrest undermines the negative experiences of global majority populations globally (Bell and Bevan, 2021). XR has also been critiqued for paying inadequate attention to climate justice – their visions are typically more in line with mainstream environmental policy makers (Smiles and Edwards, 2021), with suggestions that they are more interested in generating appeal rather than offering radical solutions. This could suggest a 'disregard for the struggles of others and a lack of willingness to engage with their issues as linked to the same root causes' (Smiles and Edwards, 2021). Bell and Bevan (2021) have suggested several mechanisms by which XR could align themselves more closely to justice issues including supporting environmental and social justice movements led by global majority and working-class people with their time, money, energy and professional skills. Perhaps linked to these critiques, XR have in recently taken a step back from non-violent direct action as their primary tactic, instead focusing on bringing more people in to the movement as well as building networks

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<sup>4</sup> Since starting this project, XR's tactics have shifted away from non-violent direct action, and their media presence declined making way for 'offshoots' such as Just Stop Oil, in line with the concept of social movement life cycles.

<sup>5</sup> Actions have continuously elicited strong emotional responses across the political spectrum, ranging from admiration, anger and fear.

and partnerships in events such as 'The Big One' in April 2023, where over 60,000 people and 200 groups assembled together in four days of peaceful protest (Hudson, 2023; van der Zee and Weston, 2023).

Youth activism has also become a key site of grassroots mobilisation, not only because of the disproportionate environmental impacts young people face, but also because of their structural exclusion from formal political processes. As Collin, Bessant and Watts (2024) highlight, youth led protest is an integral mechanism for young people to enact change through actions like school strikes, most notably Fridays for the Future (FFF) strikes that emerged largely in 2018-19, where millions of young activists around the globe pressured powerholders to acknowledge the climate emergency (Sloam, Pickard and Henn, 2022). While still largely institutionally sidelined, such mobilisations offer important spaces for young activists to raise awareness of environmental inequality and reimagine democratic engagement, positioning themselves as agents of the 'now' rather than voices of the future.

Yet not all activism is working towards inclusive and justice-oriented transformation. In recent years there has been an increase in anti-environmental counter movements, conspiracy theories and anti-net zero populism (Paterson, Wilshire and Tobin, 2023; Duffy and Dacombe, 2023). Protests against concepts like the '15-minute cities' in UK cities such as Oxford (Silva, 2023) and broader resistance to sustainability policies reflect a growing backlash, often grounded in perceptions of injustice and loss of personal freedoms. There has also been a rise of far-right environmentalism, which focuses on 'demographic arguments propagating coercive and discriminatory

population control targeted at communities which contribute little to the environmental crises' (Marin and Culot, 2023, np). The increase in such activity highlights the complex nature of contemporary environmental and political movements. While some groups strive for sustainability alongside inclusivity and justice, others emerge in opposition with ideologies that challenge the pursuit of just and equitable societies by spreading fear and resentment. As Kemper (2001) states, social movements are 'awash in emotions' (p.59) – the source, direction and framing of such emotions often shape how movements emerge, gain traction and shape outcomes.

Moving forward, it is integral that the 'many voices, perspectives and positionalities within the field of environmental activism' (Apostolopoulou and Cortes-Vazquez, 2018) are heard. Environmental issues are a shared struggle, therefore movements must allow for a diversity of experiences, points of view and knowledge exchange, especially if we are to overcome harmful and exclusionary rhetoric.

## 2.7 Alternative imaginaries

Many grassroots movements are motivated by the hope that things can be better than they currently are, grounded in a sense of belonging in doing something towards such ends (Pickard, 2022; Wettergren, 2024). Communities and movements are increasingly turning towards alternate imaginaries that challenge the status quo. Radical practices which problematise growth or development as organising principles are becoming more popular (Escobar, 2015; Demaria and Kothari, 2017) and are even

emerging within more traditional sustainability discourse (e.g. Morrison et al., 2022; West et al., 2024).

Many of these imaginaries are visible in grassroots experiments and prefigurative practices such as community food networks, co-housing initiatives, urban rewilding or repair cafes. Such practices are deeply embedded in everyday life, community and relationships that signal different ways of living, relating and organising, aligning with the notion of 'everyday eutopias' (Cooper, 2014). Despite being small in scale, scholars suggest that these practices represent a vital site of resistance, offering relational and place-based responses to systemic issues (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Amorim-Maia et al., 2024).

These initiatives resonate with broader thinking such as degrowth, post-development and post capitalism. Though distinct in their thinking, these frameworks share a rejection of economic growth as an organising principle, instead centring values like reciprocity, plural knowledges, ecological rights and justice (Escobar, 2015; Demaria, Kothari and Acosta, 2015). Transformative concepts like Buen Vivir in Latin America, Ecological Swaraj in India, or even the Transition Town movement in the UK offer culturally and geographically grounded imaginaries that contest the extractive nature of our current system, envisioning the present and future rooted in justice, sustainability and collectivism. Indeed, Escobar (2015) highlights the Transition Town Initiative (TTI) as one of the most grounded examples of degrowth and local resilience in practice. Community wealth building, most notably with great success in Preston, has also challenged the traditional 'trickle-down' economics by redirecting wealth

locally, encouraging local procurement and embedding more participatory approaches (McInroy, 2018). By recentring people and place, examples of deeper democracy are uncovered, which lead to more just outcomes for communities.

These concepts are contested within the Global North context, with scholars noting risks of appropriation and superficial borrowing detached from their epistemological and political roots (Altmann, 2020). Degrowth has too been criticised for being too focused on the Global North and 'reflecting the values of a particular social group, namely the well-educated European middle class that share progressive-green-cosmopolitan values' which 'creates significant barriers for its dissemination among lower-income social groups in other parts of the world' (Muradian, 2019, p.257).

Thomas (2019) also notes inequality in being able to consider 'the future' or alternate imaginaries when many communities in the here and now don't have justice, stressing the necessity of grounding futures thinking in the realities of diverse communities.

Despite challenges, grassroots organising and concepts that outline pathways to drastically different futures demonstrate the power that communities hold to prefigure different worlds. They show how hope, care, and collective action can challenge dominant incumbent narratives to create more just futures. As scholars advancing decolonial, Indigenous and radical Black thought remind us, there is no single definition of justice that can be applied everywhere (Pulido and De Lara, 2018; Álvarez and Coolsaet, 2020) instead, it arises from specific social relations, struggles and systems of knowledge. Recognising this plurality and diversity within justice is therefore essential to developing discourse around just transformations.

## 2.8 *Feeling* environmental transformation

The places in which environmental transformation takes place are more than physical space, they are enveloped in attachments, identity and meanings, all of which are inherently emotional. Emotional geographies explore the intertwining of emotions with spatial and environmental dimensions of human experience, calling for a departure from the dominant emphasis on technical, scientific and objective understandings of climate change. Scholars in the field stress the importance of acknowledging and incorporating emotional dimensions within climate discourse despite having long been 'banished to the margins of Western thought and practice' (Williams, 2000 p.1).

Emotions are a vital part of the human experience, directly impacting the way people experience their past, present, and future (Bondi, Davidson and Smith., 2005). As such, sidelining them 'leaves a gaping void' in the ways people can understand and act in the everyday realm (Anderson and Smith, 2001). Perhaps because of this realisation, at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there was somewhat of an 'emotional turn' within the field (Bondi, Davison and Smith., 2005). This increased attention to 'emotional' and 'affectual' elements signifies a desire to highlight the ways that emotion is, and has always been, fundamental to geography (Ryan, 2016) – Massey and Thrift (2003) for example, highlight how emotions are central to how people make sense of the world around them. Traditional sustainability literature has been critiqued for ignoring emotional and affective dimensions (Ives et al., 2020; Wickson, Lambert and Bernstein, 2025), yet recent scholarship calls for greater attention towards emotions,



interconnection, empathy and justice (see Wickson, Lamber and Bernstein, 2025; Schipper et al. 2024).

Distinguishing between affect and emotion has been crucial to many geographers conceptual and empirical debates, with Pile (2010) offering the first publication attempting to outline a fundamental split between the two conceptual approaches. They state that emotions are expressible, conscious, subjective embodied feelings, whilst affect is pre-cognitive, moving through and between bodies and material and cannot be represented, and that emotion is 'one way in which subjects experience and respond to affective modifications' (Dawney, 2011, p.601). Hamilton (2020) suggests that 'Affect', on the other hand, is the term typically used for bodily sensations, conscious or subconscious feelings without a specific object, such as anxiety. Emotions describe more conscious feelings that can be named and have an object, for example grief for the loss of a loved one' (p.35). However, to uphold a clear dichotomous separation between affect and emotion is often a difficult task. There is a lack of consensus seen within the literature (Pile, 2010; Bondi and Davidson, 2011; Dawney, 2011), with some scholars suggesting that the separation may not always be a useful binary (Bondi and Davidson, 2011). Work by Saville (2008) suggests that although affect might initially arise first, it promptly becomes intertwined with and influenced by our sensory and emotional interactions with the world. As such, whilst there is an ongoing dynamic debate about these theories, there are no 'hard rules' for the distinctions between definitions (Hamilton, 2020). Bondi, Davidson, and Smith (2005) highlight that that emotion and affect 'are never easy to define or demarcate, and

they are not easily observed or mapped although they inform every aspect of our lives' (p.1). Within this research I foreground emotion as a conceptual frame, a choice made for its utility largely because it reflects how participants themselves expressed and made sense of their identifiable experiences. At the same time, I also align with Bondi and Davidson (2011) who argue that such a strict separation may not always be productive – in practice both affect and emotion are often entangled.

Increasingly, scholars such as Ahmed (2014) have been asking 'what do emotions *do*'? (p.4), and within social science research alone, an array of emotions including love, grief, anger, fear and hope have been shown to have mobilising qualities that can help promote transformative action (Morrison, Johnson and Longhurst, 2013; Ahmed, 2014; Kleres and Wettergren, 2017; Kennedy and Johnston, 2019; North et al., 2020; Pickerill, 2021). When emotions are expressed within groups, such as collective action within social movements, they can often be linked to agency, resistance, and action (Brown and Pickerill, 2009), with Sitrin (2012) stating that 'emotional and subjective aspects...are some of the most inspiring and for many in the movements, some of the most powerful reasons why movements continue' (p.84). Social movements and political protest frequently display strong emotion, while also evoking emotions from the public – one needs to 'feel' the knowledge to be moved to act by it (Kleres and Wettergren, 2017). Indeed, one of the founders of XR, Roger Hallam, states 'it is no longer time for charts, it is time for emotions; it is time for courage' (Hallam in Knops, 2020). Clayton and Ogunbode (2023) mirror this sentiment, suggesting that people often find it easier to access how they *feel* than what they know about climate change

and its risks. While possessing the power to mobilise, feelings of anxiety or stress about climate change can also contribute to depression and a withdrawal from individual or collective forms of engagement with climate change (Hamilton, 2020). Other emotional impacts, such as activist burn-out can also lead to withdrawal from groups and movements (Chen and Gorski, 2015). Jasper (2011) concludes

‘emotions are present in every phase and every aspect of protest...They motivate individuals, are generated in crowds, are expressed rhetorically, and shape stated and un-stated goals of social movements. Emotions can be means, they can be ends, and sometimes they can fuse the two. They can help or hinder mobilization efforts, ongoing strategies, and the success of social movements’ (p.286).

In addition to impacts on mobilisation, emotions play a significant role in the human experience of climate change and environmental transformation, which cannot be understood without emotion, especially when considering notions of place. Emotional geographies may help to understand how emotional bonds are created between individuals and specific places or environments, such as topophilia and biophilia (Tuan, 1974; Wilson, 1984; Stedman and Ingalls, 2014) as well as feelings of belonging or non-belonging in place (Radford, 2017). When places undergo significant deliberate or unintended transformations, such as urban development or climate change impacts, people’s senses of and attachments to place might be altered (Manzo et al., 2023), with calls for an ‘ethic of care and relational responsibility...to respond to place

disruptions' (ibid, p.47). Within different place contexts, emotions are understood differently – emotional experience can be similar, yet responses are deeply impacted by people's lives, cultural histories and contexts (Ahmed, 2014), therefore highlighting the importance of considering emotions within these contexts (Hamilton, 2020). Cox (2009) adds that within social movements, culture, location and biography are all essential in guarding against the universalisation of emotions – emotions are not static, they 'move, change and transform' (Hamilton, 2020), highlighting their inherently relational nature.

The emotional impacts of environmental dispossession, contamination, and development on Indigenous, subaltern, economically disadvantaged and racialised communities are numerous, and these impacts require processes of emotional healing as part of environmental and climate justice (González-Hidalgo et al., 2022). This highlights yet another way that emotions are important when considering environmental change and justice – Askins (2019) reminds us that 'oppression and injustice are deeply emotional, tackling them likewise' (p 107). Contemporary work in critical geography acknowledges this and emphasises the need for an 'abolitionist climate justice' that centres historical racism, intersecting drivers of trauma, and an ethics of care and healing for those most at risk from climate change (Pulido and De Lara, 2018; Ranganathan & Bratman, 2021; Care et al., 2021). Bond and Barth (2020) argue that 'a concern for justice demonstrates some notion of caring about injustice and vice versa. Therefore, care and justice are entangled and co-constituted' (p.1).

Sultana (2011) highlights how emotions also play a critical role in environmental conflicts, depicting how resource struggles, with a focus on water, are not only material challenges, but are also 'mediated through bodies, spaces and emotions' (p.163). Alongside this, emotions and affective politics become important when envisioning a more just future, and have been important considerations in work concerning commoning, self-organisation and autonomy (Sitrin, 2012; Barbagallo, Beuret and Harvie 2019). By giving closer attention to the literature on emotional geographies, as well as drawing from fields including sociology and psychology, we see that emotional and affective dimensions are not subordinate to economic, political or cultural relations, but are productive, valuable and transformative. Emotions have been shown to motivate (and hinder) action, shape personal and collective experiences, and influence perceptions, highlight their importance in addressing complex problems like climate change.

The chapters that follow, specifically chapter 5 to 8, explore how sustainability transformations are felt in Nottingham, not as an attempt to categorise every possible emotion that exists within the study context, but as a heuristic device that foregrounds the most pertinent emotional tendencies emerging throughout the fieldwork. The specific emotions I touch on within the following chapters – love, fear, anger and hope – have their own literature reviews at the beginning of each chapter, situating the emotion in question within wider debates. Rather than treating these emotions as isolated or universal, they are understood as deeply relational, entangled with one another, with place and with the wider social, political and ecological

contexts that shape transformation. As such, the thesis should not be read as a broad taxonomy (see Pihkala, 2022) but as an assemblage of emotion – one that reflects the complex and contradictory ways in which people experience and respond to transformation.

## 2.9 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the evolving landscape of sustainability research, highlighting both technocratic solutions alongside more radical and justice-oriented transformations. While transition scholarship has contributed important frameworks in relation to socio-technical change, it has been increasingly critiqued for its insufficient engagement with questions of power, equity and emotion. Perhaps due to these critiques, emerging scholarship is often employing a more expansive and politicised understanding of transformation, one that allows for and embraces a greater level of complexity.

At the core of this shift is the acknowledgement that environmental transformations are not just technical or ecological, but social, political, cultural and, ultimately, deeply emotional. Calls for 'just transformations' grapple with these factors, seeking to challenge the inequalities that are embedded within social-ecological systems and disrupt business as usual to promote social and ecological justice. Cities are key sites for such transformations, being both drivers of unsustainability as well as promising sites for change, representing a manageable and dynamic scale at which to enact local place-based action.

The literature in this chapter emphasises the importance of not just grounding transformation in place, but also in justice and emotion. These insights provide the foundation for the following empirical chapters, which explore how transformation is felt and negotiated within the Nottingham context. This context is explored within the next chapter, helping to situate the research.

## Chapter 3: Contextualising just urban transformations in 'The Rebel City'

Nottingham, a medium-sized city in England's East Midlands, is known for its rich history and diverse culture. However, in terms of social and economic sustainability, it ranks as the poorest city in the UK based on gross disposable household income (GDHI) (ONS, 2021). It is a city suffering from the symptoms of over a decade of austerity and with that, widening inequality and high levels of poverty. Additionally, like many other urban areas, it faces increasing risk from climate change and environmental degradation including air and water pollution, urban heating and increasing flood events.

In response to such risk, in 2019 Nottingham City Council (NCC) declared its ambition to become the country's first carbon neutral city by 2028, outlining these plans in their 'Carbon Neutral Action Plan' (NCC, 2020). While significant actions, such as the creation and implementation of the plan are integral in tackling the climate crisis, it is also paramount that the needs, rights and identities of communities are central to decision making. Without these considerations, transformations risk widening existing inequalities, especially within vulnerable groups (Blythe et al., 2018) which is arguably even more important to consider in places such as Nottingham that are also facing significant hardships economically and socially. Cities like Nottingham may also be well placed to represent the experiences of urban residents nationwide, as most



people reside in 'non-major' or 'non-capital' cities (Haupt et al., 2022). Despite this, these areas typically receive limited attention compared to 'winner-take-all'<sup>6</sup> cities (Florida et al., 2020). This limited attention risks reinforces existing inequalities, showing the vital importance of focusing on a greater diversity of urban areas within research.

The following chapter introduces the Nottingham case study, highlighting why further attention to 'ordinary' places may be integral to understand processes of urban transformation (Robinson, 2006). Concentrating on the city's physical environment, history, political landscape, deprivation levels, economy, and environmental initiatives, the chapter paints a vivid picture of Nottingham, while shedding light on the complexities of urban change.

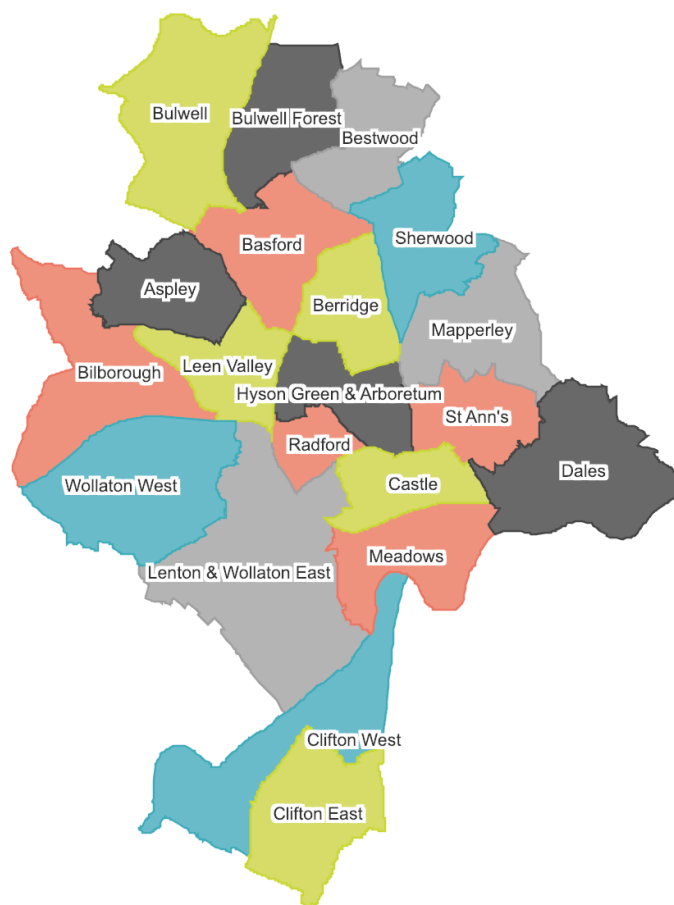
### 3.1 Boundaries and demographics

Nottingham is mid-sized city with a unitary area population of 323,000 (ONS, 2021). The city is in the 'geographical heart of England', surrounded by other towns and cities including Lincoln, Newark, Derby and Leicester (Collins, 2015). The administrative boundary of Nottingham is tight (figure 3) when compared to many other cities (Wilson and Lilly, 2016) and the wider county. Nottingham City Council is a unitary authority, responsible for providing all local services to its communities (e.g. housing, education, social care, planning, transport, highways) which means they have a major role to play both in social justice and achieving environmental goals. Despite this

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<sup>6</sup> 'A city or metropolitan area that garners a disproportionate share of talent and other economic assets, generating an inordinate share of innovation, start-up companies, wealth, income, and economic output' (Florida et al., 2017).

devolved power, many argue that the 'significant under bounding' of the city borders mean the area is too small to operate efficiently, going hand in hand with the high levels of deprivation within the city boundary (Locker, 2020) as discussed in section 3.4. Such boundaries mean that the amount of council tax generated is inhibited<sup>7</sup>. Additionally, over half of the people working and using services in the city boundary do not live there, meaning that they do not contribute to the funding of these assets (Locker, 2020).



*Figure 3 Map of Nottingham City Council Wards (Nottingham City Council, 2019)*

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<sup>7</sup> There are currently talks regarding altering this city boundary to include parts of Broxtowe, Gedling and or Rushcliffe (Martin, 2025).

Nottinghamshire has a population of approximately 1.1 million (14<sup>th</sup> highest in the country), and contains a larger proportion of more affluent areas when compared with areas inside the city boundary, including West Bridgford which is located less than two miles from the city centre. Unlike Nottingham City, Nottinghamshire County Council is a two-tier authority and is made up of seven district and borough councils. The county council also covers a variety of rural areas in addition to several urban areas.

Demographically, Nottingham city is relatively diverse with 34.1% of the City's population coming from global majority backgrounds<sup>8</sup>, and a further 8.6% coming from white groups who do not identify as white British (figure 4). This is much higher than the national average of 18.3% (ONS, 2021), and substantially higher than Nottinghamshire County where just 4% of the population come from non-white British backgrounds. In addition to being a diverse city, Nottingham also has a relatively young age structure, with 21% of its citizens aged under 18 and 30% aged between 18 and 29 (Nottingham Insight, nd), partly due to the two large universities found in the city. This high student population, coupled with international migration, means the city sees a large amount of population 'churn', which continues to lead to tensions and conflicts among different communities within the city – issues of studentification for example will be explored later in the thesis.

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<sup>8</sup> While the City and County Council still uses the term 'BME', this thesis will use global majority due to critiques of the limitations of this term (e.g. Campbell-Stephens, 2020).

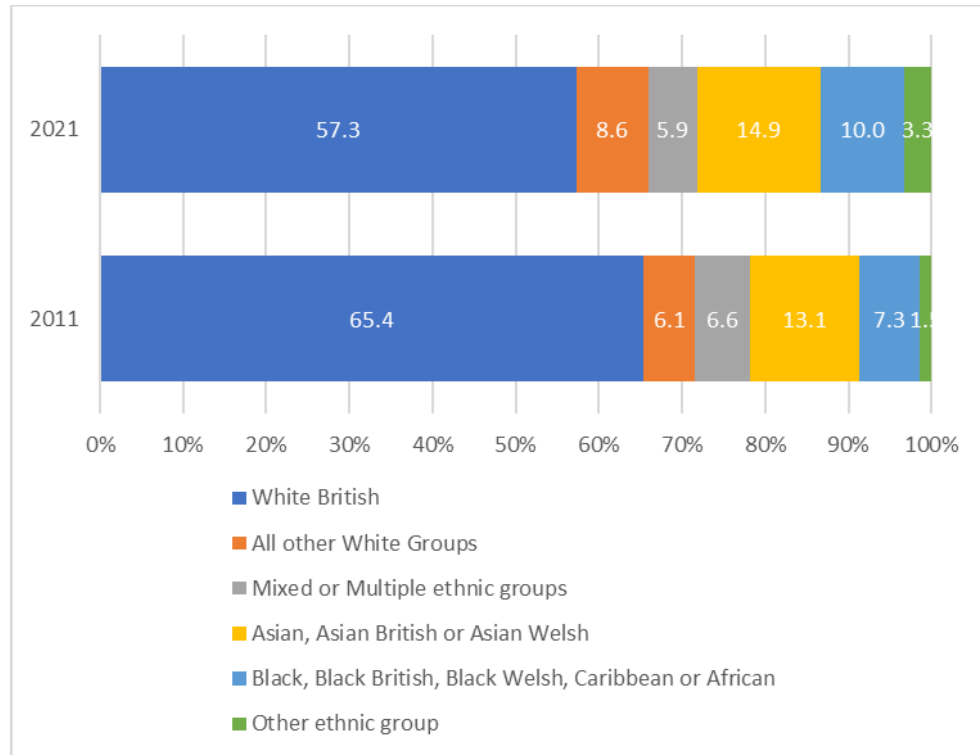


Figure 4 Breakdown of ethnicities in Nottingham from Nottingham Insight (2023) using 2011 and 2021 Census data from ONS

### 3.2 Bio-physical landscape

Though this thesis focuses largely on the social aspects of environmental transformations, it is important to understand the biophysical elements that underpin the city's environmental targets and response to climate change, and how they intersect with issues of social injustice and inequality. The natural environment helps residents to create attachments and meanings in place, highlighting its importance as an asset for the city in terms of community wellbeing (Keddie and Ives, 2024; Nottingham City Council, 2024). Yet, it also poses hazards for Nottingham in several ways including flooding and heatwaves, again highlighting the importance of considering the biophysical environment in policy and planning. The environment also

raises a range of emotional responses, with Segal (2023) suggesting 'nature is often prized as inherently nurturing, offering us moments of solace and beauty... for others, unmitigated nature is usually scary, a place arousing dread and foreboding' (p.156), emphasising the significance of integrating these bio-physical aspects with social dimensions to develop strategies that address both environmental and social challenges in a holistic manner.

### 3.2.1 Green space

Nottingham as a city has a large amount of greenspace – in 2023, the Ordinance Survey ranked Nottingham as the 8<sup>th</sup> top city in terms of access to public green space (20.68% coverage). The city also boasts 71 Green Flag Awards (an international mark of park quality) – a high density compared to many urban areas in the country outside of London (Sloam, Henn and Huebner, 2023). Figure 5 outlines the green spaces found in the city, including parks, gardens and allotments. Despite this seemingly extensive network of green space, inequality in access, as found in many cities globally (Wüstemann, Kalisch and Kolbe, 2017; Williams et al., 2020), does persist within Nottingham (figure 6). These areas include Bulwell, Bulwell Forest and Bestwood, which are classified as deprived areas in the north of the city centre (IMD, 2019). Other areas of deficiency to the west of the city centre include Bilborough and Wollaton West. The Council cites several barriers to access including large roads (Nottingham Outer Ring Road, A60), railway lines, canals and rivers (Nottingham City Council, 2021). To try and combat accessibility issues, there have been increasing urban greening initiatives by grassroots groups like Grow Notts and Green Hustle, with a

focus on underserved inner-city areas like Sneinton. These efforts highlight the importance of not only the quantity, but also the distribution, configuration and management of green space as these are vital aspects in ensuring that the benefits that these spaces provide can be felt by all communities (Barbosa et al., 2007).

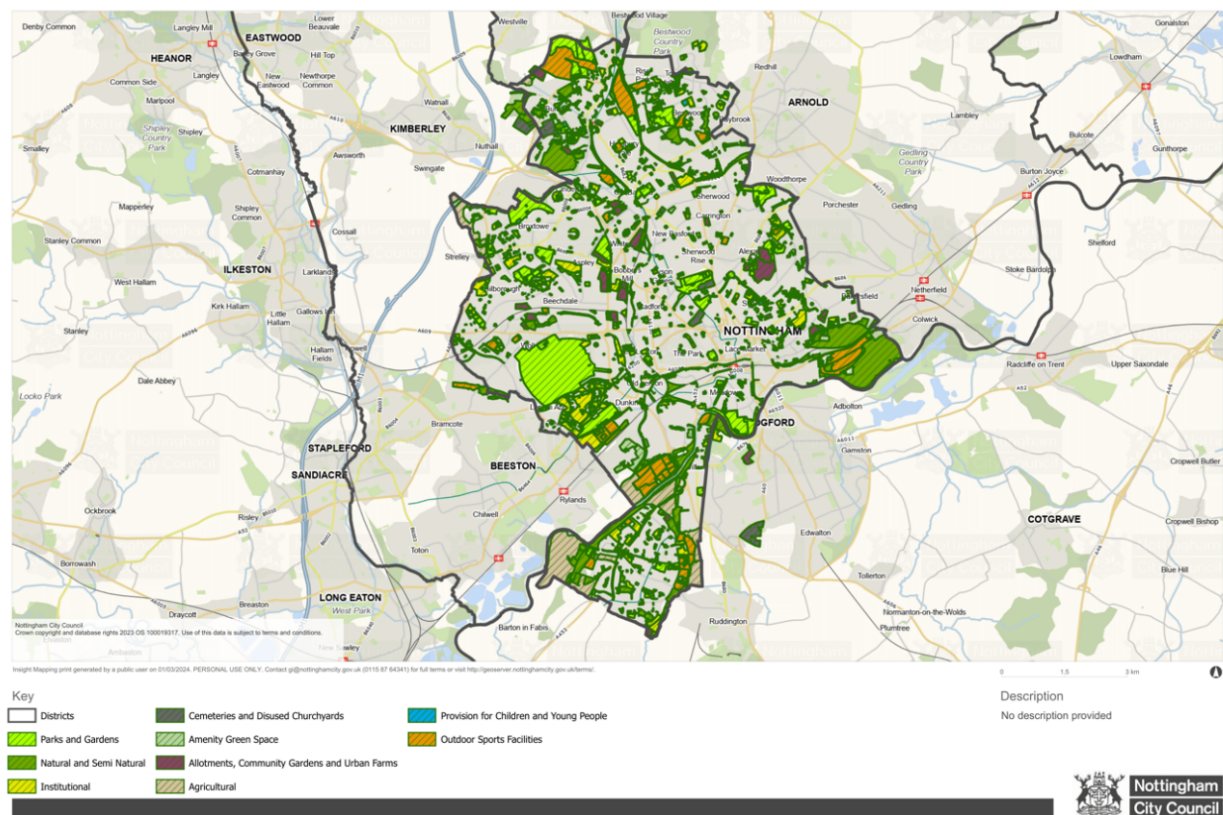


Figure 5 Map showing green space distribution and type within Nottingham city wards (Nottingham City Council, 2024)

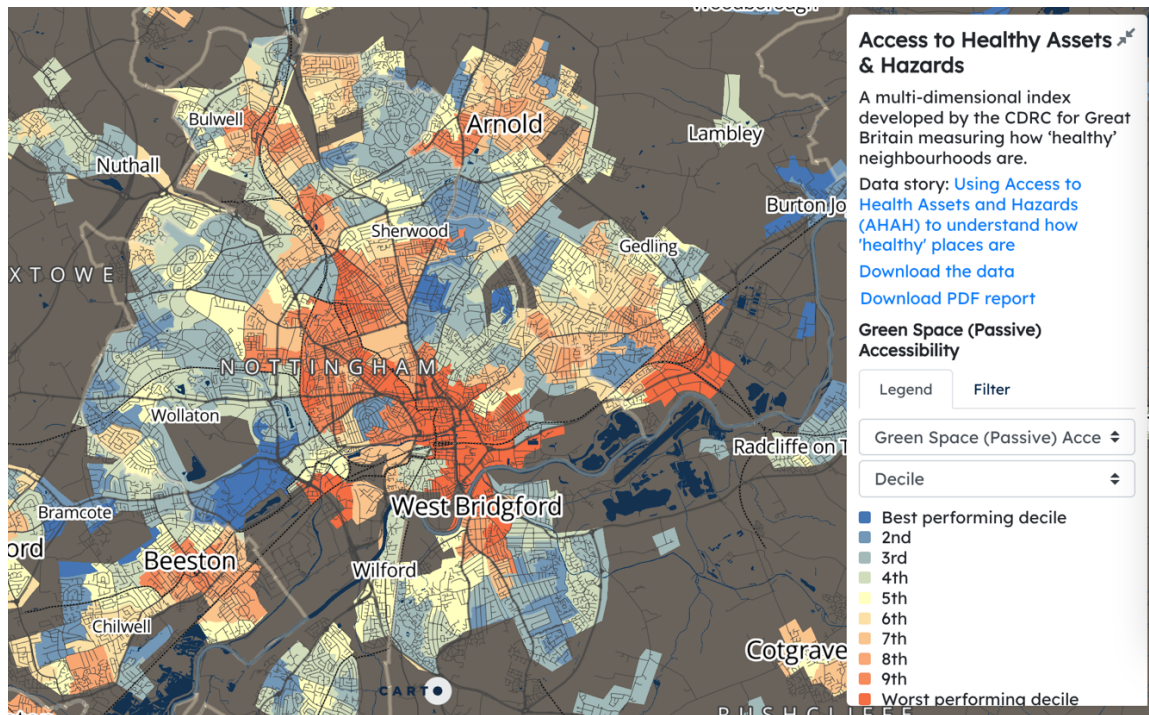


Figure 6 Distribution of passive access to green space in Nottingham (Nottingham City Council, 2024)

### 3.2.2 Blue space

As well as green space, the city has several blue spaces. It is situated along the lower valley of the River Trent (the third longest river in the UK which also passes through Stoke-on-Trent, Stone, Staffordshire, Rugeley and Burton-upon-Trent), and has numerous lakes both inside and outside of the city boundary such as Highfields Park, Bestwood Country Park and Colwick Country Park. Water quality within these spaces represents a mixed picture, with the River Trent continuing to face challenges largely due to a dramatic increase of untreated sewage into the river and its tributaries (Trent Rivers Trust, 2024).

With this comes a long history of flooding (Macdonald, 2013) with increasing frequency and intensity of storm events such as Storm Babet (2023) and Storm Henk

(2024) exacerbating flooding occurrences. In 2023 and 2024, storm events caused widespread flooding in the City and County, resulting in a major incident being declared with widespread impact on the built environment. Hundreds of properties and businesses were evacuated, numerous roads were closed, and tram services were ceased (ITV News, 2024; BBC, 2024). Beyond such physical, structural damage, research has also shown that residents living with persistent flooding in Nottinghamshire face significant levels of stress which has impacts on mental health and wellbeing. This is often linked to a sense of being trapped in flood risk areas due to socio-economic circumstance (Fothergill et al., 2021), highlighting issues of distributional injustice.

### 3.2.3 Climate change and heatwaves

Flooding is only one of many negative impacts associated with climate change locally and nationally. Heatwaves are also increasing in both severity and frequency, posing threats to biodiversity due to droughts and wildlife (Moore, 2022) as well as to human wellbeing and health. In the East Midlands region, there were 209 heat related mortalities during five heat periods in summer 2023 (UK Government, 2023), an increase from 152 in 2022. This trend is likely to continue or intensify, with global temperatures exceeding 1.5 degrees of warming from February 2023 to February 2024 for the first time in history (Copernicus, 2024). Figure 7 below outlines the mean temperature in Nottingham since 1979, showing a much warmer period during 2022 and 2023.



A recent report reveals how Nottingham may be especially vulnerable to the negative impacts of extreme heat (Ogunbode et al., 2023). Nottingham City is ranked fifth out of 156 local authorities in England within a list detailing place needing to be prioritised for adaption to hot weather. It outlines how areas with low access to green space, high crime rates and poor-quality housing stock are the main factors contributing to vulnerability, with Nottingham having issues in these areas<sup>9</sup>. Heatwave events therefore do not pose equal threats to all members of society – UK residents from global majority backgrounds are four times more likely to live in vulnerable areas compared to white people, elderly people and those under five are more likely to suffer health impacts, people with low incomes are more likely to be admitted to hospital during extreme temperatures and those experiencing homelessness are more likely to be exposed to extreme heat (Ogunbode et al., 2024) because of high levels of deprivation, urban density and limited access to green and blue spaces in some neighbourhoods. The report also highlights how 71% of people surveyed in the city experienced at least one heat-related impact on their physical health, 55% experienced mental health impacts and 31% reported that the heatwave affected their ability to work or earn money (Ogunbode et al., 2024). Importantly, many of these groups are facing multiple intersecting forms of inequality, which are being exacerbated by the effects of climate change.

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<sup>9</sup> As mentioned in section 3.2.1, while Nottingham is relatively 'green', access to green space is limited, especially in more deprived areas.

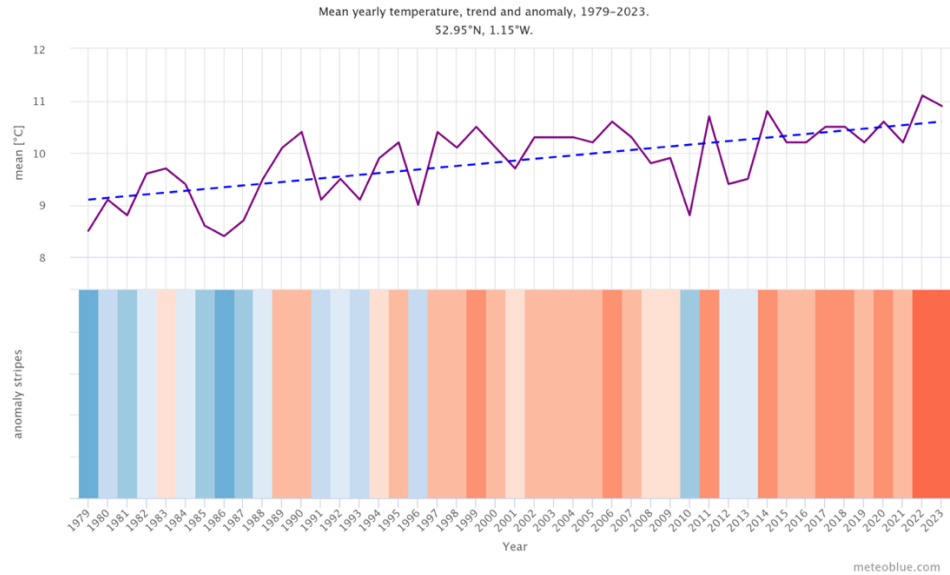
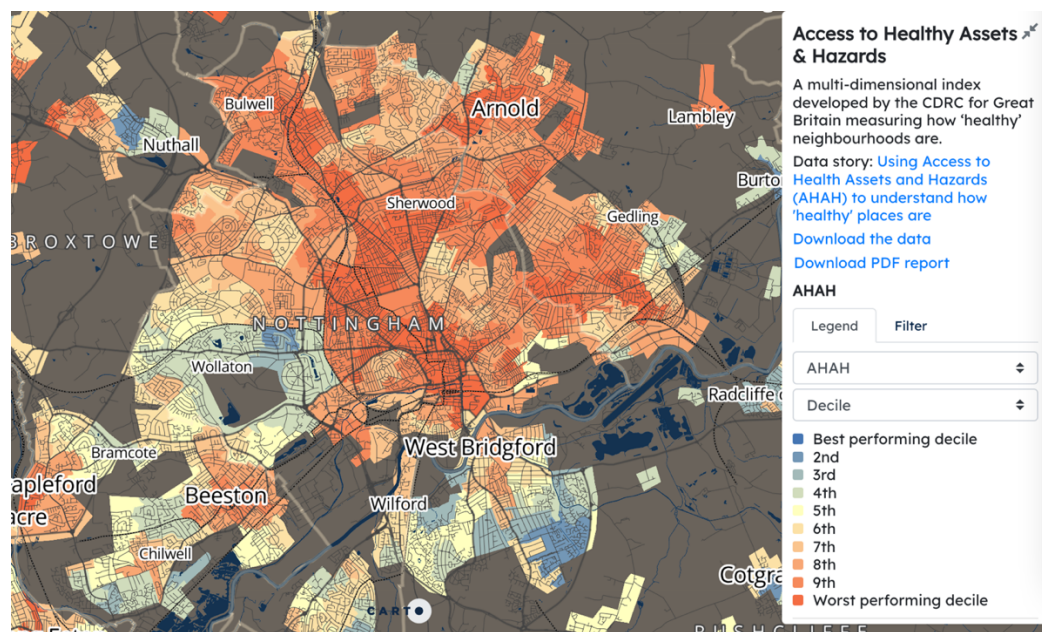


Figure 7 Mean yearly temperature (degrees centigrade) in Nottingham from 1979 to 2023 – each coloured stripe represents the average temperature for a year – blue for colder and red for warmer years (Meteoblue, 2024)

### 3.2.4 Air quality

In 2017 it was reported that Nottingham was one of several UK cities that broke WHO air pollution guidelines for the maximum concentration of small particulate matter from both vehicles and wood-burning stoves – there is no known safe level of exposure to air pollution, meaning this is having significant impacts on human health in both the city and county (Air Quality Strategy for Nottingham and Nottinghamshire, 2020). Research has also found that the most deprived fifth of areas in the East Midlands had significantly higher mean PM<sub>10</sub> (particulate matter) and NO<sub>2</sub> (nitrogen dioxide) air pollution concentrations than the most affluent fifth (Air Quality Strategy for Nottingham and Nottinghamshire, 2020), raising important questions around contextual and distributional injustices.

This exposure has negative health impacts, with around 5.7% of all adult deaths (equivalent to more than 410 deaths) in Nottinghamshire County, and 6.3% of all adult deaths (equivalent to 146 deaths) in Nottingham City being attributed to long term exposure to human-made particulate air pollution (Nottingham Insight, 2019). Steps are being made by the local and county council to tackle these issues, not only through an air quality strategy, but also through CN28, as it is hoped that reducing car journeys will improve air quality within the city, as initiatives taken to tackle climate change are also likely to target air pollution. Figure 8 below outlines the distribution of air quality and other metrics throughout the city.



*Figure 8 Map highlighting access to Health Assets and Hazards which includes air quality, particulate matter and access to green and blue space in Nottingham (Nottingham City Council, 2024)*

As Segal (2023) reminds us, the biophysical environment of places as described above evokes a variety of emotional responses from serenity to fear, highlighting the importance of considering such feelings in policies addressing climate change, especially given

that many of these metrics are invisible. This section has highlighted the importance of addressing environmental challenges with a holistic approach, acknowledging the physical landscape alongside the emotional, social and economic factors that shape residents' experiences of living with climate change and its impacts.

### 3.3 Political Landscape

To understand the broader dynamics within Nottingham's governance and decision-making processes, it is important to consider political context.<sup>10</sup> Nottingham City Council has been a Labour stronghold since 1988. In the 2023 elections they gained further seats from the Conservative party meaning there are 51 Labour councillors representing the city with a further 5 from independent parties (Nottingham City Council, 2023) (figure 9). This pattern is also found in parliamentary constituencies, with all three of Nottingham's MPs representing Labour, showing a relatively stable and uncontested political environment within local government. This local political stability allows decision makers to take a medium-long term view in decision making, knowing that they are unlikely to be voted out of office over single issues (Dale et al., 2014). This perhaps allows for them to make bolder moves than more precarious councils, including ambitious (and often divisive) initiatives such as Robin Hood Energy and the Workplace Parking Levy (discussed in section 3.7.3). However, there is also concern about the prevalence of one-party councils or those who have little

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<sup>10</sup> This section speaks to the political context of the city and county while this research was being undertaken, and therefore doesn't go into detail about Reform's take over of the county council in May 2025.

competition as they can produce issues over time such as complacency, stagnation, reduced accountability and corruption (Fazekas, 2015), factors that participants of this research commonly touched upon and will be unpacked later in the thesis.



*Figure 9 Political representation in each Nottingham City Council ward in after 2023 elections (Nottingham City Council, 2023)*

Nottinghamshire County Council held a Conservative majority until from 2021-2025, prior to which there was fluctuation between Labour and Conservative majorities.

Now controlled by Reform, the County represents a more dynamic political landscape<sup>11</sup>. The wider diversity of parties represented in the county council (figure 10)

<sup>11</sup> They too mirror differences in socio-economic contexts, as many parts of the county are more affluent than Nottingham City.

points to a more complex governance environment, which has the potential to delay action and collaboration on pressing issues such as climate change and social inequality<sup>12</sup>, with different parties often holding differing opinions about the issues at hand as well as how to act on them. This is especially prevalent and pressing within the County’s current political climate, the Reform party closely linked with climate denial and anti-net-zero rhetoric (Smith, 2024; Caswell, 2025). The issues faced in the region extend across these complex geo-political boundaries (Miller et al., 2022), meaning bridging these political divides and fostering collaboration across difference is paramount for addressing them.

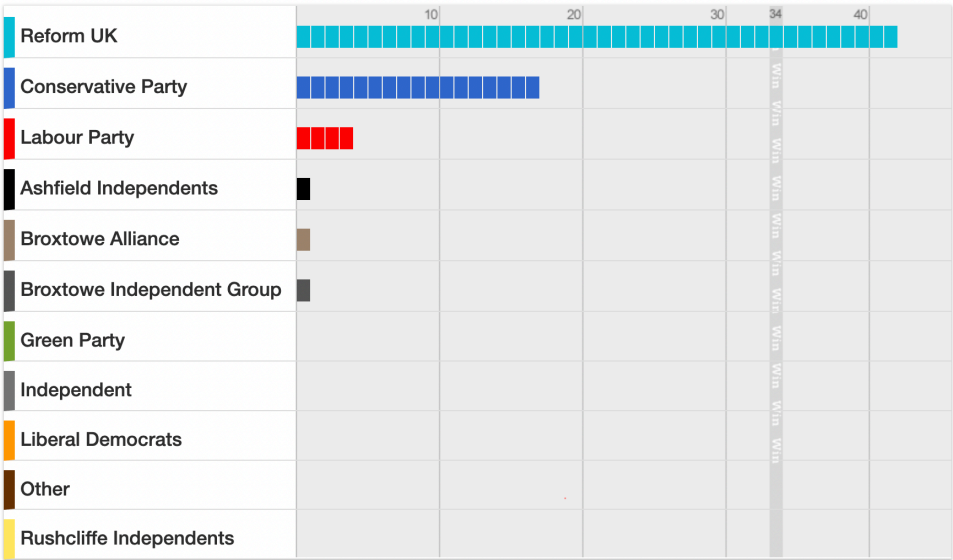


Figure 10 Nottinghamshire County Council 2025 election results (shown in number of seats) (Nottinghamshire Council, 2025)

<sup>12</sup> This topic will be explored in more detail later in the thesis when exploring work between Nottingham City Council and the wider County Council.

In 2024, a £4 billion East Midlands devolution deal was made, with Derbyshire County Council, Nottinghamshire County Council, Derby City Council and Nottingham City Council approving plans to create the East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCA) by spring 2024 (figure 11) (Nottinghamshire Gov, 2023). According to Barry Lewis, the leader of Derbyshire County Council, 'our shared vision is for the 2.2 million people who live and work in the heart of the country to be better connected and more prosperous – addressing years of historically low investment in our region' they say 'devolution brings much more control over our own area. Rather than many major decisions being made for us in London, local people would have a say in the region's priorities' leading to 'a better connected, more competitive and prosperous East Midlands' (EMCA, nd). David Mellen, previous leader of Nottingham City Council until May 2024 adds 'people in Nottingham will see real benefits with more investment in jobs, training and housing. It is vital that we continue to work closely with our neighbouring councils on this...Nottingham has not had the investment it needs and deserves, and this deal will start to address this' (Nottinghamshire County Council, 2023). The four authorities will still exist as individual entities but will work together on a formal and legal basis to 'improve the region for our communities and businesses'. More recently, the combined authority has also approved the nation's largest Local Area Energy Plan (LAEP) to work towards national net zero goals (EMCA, nd).



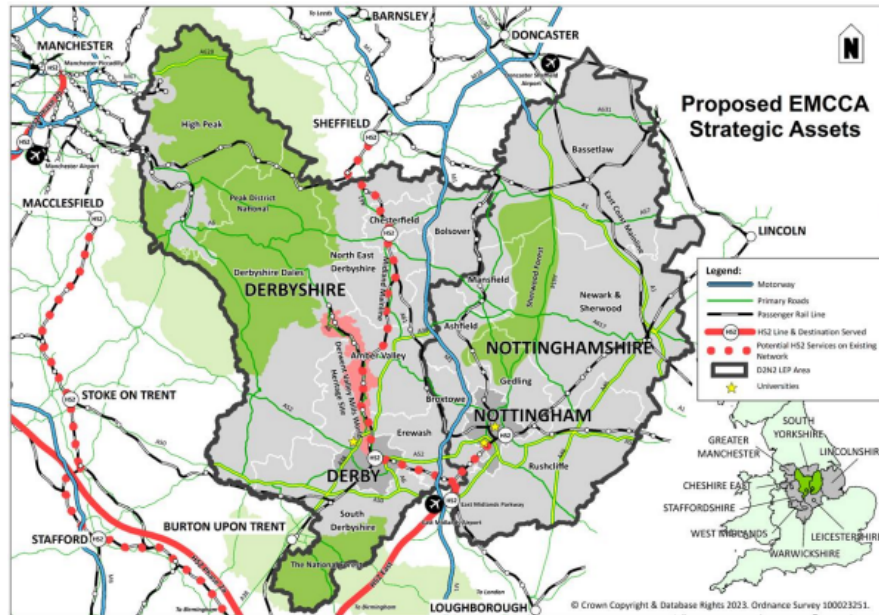


Figure 11 Proposed boundary for East Midlands Combined Authority (Nottinghamshire County Council, 2023)

Despite these hopes, there is a level of scepticism about the realities of the deal with Breach (2022) stating that 'East Midlands devolution deal's geography mismatch will struggle to overcome problems of fragmentation that hamper local economic policymaking and service delivery' adding that this 'muddled devolution' may make future reform more difficult due to competing socio-political and economic contexts.

### 3.4 Deprivation and injustice in Nottingham

Despite being a 'Core City'<sup>13</sup> and ranked as a sufficiency-level<sup>14</sup> city by the Globalization and World Cities Research Network (World Cities, 2020), Nottingham faces high levels of deprivation and is classified as the poorest city in the United

<sup>13</sup> 'Core Cities is an alliance of 11 cities - Belfast, Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham and Sheffield. Our mission is to unlock the full potential of our great city regions to create a stronger, fairer economy and society' (Core Cities UK).

<sup>14</sup> According to GaWC, sufficiency level cities are ones that have sufficient services, meaning they are not overtly dependent on world cities. They are usually comprised of smaller capital cities and traditional centres of manufacturing regions.



Kingdom<sup>15</sup> (Hartley, 2023). Facing disproportionate amounts of poverty and inequality (Cauvain, 2018), the city ranks 11<sup>th</sup> worst out of 317 districts within England in terms of deprivation (Nottingham Insight, 2020), with 30% of the Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in the city falling into the bottom 10% nationally (figure 12)<sup>16</sup>. The Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) measures income (the proportion of the population experiencing deprivation relating to low income), employment (the proportion of the working age population in an area involuntarily excluded from the labour market), education (the lack of attainment and skills in the local population), health (the risk of premature death and the impairment of quality of life through poor physical or mental health), crime (the risk of personal and material victimisation at local level), barriers to housing and services (the physical and financial accessibility of housing and local services) and living environment (the quality of both the 'indoor' and 'outdoor' local environment) (Bowie, 2019).

Health Innovation East Midlands (2023) highlights that Nottingham faces a multitude of health inequalities including a lower life expectancy than the national average (81 years for women in Nottingham compared to 83.1 in England, 76.6 for men in Nottingham compared to 79.4 in England), higher prevalence of mental health issues compared to national average as well as higher rates of childhood obesity. There are also significant inter-Nottingham inequalities, with people residing in some of the

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<sup>15</sup> Using the Gross Disposable Household Income (GDHI) measure.

<sup>16</sup> These figures are based on the most up to date Indices of Multiple Deprivation Data (IMD) from 2019, as an update is yet to be formally commissioned (UK Government, 2022) and is not expected until late 2025 (OCSI, 2023).

city's poorest area's having a 12 year reduction in their healthy life expectancy compared to the most affluent areas (Sloam, Henn and Huebner, 2023), and people from global majority populations receiving less primary care despite having a higher prevalence of a variety of illnesses (Small Steps Big Changes, 2023). According to the thriving places index (Centre for Thriving Places, 2022), a set of scores comprised of data from the Office for National Statistics, Nottingham also has low levels of community cohesion<sup>17</sup>, and low education levels for both children and adults (with 19.5% of the population aged over 16 having no qualifications). While several places nationally saw decreasing absolute child poverty rates, Rollison (2024) shows that Nottingham experienced large increases, and tops the list of places for highest relative poverty rate, especially in neighbourhoods such as Hyson Green, Radford, Sneinton and St Anns.

Another challenge the city experiences is high levels of unemployment, with a rate of 5.9% compared to a national average of 3.7% (ONS, 2024), while also having significantly lower wages than elsewhere across England (£30,400 per annum compared with £39,500). Additionally, Nottingham has the highest rate of unhoused people in the East Midlands, with 1 in 162 people in the city living in temporary accommodation or sleeping on the streets (Shelter, 2023), again adding to the highly

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<sup>17</sup> This was previously measured in Nottingham using the Citizens' survey, a wide scale city wide survey, which was stopped in 2020 due to budget cuts. Centre for Thriving places use a 'Social Fragmentation Index' based on data from the ONS Annual Population Survey.

unequal landscape that exists in the city.

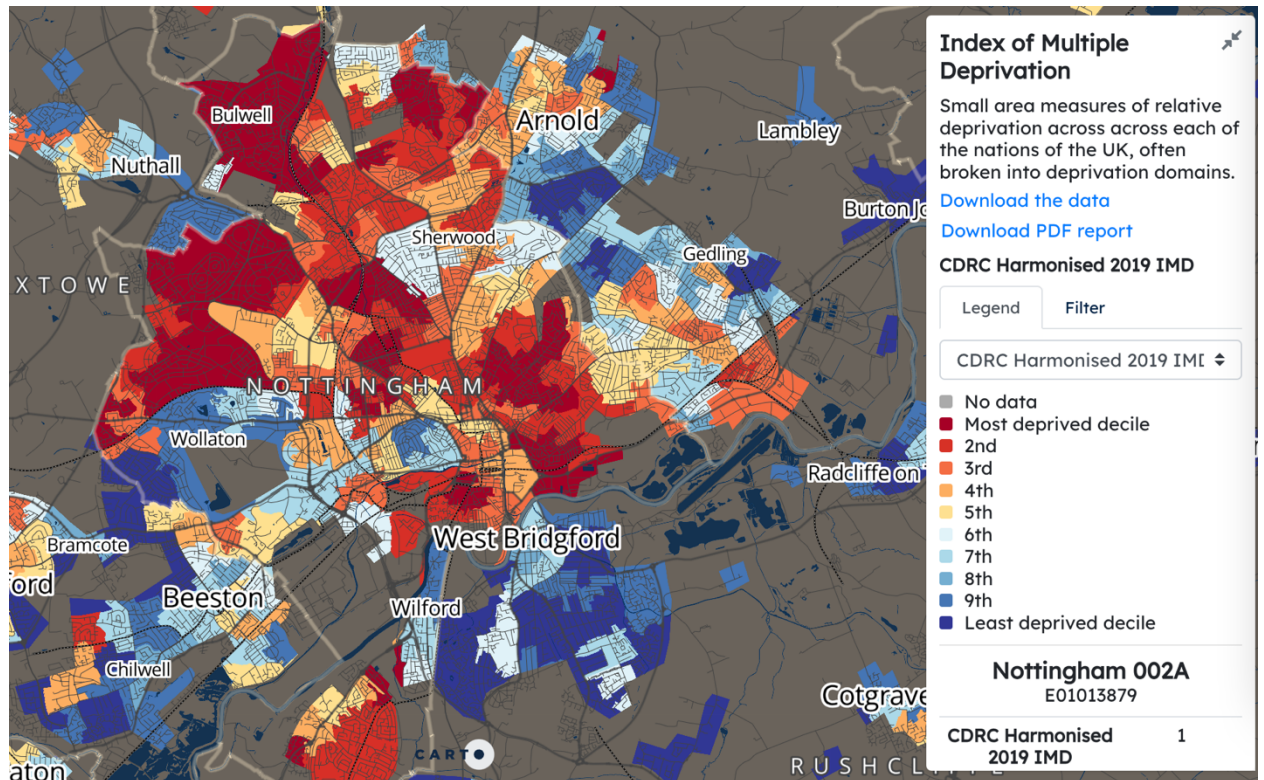


Figure 12 IMD data for Nottingham City and parts of the wider county (Nottingham City Council, 2024)

As touched on in section 3.2.3 these inequalities do not act in silos, with many residents facing multiple and intersecting forms of deprivation. Socio-economic inequalities intertwine with various other factors, such as access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. Factors including race, gender, and disability intersect with socio-economic status, creating multifaceted experiences of injustice within the city (Perkins, 2018; Versey, 2021). As noted above there are poorer health outcomes within deprived areas when compared to more affluent ones in the city, and within these communities, people from global majority backgrounds are likely to face additional barriers to accessing healthcare services, showing how experiences of inequality are combined and intensified. In section 3.2 we also saw how

many of these areas also lack access to green space and are therefore more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change while also not accessing the health benefits associated with such spaces. This complex interplay highlights the necessity for comprehensive, holistic approaches that address the interconnected nature of these issues and strive for equitable outcomes for all members of the community.

### 3.5 Austerity and financial management

Adding even greater complexity for addressing such inequality, governments worldwide have implemented a series of austerity programmes in response to the 2008 financial crisis. These economic measures have been especially prominent in the UK, causing cuts to several services and leaving the services themselves and the people who depend on them in a precarious position (Hoddinott, Fright and Pope, 2022). There is also evidence that higher tiers of government have purposely targeted austerity towards urban areas in England in a process of 'austerity urbanism' (Peck, 2012), as cities are often in receipt of high levels of government funding and are therefore more vulnerable when cuts are made. Processes of austerity also disproportionately impact economically and socially marginalised groups (Hastings et al., 2017) and women (Craddock, 2017).

Like most other councils, Nottingham City Council has faced significant budgetary cuts from central government (figure 13), while also dealing with an increase in demand for provision in adult social care and legacies of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2024, the city council faced a £23 million overspend, largely due to adult social care, and announced a £50 million budget gap for the years 2024-5 (Butler, 2024). The Local

Council Association (2024) stated 'given that core spending power in 2024/25 has been cut by 23.3 per cent in real terms compared to 2010/11, it is unsustainable to expect them to keep doing more for less in the face of unprecedented cost and demand pressures.' This means that the city council is increasingly reliant on raising funds from sources like council tax, burdening already financially 'stretched' residents (Carty and Watson, 2024). In part due to cuts in national government spending, the council issued a section 114 notice in November 2023, effectively declaring bankruptcy. They are the fourth city council to declare insolvency in 2023/4, and the sixth in the past three years (Butler, 2023).

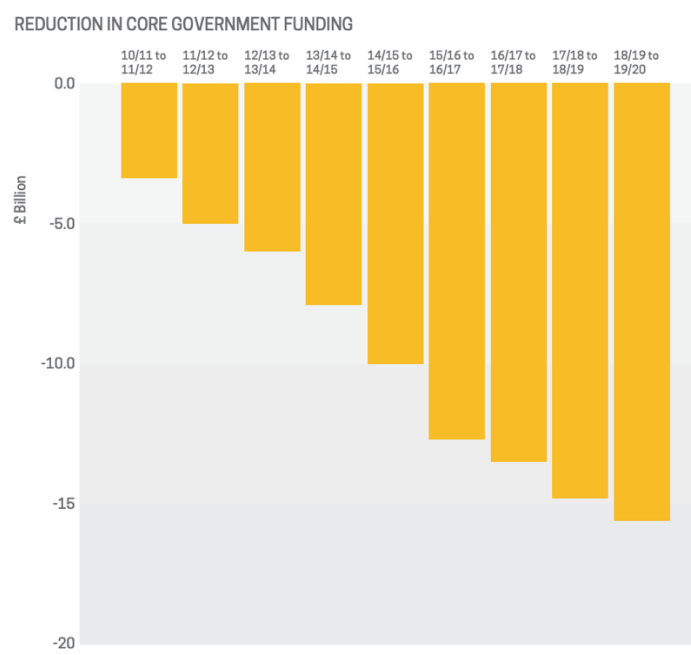


Figure 13 Graph showing local government funding cuts 2011-2020 (LGA, 2020)

Political opposition, however, argue that the council's challenges largely stem from financial mismanagement, including the collapse of community energy project Robin Hood Energy (discussed in section 3.7) which cost over £38 million, caused the loss of

230 jobs and spurred additional misspending of ringfenced budgets (Caswell and Martin, 2023). In 2021 following the collapse, an Improvement and Assurance Board by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities was appointed and produces yearly reports on progress, with additional commissioners being appointed to oversee improvement activities following the 114 notice. In 2023, the city's internal auditors further stated that its financial management was 'not fit for purpose' (Caswell and Martin, 2023). Nottingham Labour have responded to these claims, stating

'The blame for this budget does not lie with our council officers who have been asked to bring forward as many proposals as possible to make savings to fill our budget gap. The blame lies with the Conservative Government...they have cut our funding...they have relied on an outdated Local Government model which is no longer fit for purpose...they have forced councils to cut services to the bone...cuts in local government have disproportionately affected the poorest areas. Nottingham has lost the equivalent of £950 per resident from cuts, Oxfordshire only £96, nearly ten times less.' (Nottingham Labour, 2024)

Despite substantial public consultation and pushback from councillors and community members, a full set of cuts was approved by the city council on March 4<sup>th</sup> 2024, with the commissioners denying any amendments to the proposed cuts. These include removal of all funding to arts and cultural services in the city as well as voluntary sector organisations and charities, removal of funding for community centres, a review of library service provision, closure of multiple care homes, parks and youth provisions,

reduction in capacity of adult social care, all of which have a hugely detrimental impact on social and cultural spaces in the city which are integral for social capital and community building. Despite such cuts, CN28 has remained which will be discussed in section 3.7.3.

During the budget meeting, several councillors were visibly moved, with some crying as they made their vote, and then council leader David Mellen<sup>18</sup> saying it was the worst thing he has had to do in his 20 years in local government (Pridmore, 2024), highlighting the overtly emotional nature of the situation. All but one councillor voted in favour of the budget, noting that they were told beforehand that council staff pay and local services would be stopped if the budget was not passed (Pridmore, 2024b).

Councillor Shuguftah Quddoos, who serves as a councillor for the Berridge ward but also holds the ceremonial post of the Sheriff of Nottingham, was the only councillor to vote against further budgetary cuts. She stated

'It's...true that our city is at the centre of a storm of overlapping crises in housing, in social care, the cost of living and the demolition of local democracy. Surely times of crisis require us to be bolder. If we all agree that it is a broken system, what comes of complying with it? Rubber stamping this budget with

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<sup>18</sup> On the 12<sup>th</sup> March 2024 just weeks after the councils announcement of the 114 notice, Cllr David Mellen announced that they were stepping down from their role as leader of the council, but continues to serve as a councillor in the Sneinton ward.

heavy hearts will do little for the 500 people whose jobs are at risk, many of whom are my friends' (Pridmore, 2024<sub>b</sub>)

On behalf of the protestors outside the council chambers (discussed in section 3.6) she added

'These thousands of people love Nottingham and want us to fight for this city. The names here do not have a vote in this room today, nor do our kids in care, people in temporary accommodation, our vulnerable adults, our social workers and social housing tenants, our charities and volunteers, our artists and protectors of culture. They do not have a vote, but I do. We do.' (Pridmore, 2024<sub>b</sub>)

Councillor Qoodeos has since been suspended from the Labour party 'pending investigation' but says she would do it again in a heartbeat due to the love for her city and apprehension in passing these cuts onto the most vulnerable (Moore, 2024). This willingness to 'stand up' against entrenched norms (Ulug, Horlings and Trell, 2021) will be integral when considering the transformative change needed for the city to reach its environmental goals while reducing inequality and injustice for its residents.

### 3.6 History, Identity and Rebellion

Councillor Qoodeos shows here a display of something that is 'engrained deeply in the civic psyche of Nottingham' (Nottingham Castle, nd), a sense of rebellion. Despite, or because of, its socio-economic position, Nottingham has a strong legacy and identity associated with activism, defying categorisation as merely part of the 'missing middle'



of the country (Hardill, Bentley, and Cuthbert, 2006; Massey, 1991). Instead, it has a long history of progressive change and advocating for social justice, with previous research highlighting Nottingham's rebellious, bolshie and proud nature (Collins, 2019). These notions have helped to shape the city's cultural heritage and identity (Collins, 2019) and have also been coopted by the city council, branding Nottingham as a 'City of Rebels' (figure 14).



Figure 14 City council branding on the Broad Marsh redevelopment (Broad Marsh, December 2023, author's own picture)

This 'rebellious' nature has historical links to Robin Hood, as well as to social movements such as the Luddites from 1811-17, where workers broke the machinery that was being used to replace their labour, and Chartism, a mass movement for parliamentary reform, democracy and social rights in manufacturing districts from the 1830s to 1850s (Roberts, 2023). In 1831, the city was also sieged by Reform Bill Rioters,

who set Nottingham Castle on fire and mobbed parts of the city as a response to lack of support for parliamentary reform (Collins, 2015).

In more recent history, Nottingham played a part in the 2011 England Riots, where vandalism and rioting erupted in many UK cities following the shooting of Mark Duggan in London, which has had a lasting impact within the city (Nanrah, 2021).

Following this, Nottingham became home to the first chapter of the Black Lives Matter movement in the UK, forming in 2015. In the years following there were several protests and demonstrations, in 2016 protestors in Nottingham blocked roads and the tram system. Following the murder of George Floyd, there were large scale protests globally, including 3000 people standing in solidarity at Forest Recreation ground (figure 15).



*Figure 15 Forest Recreation Ground BLM protest (June 2020, author's own picture)*

Nottingham also played a part in the global Occupy movement in 2011, with Old Market Square campaigners staying put for over six months to protest unfair financial systems, large corporations and to promote a more democratic society (BBC News, 2012). The Nottingham Occupy movement was the longest running in the UK but were eventually evicted in April 2012. While scholars agree these movements have left lasting social change in terms of networks of connections and shifting discourse about ownership of urban space, their longer-term impact can be difficult to discern (Pickerill, 2020). More recently, there have been waves of anti-austerity movements such as The People's Assembly, Notts Uncut (Craddock, 2017) and Resolve Nottingham, including a petition titled 'No Nottingham Cuts' that was delivered to parliament following the section 114 notice (Hammond, 2024). Trade unions, including performing arts union Equity, have also demonstrated against the 100% cut to arts funding in the city.

The city certainly seems to take pride in this 'rebellious' identity, with several local organizations using the discourse in their events and communications. To name a few over the last decade: the 'Rebellion Gallery' in Nottingham Castle, literary tourism based on 'rebellious' Nottingham literature (Kew, 2023), Riot and Rebellion tour offered by Visit Nottinghamshire, a series of events across the city titled 'Heroes and Villains: subversion and rebellion in Nottinghamshire' (University of Nottingham, 2014), Nottingham Night Light theme 'Rebel City' (2022), community art installations at New Art Exchange titled 'a rebel scene' (NAE, 2016), short films at City Arts celebrating Nottingham's rebellious creativity (City Arts, 2021) as well as a weekly

column in local publication *Leftlion* throughout 2022 called 'Notts Rebels' celebrating different figures in Nottingham history.

This use of rebelliousness in various outlets spanning over a decade (and beyond) could be seen as a strategic mobilisation for political and economic purposes, or as a celebration of a rich history, culture and identity. It is crucial to acknowledge the complexities and contradictions that are inherent in this 'rebellious' self-identity in present day Nottingham, which is not necessarily always seen on the ground (explored in chapter 5). There are also historical examples of division – during the 1984-85 Miners' Strike, the majority of Nottinghamshire miners crossed picket lines and continued to work, creating rifts within communities that are still felt to this day (Pittam, 2019), with the legacy enduring beyond the city too. This complicates the uniformity of the city's identity and branding and as such the role and limitations of such an identity in tackling current environmental and social issues will be discussed in later chapters of this thesis.

Despite the progressive nature discussed above within the city, it is not immune to counter-protest and far-right activity, which has been more visible in the city since this research started. Within this time, we have also seen a significant shift in the approach to policing protests, with the introduction of new laws and a hardening stance on activism. Hadjimatheou (2023) states that 'the approach of law enforcement to environmental protest in the UK has recently hardened, with police announcing intentions to 'rebalance' enforcement in favour of business and daily life, and against protesters seeking to disrupt these evidence of a toughening of the police stance is

already evident...Police in England and Wales have also declared an intention to intensify their use of surveillance powers against protest movements, through the use of informants and undercover police infiltrators and the expansion of technological surveillance such as facial recognition' (p.133). This raises important questions about the future of resistance in places like Nottingham, where a long history of activism has helped to shape its identity.

### 3.7 Environmentalism in Nottingham

As a city, Nottingham also has a 'legacy of climate change commitment' (Sugar, 2021) from above and below (Cauvain, 2018). In this section I outline the City Council's effort to make Nottingham more environmentally friendly, their progress, as well as the barriers and pitfalls they face. The work of grassroots groups and activist mobilisations for the environment within the city are also discussed.

#### 3.7.1 Local government action and policy

An example of one of Nottingham's first efforts to tackle climate change was the Nottingham Declaration. After being announced at a conference in Nottingham in 2000, the declaration sought to 'develop plans with our partners and local communities to progressively address the causes and impacts of climate change, according to our local priorities, securing maximum benefit for our communities' (LGA, 2009). This declaration was the first local authority initiative, acting as a voluntary commitment by local authorities to tackle the climate emergency at a local level. It was signed by 326 local government bodies, who committed to aims including acknowledging climate change, welcoming government targets and creating plans for

carbon management at the local scale (Sugar, 2021). While laudable for bringing climate issues to the table locally, and generally seen as a successful initiative, the declaration did not have any legal basis, nor any follow up to ensure progress was being made across the nation (Gearty and Peverill, 2007) and was therefore limited in its capacity to create transformative change. Accounts also suggest that the initiative was not well known in the public domain, therefore suggesting issues with engagement and participation of local residents (Gearty and Peverill, 2007).

Another initiative taken by the council was the introduction of Europe's first 'Workplace Parking Levy' (WPL) in 2012, a levy of £387<sup>19</sup> per parking space placed on employers with more than 10 liable workplace parking spaces within the county boundary (Clayton et al., 2017; Dale et al., 2019). The aims of the project were to reduce congestion, improve air quality and provide a means of funding an expansion of the NET tram network, improvements to Nottingham Railway Station and the LinkBus service (Dale et al., 2017). This municipal approach demonstrates a successful, locally driven solution to urban mobility challenges, directly addressing the city's needs by merging fiscal policy with infrastructure development. Unlike other transport related projects that rely on national mandates and funding, the WPL represents a self-sustaining strategy. The WPL has directly generated £83 million since implementation and has unlocked a further £600 million in grants. The implementation of the WPL has had several impacts for travel within the city, with 8.6% of current commuters using

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<sup>19</sup> At the time of writing, this figure stands at £550 per space.

sustainable transport having switched from car use between 2010 and 2016 (Dale et al., 2019). Research has also shown a statistically significant reduction in congestion since its introduction (Dale et al., 2017), though this is difficult to attribute to the WPL alone. Additionally, despite initial concerns about de-incentivizing business in the city, the number of businesses has grown by around 2000 since implementation (Transport Action Network, 2023), and figures show no evidence of significant negative economic impacts on Nottingham (Transport for London, 2019). Flack et al (2022) also highlight a number of potential positive social impacts from the levy for employees, employers and residents including better health and wellbeing levels, greater neighbourhood satisfaction and improved access to employment opportunities. Nottingham is still the only city in the UK to have introduced a WPL<sup>20</sup>. However, places such as Cambridge, Oxford, Edinburgh and Glasgow hope to implement similar parking systems. Despite success, WPL do remain contentious, with Neil Bibby, a Scottish Labour MP, branding it a 'commuter tax and a shameless attack on workers' pay packets' (McIntyre, 2023) due to the fact that most organisations pass down at least half of the cost to their employees. This raises important questions around justice regarding who is bearing the burden of 'green' policy initiatives (Steadman et al., 2023).

Perhaps the most high-profile initiative to date was the council owned energy company 'Robin Hood Energy' which was set up in 2015 as the first local authority run energy company in the UK. The main aim of Robin Hood Energy (RHE) was to address

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<sup>20</sup> Other schemes exist globally, mainly in Australia in cities such as Melbourne, Sydney and Perth



energy poverty (a big problem within Nottingham City<sup>21</sup>) through a municipal, not-for-profit public energy company (Bieler, 2021). The company aimed to act as an alternative to the 'Big Six' that supply around 95% of domestic consumers (Hall, Foxton and Bolton, 2017) following the privatization of the UK's energy market under the Thatcher administration in the 80s (Pearson and Watson, 2023). As a not-for-profit, the council hoped that it would be able to provide more affordable energy than competitors, and framed themselves as an organisation providing 'sustainable, fair and affordable energy for everyone' (Robin Hood Energy, 2020), in turn acting as a company bringing 'power to the people' (Winter and Le, 2020). Following the introduction of austerity measures in 2010, local authorities were encouraged to become more entrepreneurial with their resources (Pittam, 2020), which in Nottingham has led to processes of 'creative environmental commercialisation', characterised by ownership of environmental assets such as alternative energy (Winter and Le, 2020). Despite often being framed as 'innovative' or 'brave', these initiatives also leave the council in a precarious position, where they are forced to take risks without clear help or guidance from central government, often lacking the experience or skill required to succeed (Pittam, 2020). In its first years, RHE grew to be a national player in the sector, with 125,000 customers<sup>22</sup> and growing in turnover from £4.6

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<sup>21</sup> NCC reports that 15% of households in Nottingham are facing energy poverty compared to 13% nationally (Bolton, Kennedy and Hinson, 2024).

<sup>22</sup> These included people such as Jeremy Corbyn, former leader of the Labour party, who mentioned the company in a keynote speech at the Labour 2016 Annual Conference (Pittam, 2020).



million in 2015/6 to £100 million in 2018/9 (Pittman, 2020) largely through collaboration with other likeminded councils<sup>23</sup>.

However, due to missed Ofgem payments in the region of £12 million, RHE was closed in September 2020. Remaining residential and business customers were taken over by British Gas, one of the very companies RHE was set up to compete with. Through the sale, the council was not able to cover its losses which auditors amounted to £38.4 million despite having received £43 million in public money and a further £16.5 million in loan guarantees (Ambrose, 2020). In addition to financial loss, over 230 employees were made redundant because of the sale (BBC News, 2020). During the City Council's financial troubles in 2023/24, RHE was repeatedly cited as a prime example of their financial mismanagement (see Murray, 2023; Phipps, Jefford and Locker, 2023; Pridmore, 2023; Sandeman, 2023), further compounding issues caused by austerity measures. The council themselves admitted that RHE has left them with 'less financial resilience' (Phipps, Jefford and Locker, 2023).

The most prominent current initiative is the council's 'Carbon Neutral 2028' (CN28) policy, which sets out the ambition for Nottingham to become the first carbon neutral city in the UK by 2028 and as such is cited as a front-runner in environmental sustainability by the Carbon Disclosure Project (2023) and Climate Emergency UK (2023). CN28 was announced in 2020, following on from the council declaring a climate

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<sup>23</sup> A number of 'white label' contracts were created in other parts of the country, such as White Rose Energy in Leeds, Angelic Energy in Islington and CitizEN in Southampton to name a few – these have all since shut down after the sale of RHE with their customers also being switched to British Gas.

and ecological emergency in 2019. The initiative, which includes a carbon neutral charter and an action plan, outlines 230 points in four main areas: carbon reduction, carbon removal, resilience and adaptation ecology and biodiversity. Within these, sections focus on transport, the built environment, energy generation, waste and water and consumption (Nottingham City Council, 2020). Since inception, the council have also been producing yearly reports outlining progress and have also funded research with local academics to run focus groups with Nottingham communities about engagement with the policy (Henn and Arya, 2021; Henn and Arya, 2023). Since implementation, some key achievements outlined by the city council include (CN28, nd):

- A reduction in overall CO<sub>2</sub> emissions between 2005 and 2021 of 44.7%<sup>24</sup>
- Second highest number of Electric Vehicle (EV) charge points per head of population for any UK core city
- 30% of public buses operating in the city are biogas or electric<sup>25</sup>
- The energy efficiency of nearly 1,000 homes in Nottingham improved by the City Council's Greener Housing works
- Over 36,500 new trees have been planted in the last three years
- Both Nottingham Universities being considered in the top three most sustainable universities in the world (using the UI Green Metric)

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<sup>24</sup> It is important to note here that a large majority of this reduction is down to national grid decarbonisation.

<sup>25</sup> Nottingham City Council was one of only a few in the UK to retain a municipal bus company after deregulation in 1986, meaning they have greater power.

Within and alongside CN28, the local authority has also shown a commitment to upholding notions of social justice, setting ambitious goals for the future. In the CN28 plan, the council outlines a holistic vision for the future of Nottingham – a safer city, a healthy city, a city of opportunity, an inclusive city, a city that takes care of its residents and a city where everyone can reach their potential (figure 16). The council has also backed aspirations to become a UNICEF Child Friendly City, a city-wide partnership that focuses on taking a child rights-based approach (Child Friendly Nottingham, nd), while also aiming to become a City of Sanctuary, providing refuge and support for migrants and refugees (Nottingham City of Sanctuary, 2023).



Figure 16 City Council vision of Nottingham in 2028 (CN28 Action Plan, 2020)

While these are laudable aims, the local authority faces several challenges. To reach their CN28 target for instance, the city would need to reduce their annual carbon

emissions by at least 22.3% year on year, yet in the 2020-2021 report<sup>26</sup>, emissions data indicated an increase of 11.7% (above the national increase of 7.8%). This increase is largely down to the easing of COVID-19 restrictions and colder temperatures (CN28, 2023), but also because the 'low hanging fruit' of carbon reduction strategies have already been completed, leaving the more radical and harder to achieve changes in the final years. The addition of mounting financial pressure and the section 114 notice in 2023-2024 also leave the ambition in a more precarious position – the proposed budgetary cuts include a review of the CN28 initiative, potential changes to public transport and ownership, as well as jobs cuts within environmental teams<sup>27</sup>. At a CN28 review meeting on April 3<sup>rd</sup> 2024, outgoing council leader David Mellen said that the authority was 'holding on by its fingertips' to its carbon neutral target due to immediate financial concerns because CN28 is not a statutory duty (Locker, 2024).

Cllr Mellen suggests that the recommendations outlined in the review for them to be able to reach their carbon neutrality target would be costly, therefore may not be feasible at this time. Other recommendations from the review suggest that harder to achieve, and more controversial actions might be needed (Locker, 2024), such as the implementation of a clean air zone, following other cities such as Bath, Birmingham, Bristol and Sheffield. Clean air zones and Ultra-Low Emission Zones (which has been recently expanded in London), while proven to be beneficial for air quality and carbon

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<sup>26</sup> There is a two-year lag in data availability from the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero who provide all UK councils with emission data, therefore this is the most up to date data available at the time of writing.

<sup>27</sup> Recent personal communication with council members suggest that the CN28 team is currently safe from redundancy proposals, however this could change.

emission reduction, are divisive (Pidd, 2023; Brown, 2023; Fisher and Austin, 2023) largely due to the increased charges placed on residents and businesses. In Nottingham, Cllr Mellen reflects that 'a clean air zone in the city it might help reduce emissions, but would it be the right thing to do for Nottingham when they are already paying for the Workplace Parking Levy?' (Locker, 2024). This shows the complexities of enacting plans like CN28 – while additional measures like clean air zones are promising for advancing environmental goals, they also risk worsening the financial strain on residents. Despite these difficulties, the council say 'we do not apologise for having an ambitious target' and that it is right for them to aim high for the safety of their citizens (Locker, 2024). While remaining committed to CN28, in recent years the city's environmental targets are underlined by a sense of pragmatism, with Cllr Mellen observing the need for short-term solutions to navigate immediate financial pressures stating, 'we have to balance this year's budget rather than thinking about what happens in 2028' (Locker, 2024), contrasting from their usual long-term plans and visions. This poses a significant challenge for the task of sustainability transformation in the city, with austerity measures being shown to significantly constrain the tools available for and the narratives associated with transformative change (Baker and Quinn, 2022).

Mirroring the political variation in the wider county, the local authorities in Nottinghamshire also have wide ranging carbon reduction goals. Sugar (2021) outlines the unequal climate policy that is present in the county, which has been improved in recent years (see table 1), but is still lacking when compared to the city's ambitions. All

local authorities in the area have now made in-house carbon neutral targets (relating to their own carbon emissions) with Broxtowe aiming to beat the City Council's ambition by a year, yet many are still lacking area wide targets, meaning the impact of their policies will be lesser. This highlights issues of scale, as even within a region fragmented and uneven policies persist.

*Table 1 Nottinghamshire local authority climate emergency declarations and carbon reduction commitments (adapted and updated from Sugar, 2021). Council Climate Scorecard score is measured from several metrics and datasets in the areas of buildings and heating, transport, planning and land use, governance and finance, biodiversity, waste reduction and food and collaboration and engagement (Climate Emergency UK, 2023)*

<b>Local authority</b>	<b>Climate Emergency Declaration Date</b>	<b>Carbon neutrality/ net-zero commitment</b>	<b>In- house Carbon Neutral target</b>	<b>Area target</b>	<b>Council Climate Scorecard score (2023)</b>
Nottingham City Council	21/01/19	Commitment made	2028	2028	42%
Nottinghamshire County Council	27/05/21	Partial commitment made	2030	No target	29%
Mansfield District Council	05/03/19	Commitment made	2040	2040	17%

Rushcliffe Borough Council	07/03/19	Partial commitment made	2030	No target	26%
Bassetlaw District Council	No declaration	Partial commitment made	2030	No target	23%
Newark and Sherwood District Council	16/07/19	Partial commitment made	2035	No target	25%
Broxtowe Borough Council	17/07/19	Commitment made	2027	No target	25%
Ashfield District Council	16/09/19	Partial commitment made	2030	No target	25%
Gedling Borough Council	20/11/19	Partial commitment made	2030	No target	31%

### 3.7.2 Community groups and third sector organisations

In addition to local authority measures, there are a wide range of third sector organisations and community groups operating in the city (figure 18). Due to inadequate local authority funding and austerity measures as discussed in section 3.5,

these actors have increasingly been seen as integral in filling the service gaps in the public sector (Baines, Cunningham and Shields, 2017).

Alongside national organisations, local charities and groups operate within a number of areas: food and community gardening (e.g. Himmah, Hope Nottingham, Incredible Edible, Bulwell Forest Garden), energy (e.g. Green Meadows, MOZES, Nottingham Energy Partnership), nature and wildlife (e.g. WildNG, Nottingham Open Spaces Forum) and transport (e.g. Ridewise, CT4N) as well as general environmentalism (Nottingham Climate Assembly, Nottingham Coalition for Climate Justice, BAME Climate Champions). Other organisations focusing on social welfare in the city including the Pythian Club, Nottingham Refugee Forum and Refugee Roots, all also provide an environmental offering for their communities, highlighting the importance of the environmental and nature for wellbeing and community building<sup>28</sup>, as well as an ideological alignment between social action and environmental concerns. Like the council, these organisations have been put under greater strain in recent years following the COVID-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis, with food banks and warm spaces seeing a large rise in users (Blake, 2023). The council's budgetary situation is also likely to have a negative impact on third sector and community organisations, as NCC have announced they will cease any non-essential funding, where they have previously provided thousands of pounds in support (MyNottingham News, 2021). In

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<sup>28</sup> see [Nottingham CVS Big Green Book](#) for more about this, and for more information on social prescribing in Nottingham.



addition to this, rent rates for properties in the city are likely to continue to rise, which has already impacted some organisations<sup>29</sup>.

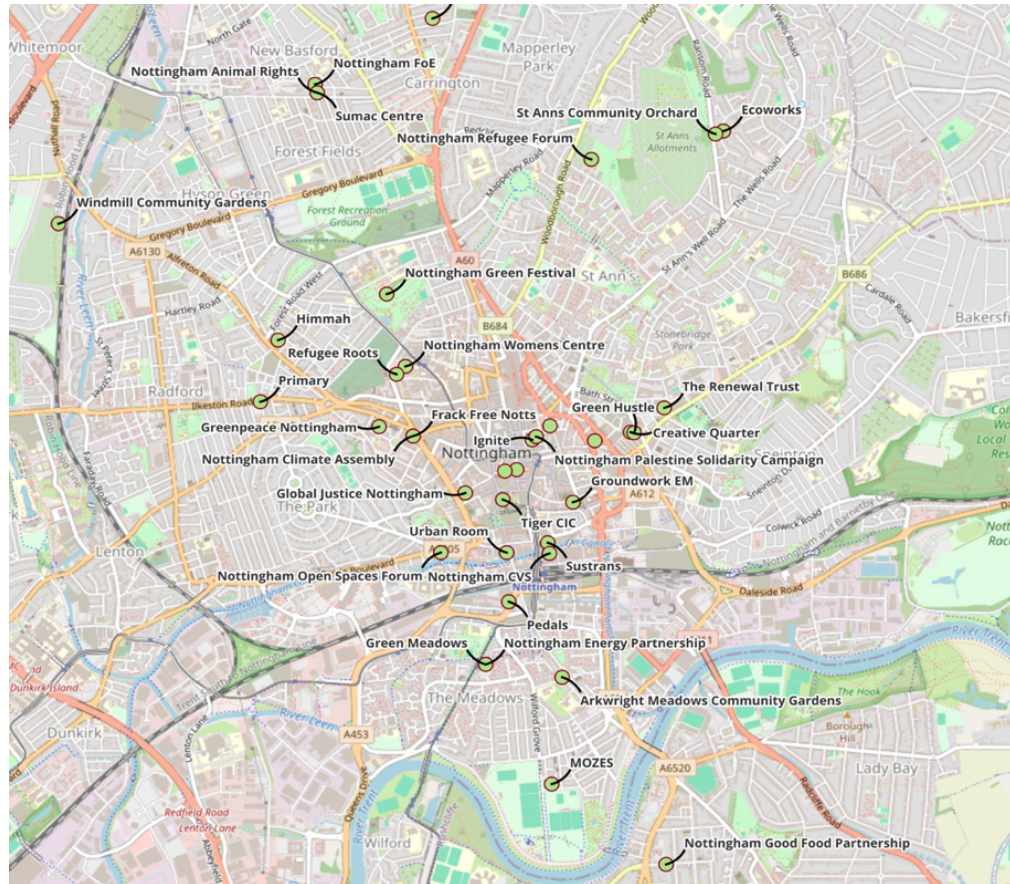


Figure 18 Distribution of environmental focused groups in Nottingham (using their bases as map points)

These organisations are also extremely important in doing on the ground engagement work with Nottingham residents through outreach events. An example of this is the community group 'Green Hustle', who work in partnership with a variety of organisations to put on an annual festival. While promoting nature and sustainability, the festival aims to connect with a wide range of residents and communities, which is

<sup>29</sup> This will be explored further in in chapter 6 of the thesis.

an ongoing problem for the environmental movement (Bell, 2019), marketing themselves as a 'free festival celebrating life, nature, community action and creativity' (Green Hustle, no date). Groups like Nottingham Climate Assembly also sought to include youth voices in the climate conversation during their 'Nottingham Youth Climate Assembly' in 2022<sup>30</sup>, as young people are typically sidelined from conversations about the environment (Wilson et al., 2024). Following the success of the youth assembly, Nottingham Climate Assembly is also planning a full-scale citizens assembly in the hopes of creating a two-way dialogue between citizens, stakeholders and the city council to increase participation of the public in CN28 (Nottingham Climate Assembly, 2023). Additionally, community organising groups like 'Nottingham Citizens' undertake listening campaigns in Nottingham communities and work to action their desires, undertaking campaigns on a variety of social and environmental issues such as fair pay, hate crime and air quality.

### 3.7.3 Environmental activism

As discussed in section 3.6, Nottingham has a strong grassroots and activist scene, which extends into environmental activism. There is a diverse and interconnected network of individuals and groups operating within the city and county who mobilise for a variety of different reasons, including air quality and environmental justice.

One example of this is the creation of a group called 'The Mischief Makers'. This group of artists and activists formed in early 2005 as a creative response to the G8 Summit,

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<sup>30</sup> See <https://www.nottinghamclimateassembly.co.uk/events/nottingham-youth-climate-assembly>

using 'creativity to support community, environmental and social justice campaigns, and activist groups' aiming to 'inspire people and empower them to identify challenges and take action in their local environment' (Indymedia, 2007). Their actions and campaigns were multi-faceted in nature, supporting environmental causes, no borders campaigns, NHS campaigns as well as taking part in an 'Arts and Activism Caravan' to engage young people with activism. The group was also involved in Nottingham Against Incineration and Landfill, a 10 year campaign against the expansion of Eastcroft incinerator in the Sneinton area of the city as well as protests against the Ratcliffe on Soar incinerator as part of the global movement 'Camp for climate action'. This was part of a wider movement in Nottinghamshire against the coal powered Ratcliffe power station in 2009, where over 300 protestors from Camp for Climate Action, Climate Rush, and Plane Stupid were expected to co-ordinate a 'Climate Swoop' (This Is Nottingham, 2009). This action was however halted by police before it occurred, with 114 people being arrested on conspiracy to commit aggravated trespass and criminal damage (UK Government, 2009)<sup>31</sup>.

Similar 'camp' style protests have also taken place in more recent history, with around 100 'rebels' from Extinction Rebellion (XR) camping outside of County Hall in West Bridgford (where the county council offices are located) for 9 days in May 2021. Their demands for the council included calling for them to declare a climate emergency,

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<sup>31</sup> Only 20 of these arrests went to trial and were later dismissed following an inquiry requested by the then Director of Public Prosecutions Kier Starmer in the aftermath of police officer Mark Kennedy's undercover operations and infiltration of the Sumac Centre in Nottingham (Lewis, Evans and Wainwright, 2011).

stop investing pension funds in the fossil fuel industry, refuse to approve the proposed incinerator at Ratcliffe-on-Soar and support the Climate and Ecological Emergency (CEE) Bill (Whittaker, 2021). While not all of these demands were met, the camp was seemingly successful in some of their aims, with the county council declaring a climate emergency within the same month (table 1). XR Nottingham continue to be a very active group in the city, with events and protests happening on a weekly basis. The local group have also maintained presence at a national level, being involved in action such as 'The Big One' where an estimated 60,000 people gathered in London outside the Houses of Parliament over the course of four days, in what is said to have been the UK's joint biggest environmental protest of all time (figures 18 and 19). This action included a number of other local groups including Nottingham Trade Union Council, Unison, Nottingham Green Peace, Nottingham CND, XR, Just Stop Oil and Global Justice Nottingham that make up 'Nottingham Climate Justice Coalition', showing how the coalition brings together several groups working of different causes.





Figure 17 XR Protest – The Big One (London, 2023, author's own)



Figure 18 XR Protest – The Big One (London, 2023, author's own)

This coalition is an example of partnership working between activist groups to raise the profile of several causes. As a group, they hold yearly COP demonstrations (figures 20 and 21), typically with guest speakers and performance art elements as part of a global day action to hold nations accountable during COP. They additionally support campaigns such as 'United for warm homes' which is a Friends of the Earth initiative to fight fuel poverty both in Nottinghamshire and nationally, highlighting the intersectional nature of campaigning in Nottingham and the wider county.



*Figure 19 Protest led by Nottingham Climate Justice Coalition in 2023 (Trinity Square, Nottingham, author's own)*



*Figure 20 Protest led by Nottingham Climate Justice Coalition in 2023 (Trinity Square, Nottingham, photo: Liv Marshall)*

A further example of this intersectional approach is Nottingham Green Festival, which has been happening on a yearly basis since 1991. The festival was born out of 'The Peace Festival' which began in 1970 and had Nottingham CND at its heart (Pickering, 2023). In 1991, the festival was rebranded as 'Nottingham Green Festival' but continues to support social justice causes. Patrick Smith, who runs Veggies, a vegan catering campaign that has been supporting human and animal rights, environmental protection, and social justice since 1984<sup>32</sup>, outlines the rationale behind the broad scope of the festival:

'Why do we have people like CND and the (Nottinghamshire) Refugee Forum?

Because there's no environment on a dead planet, there's no nature on the

<sup>32</sup> See [www.veggies.org.uk](http://www.veggies.org.uk) for more information.



planet if we don't tackle the spread of nuclear weapons and war. Many people in other countries and other communities are gonna be suffering the effects of climate change faster than we will. So we have groups like Global Justice who are pointing out that it's our responsibility in the West, to make some amends for our causing a lot of these concerns in the first place. We have that sense of global responsibility, it's that broad definition of green – we're all in it together. It's one planet, one world, and we've all gotta stick together.' (Smith in Pickering, 2023).

The festival is seen as an important local event in engaging with and educating the public about environmental and social issues, while also providing live music and food (figure 22). At the 2023 festival, a mini community led climate-assembly was held (also called a popular assembly or Pop) (figure 23), the outcomes of which highlighted the importance of meeting people and communities where they are and listening to them, having accessible and engaging messaging as well as ensuring the council commits to acting on outcomes from the full city assembly (introduced in section 3.7.2). Initiatives such as these highlight the commitment of many activists and community groups to participation and procedural justice, yet it is important to note that these types of events are likely to engage 'usual suspects' rather than the communities that they are trying to reach (Heiskanen, 2023), a theme that will be explored in chapter 7.





Figure 21 Knowledge Garden', Nottingham Green Festival (Nottingham Arboretum, 2023, author's own)



Figure 22 Mini-assembly at Nottingham Green Festival (Nottingham Arboretum, 2023, author's own)

Anarchist organisations like the Sumac Centre and Sparrows Nest also play an important role in Nottingham's activist scene. The Sumac Centre started as an environmental and peace focused self-managed social centre in 1985, which later, in collaboration with Veggies mentioned above, became the Sumac Centre in 2002. The centre serves as a hub for activism, especially for those interested in the environment, social justice and animal rights. The horizontally, community run centre provides space for organising meetings, workshops, events, communal meals as well as a social club, café, gardens and a radical library. It serves as a meeting point for activists to socialise, collaborate and strategise for collective action. Hodgkinson and Chatterton (2006) suggest that these social centres are a 'conscious refusal and confrontation to neo-liberalism and the enclosure of urban space... representing an open challenge to neo-liberal process... social centres constitute a new claim to the city — a demand that land and property be used to meet social needs, not to service global, or extra-local, capital' (p.310). The centre also has close ties to Ned's Housing Co-op, seeking to provide affordable housing for those committed to social change. Members are also involved in range of causes including animal welfare, anti-racism/migrant solidarity, environmental protection, food sustainability, LGBTQ+ rights and social justice (Radical Routes, nd). Another anarchist organisation operating in the city is the Sparrows' Nest, which is an anarchist and anti-authoritarian archive and library. It positions itself as a centre for anarchist culture and education and hosts a large collection of material on anarchist theory, local struggles and workers' struggles, with books and pamphlets including old news publications (Kate Sharpley Library, 2013).

Spaces such as these are vital in contesting and resisting the 'neoliberal city', widening and strengthening movements. Yet, much like the wider environmental movement, despite aiming to connect with more people, they tend to become homogenised in terms of class, race and culture (Hodkinson and Chatterton, 2006), thus limiting their potential reach and impact.

### 3.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided a detailed overview of the context in which my research sits, the socio-economic and bio-physical landscape, as well as place identity. It outlines Nottingham's rich history of activism towards social change, highlighting how in the current day it is grappling with significant social and economic challenges while trying to maintain its status a front runner in urban sustainability.

Transformative change in the city is taking place at a critical conjuncture, marked by the climate crisis, austerity and growing social inequality, creating a rich landscape for understanding how transformation processes are felt, negotiated and enacted. As Pickerill (2021) notes a 'careful reflection on our histories can reveal practices and hope in the past that can both inspire contemporary initiatives and also be repurposed for the present' (p.250) – in this sense, paying attention to the city's history of activism, rebellion and community led change can offer valuable lessons for contemporary efforts to address the challenges it faces, which will be discussed in more detail in chapters 5 and 7. The chapter also shows that a holistic approach to environmental transformation must be taken in the city, one that considers the bio-physical, political, economic and community dimensions to ensure such transformations are enduring

and equitable. While focused on Nottingham, dynamics occurring within the city also mirror urban processes occurring across mid-sized, post-industrial cities striving for more just and sustainable futures (Aalbers, 2022).

## Chapter 4: Methodology – Researching social justice, place and emotion within urban transformations

The main aim of this research was to understand the role of place and social justice within environmental transformations through a lens of emotional geographies, recognising their interconnectedness and significance in contemporary geographical discourse. This chapter outlines the iterative research process and data analysis used in fieldwork undertaken in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire from 2022 – 2024.

The chapter reflects on how the research aligns with notions of justice, borrowing from feminist, gentle and humble methodological approaches. It focuses on the qualitative methods used, data analysis undertaken, the difficulties and opportunities found in *doing* messy, qualitative research, touching on methodological failures and limitations before offering reflections on research philosophy, reflexivity, positionality and ethics.

### 4.1 Theoretical framework

This research draws on a variety of theory including social justice, place and urban environmental transformation, anchored by an exploration of emotional geographies (figure 24). This is a significant theoretical blend offering a lens through which to understand the intricate connections between human experience and environmental change. Importantly, these theories were selected to allow for exploration of

contextual nuances that are paramount for understanding the complexities of the place-based change and for achieving social justice as outlined in chapter 3.

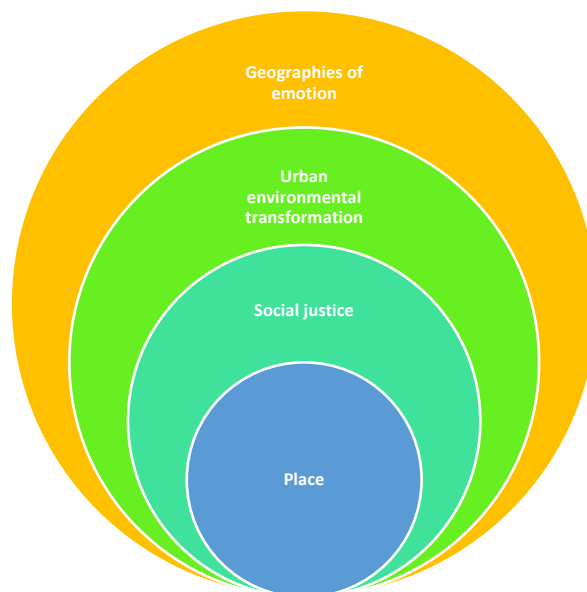
As already explored, justice, transformation and place are fluid, messy, non-linear concepts with input from a wide variety of disciplines. Reflecting this complexity, the data collection process largely left the themes open for interpretation by the participant (Martin et al., 2020), while still being guided by conceptual and theoretical frameworks (Mitchell, 2014). For example, questions on justice were framed as follows: *How would you define justice? How is justice considered in your work?* This allowed for justice to be considered outside of the traditional trivalent confines that is found in much of the literature (Temper, 2019).

Transformation and place were also considered in this broad manner, allowing participants to speak to their own personal experiences, which led to a range of different approaches and beliefs being brought forward in discussions. This research therefore aligns with a pluralist approach, allowing for differences and acknowledging that these research themes are often variable, contested and fluid (Raymond et al., 2021 p4; Martin et al., 2020).

While not explicitly designed as a grounded theory study, the thesis borrows from grounded theory principles, particularly in its inductive approach to theme development (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 1994). This meant that geographies of emotion arose as an emergent theme throughout data analysis, acting as an important point of convergence for the research topics. As this project sought to depart from the prevailing emphasis on technical, scientific and objective knowledges

in understandings of climate change, acknowledging and incorporating emotional dimension into discourse was paramount, helping in the exploration of bonds between individuals and their environment as well as motivations and obstacles to create change. Emotional knowledge as part of this research does not oppose or threaten reason, but instead is central to how people process, interpret and make sense of the world around them (Massey and Thrift, 2003).

In this way, my research has somewhat mutated from what it was originally 'intended' to be, mirroring scholars like Van Wijnendaele (2014), where research did not focus on emotions yet, in an inductive fashion, emotions arose from fieldwork as crucial elements in understanding social transformation (p.266). As such, this research in part responds to Pihkala (2022), who suggests that more scholarly attention must be paid to the lived experiences of emotions in relation to climate change.



*Figure 23 Theoretical framework*

## 4.2 Research Design

The theoretical groundings of this research have helped to shape both the research philosophy and design. Authenticity and integrity were integral to me as I approached this research and helped to guide the development of a methodology that reflects the values and principles embedded within the theoretical framework.

### 4.2.1 Research philosophy

This project sought to include a wide variety of action and opinion surrounding environmental transformations, place and justice and therefore may be most closely aligned with an interpretivist epistemology, which focuses on how people make sense of the world according to their own subjective reality (Holloway and Galvin, 2016). The research also takes a relativist ontological stance, which acknowledges that there are multiple different versions of reality that are constructed by individual experience, beliefs and understanding (Hughly and Sayward, 1987). Zolfagharian et al. (2019) suggest that interpretivist research into transformation is distinctive as it highlights the process and concept as socially constructed. Just and equitable transformations depend on a multitude of actors, and an interpretivist approach allows for the interpretation and understanding of situations that may be viewed differently by multiple stakeholders (Sugar, 2021), and therefore also helps to challenge some simplistic and power-ignorant approaches to transformation research. Taking an interpretivist stance enabled me to focus on the personal interpretations and perceptions of my study participants, giving an insight into the diverse and complex nature of environmental transformations (Zolfagharian et al., 2019).



This research is also rooted in feminist and action research, seeking to create positive change *with* others, rather than *for* them (Wicks, Reason and Bradbury, 2008).

Feminist research methodologies, while articulated in different ways by different theorists, have certain defining principles including undertaking research through the lens of participants' own priorities and perspective, using methods that are not oppressive, creating useful knowledge that contributes to the interest of justice while being reflexive within research processes (Hammell, 2006). In this context, Askins (2018) reminds us that

'Working together with participants is vital, through an ethic that centres participants' voices, as actors in their own lives...emotional and embodied geographies weave through such research and writing...deepening and strengthening interdependences and a feminist ethos of care as researchers, to further foreground diverse stories and voices, work towards social and spatial justice' (p.1277).

This thesis does not directly grapple with the gendered aspects of environmentalism as a main topic<sup>33</sup>, but strongly aligns with feminist approaches due to its focus on notions of justice, as well as emotion within environmental transformations. This aligns with work by Coddington (2015) on feminist geographies 'beyond gender', where feminist projects include but are not limited to a focus on gendered subjects.

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<sup>33</sup> Although not a main topic, gendered themes such as access to green space, safety are explored within the thesis.

Intersectionality<sup>34</sup> is also an important consideration within this work. With origins in critical race studies and black feminist research (Crenshaw, 1990), intersectionality outlines how social characteristics such as gender, race, class, age and sexual orientation intersect to drive discrimination and oppression. This oppression can be further exacerbated by the 'polycrisis' we are experiencing today (Amorim-Maia et al., 2022), and as such intersectionality scholars highlight the need to tackle power imbalances and inequality holistically instead of in silos. This is reflected in this thesis, which has a strong focus on differing forms of inequality, as well as how different crises intersect (e.g. climate crisis, cost of living crisis). Mikulewicz et al (2023) note how an intersectional approach is complementary to, and I would argue central to, climate justice research and practice.

I also draw from Saville (2021) in my research philosophy, who introduced the notion of 'humble geographies', as well as Briggs (2024) who centres care-full research, both calling for open, participative and vulnerable approaches to research. Humble geographies focus on remaining teachable and open to new ideas, recognising and appreciating others, having low focus on self and remaining aware of a larger perspective, aiding reflexivity as a tool for humility – prioritising being accountable, open and responsive. These approaches encourage the creation of space for dialogue,

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<sup>34</sup> I acknowledge that the use of intersectionality outside of its traditional roots in black feminist scholarship is widely contested due to concerns over the whitening and appropriation of the concept (Bilge, 2014; Davis, 2019). In this thesis, I draw from Leah Thomas' 'Intersectional Environmentalist' (2022) where the concept is described as 'an inclusive version of environmentalism that advocates for both the protection of people and the planet' as well as promoting inclusivity and accessibility within environmental education and movements.

allowing researchers and participants to learn from one another, and also embrace emotional, embodied aspects of knowledge (Anderson, 2009) in the hopes of enriching the research process and its outcomes. Also embedded within a humble and care-full philosophy is an obligation towards reciprocity and ethical engagement with research participants. While direct compensation for participants was not feasible within the scope of this study (apart from cups of coffee and cakes for interviews in coffee shops and catering at workshops), the study aimed to create research outputs that are beneficial to the broader environmental movement within Nottingham and beyond, sharing data back to community groups and creating a summary for policy makers (appendix 4). This principle of general reciprocity underscores the belief that the production of knowledge should ultimately serve the greater good of society (Gillan & Pickerill, 2012). Additionally, many people I have met on my research journey have also asked me to help in their individual pursuits, be that attending their protests, presenting my research to their students, running engagement activities, helping to launch their campaigns or holding a workshop at their community space. Being embedded in a committed, passionate and reciprocal community was perhaps my favourite part of undertaking this research, leaving me feeling (somewhat) hopeful in the face of the mounting adversity explored in chapter three. The 'gentle' approach here also speaks to Horton (2020), who states that taking such an approach helps in forming a critique and solidarity within and against the 'ANYTHING-BUT-GENTLE' academy.

### 4.3 Research Strategy

Reflecting on this embedded nature of myself as a researcher, studying my chosen home-city and groups I have close links with (explored in 4.7.1) a single case-study strategy was employed. A detailed description of this strategy and rationale for my Nottingham case-study is explored below.

#### 4.3.1 Case study

Case studies are appropriate for small-scale, in-depth research which use a multitude of differing data collection methods (Taylor, 2016 p.581). These are most commonly comprised of observation, interviews and document analysis. They are a frequently used strategy within urban research (Zolfagharian et al., 2019), allowing the researcher to explore real-life, contextual phenomena (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2014). The case(s) are bound by time and activity (Cresswell, 2014 p.241), representing a snapshot of the phenomenon under study during a particular timeframe. As such, findings from case study research are not meant to be replicable and do not seek to build grand abstract theories (Priya, 2021). Rather, case study research usually focuses on depth and context within knowledge building. While representing a snapshot due to the nature of a PhD study window, the analysis within this thesis is not static, contextualising narratives in a relational and conjunctural way. The research resists discussing the Nottingham case study as self-contained or isolated but situated within wider social and historical processes. The focus in the coming chapters is not only on what is visible within the case itself, but also how it articulates with broader structures and relations (Peck, 2024).

#### 4.3.2 Rationale for Nottingham Case study

When I started this project, I initially planned to take a comparative case-study approach between Nottingham and another UK city. Selection of a case study in this project began with an initial scoping of cities with carbon neutrality ambitions. I limited this search to the UK due to the time pressures of conducting the research within a three-year window, and the ease and accessibility of travel within the UK. In addition to Nottingham, areas such as Bristol, Brighton, Leeds and Oxford were considered due to their sustainability goals. Oxford was selected as the second case study due to its likenesses to Nottingham in terms of carbon reduction goals, but its significant differences in terms of levels of poverty and inequality. However, after much consideration and reflection, a single case study methodology was chosen, in part due to the nuanced nature of the topics and the complexities of Nottingham as a research site. This approach has allowed for a deeper, more thorough analysis of the many facets of a just environmental transformation and the actors involved in it within the city. This decision created trade-offs between the depth and breadth of the study – multiple case studies would have provided insight into different contexts and socio-economic conditions, and their similarities and differences with the Nottingham case. This could have strengthened the argument for place-specific and situated approaches to policy and governance further, yet I feel the extra depth and nuance captured through a single case study made the decision a worthwhile one. While only focusing on a single city, as the thesis will go on to argue, it does so with the understanding that

place is deeply relational and embedded within broader systems, with the situated case allowing dynamics to become visible.

This decision was also made due to my perceived position as an 'insider' within the city (this will be explored in more depth in section 4.7). At the start of my research in 2021, I had already been a resident in the city for over three years and had been actively involved with environmental/climate focussed groups. As such, I held important relationships with several people who were interested in my research and could introduce me to other groups and people within the city. Having access from the very start of my research to these 'gate keepers' was extremely useful, allowing me to embed myself into groups such as 'Nottingham Green Partnership' where many of the city's 'influential' institutions and organisations met on a quarterly basis, allowing me to gain insights that I might not have been privy to as part of grassroots organisations.

#### 4.3.3 Study site and scope

While parts of the research spill into the wider county and therefore acknowledge broader regional dynamics, the thesis largely focuses within the Nottingham City boundary. As seen in chapter 3, the wider county is made up of a wide range of governance structures including county, borough and district councils, each with their own distinct policies and processes. The city, meanwhile, is a unitary authority, meaning they have greater control over all of the activity within the boundary, and represents a more manageable geographical area for an in-depth study. Furthermore, CN28 is limited in scope to the city boundary, and therefore the research largely

focuses on environmental action in the same confines while remaining cognisant of wider dynamics.

#### 4.4 Qualitative mixed methods approach

After case-study selection and initial scoping conversations and observations throughout 2021 and early 2022, fieldwork began in earnest in September 2022. I opted for a fully qualitative approach to my research (Creswell, 1998), utilising semi-structured interviews, observation, workshops and document analysis. In the following section I outline the rationale behind each method, reflecting on how they were used within this research.

##### 4.4.1 Semi-structured interviews

Feminist geographers have long highlighted the significance of incorporating the voice of those involved in and/or affected by the subject of matters being studied (DeVault and Gross, 2011). Semi-structured interviews are perhaps one of the most common methods to achieve this, by promoting dialogue with various stakeholders, deepening understanding of the phenomenon being studied and centring lived experiences (Crabtree and Miller, 1992).

Within this research, I undertook 50 semi-structured interviews between August 2022 and November 2023 with a variety of participants including residents, members and activists from local action groups, people from local businesses, third-sector organisations and members of the council (both elected officials and civil servants) (table 2). This enabled me to gain a thorough understanding of the different values and opinions found throughout the city both 'from above' and 'from below'. The

variety of different actors involved in the interviews meant that the questions used in each were subtly different, for example more 'key informant'<sup>35</sup> type interviews with city council representatives included a greater number of questions about policy, whereas activist interviews focused to a greater extent on motivations or personal experience. Despite these differences, the interviews covered the same themes (motivations, key successes, barriers, justice considerations, importance of place) just in differing ways, allowing for comparison during analysis (appendix 1). Due to the 'semi-structured' nature, different avenues were also explored where appropriate, considering participant interests, expertise and natural progressions of the conversations. Like Kleres and Wettergren (2017), the original project did not primarily focus on emotions, therefore there were no direct questions about this in the interview guide.

Interviews ranged from 25 minutes to 93 minutes in length, with some more informal interviews (e.g. over lunch) lasting up to 2 and a half hours. They took place in a variety of locations most commonly in coffee shops or online via Zoom and Teams (reflecting the legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic), but also took place in university meeting rooms, co-working spaces and community spaces. It is important to explore the 'where' or the 'place' of methods to explore its role in knowledge producing encounters (Creswell, 1996; Saville, 2016), something I took seriously when

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<sup>35</sup> It is important to note here that the idea of key informant or 'elite' interviews are problematised as they conform to widely critiqued conceptions of power (e.g. Smith, 2006). I am using this terminology simply to refer to the more 'top-down' actors interviewed within this study (e.g. local government), and this is in no way a reflection of the importance of the information gathered from differing sources.



undertaking this research. The location of the interview was always chosen by the participant to ensure a setting they would feel comfortable in. This was seemingly reflected in the informal manner that unfolded in many of the interviews, with even some 'elite' participants speaking candidly and using informal language. When possible, interviews were recorded using the 'Voice memos' app on my phone for in person meetings or using the record functions on Zoom and Teams when completing them virtually. When the interview was not recorded, extensive notes were taken during the conversation instead.

The recruitment strategy used was a mixture of purposive and snowballing. I initially began by compiling a list of grassroots groups, third sector organisations and other key groups and 'key informants' operating within the city and contacted them largely via email and sometimes via phone call. These groups were all either wholly focused on the environment, or social justice with a looser focus on the environment. This initial conversation included detail about my project, and what the nature of the interview would be. Often throughout the interviews, participants would suggest other people I should speak to and shared their contact details. Additionally, interviews were also gained through attending Nottingham Green Partnership meetings and the Green Hustle festival.

*Table 2 List of anonymised interviewees and their sector and focus (participants with \* next to their name took place as part of a group interview)*

<b>Pseudonyms</b>	<b>Sector</b>
Quinn	Academic (environmental)
Rowan	Academic (environmental)

Noah	Activist
Theo	Activist
Jude	Activist
Kit	Activist
Rory	Activist, Artist
Chris	Activist, Community group (energy, deliberative democracy)
Dylan	Activist, Corporate (business owner)
Jody	Charity (food and nature)
Willow	Community group (climate action)
Riley	Community group (nature, deliberative democracy, commons)
Ollie	Community group, regional government
Alex	Community group (nature)
Jeri	Community group (campaigning)
Charlie	Community group (climate action)
Eden*	Community group (climate action)
Jordan*	Community group (climate action)
Tyler	Community group (environment and justice)
Stevie	Community group (CIC)
Eddie	Community group (campaigning)
Tommy	Community group, Activist (deliberate democracy)
Alli	Community service (debt and advice)
Flynn	Corporate
Max	Corporate
Ellis	Education (higher education)
Jo	Faith group
River	Local authority

Cameron	Local authority
Avery	Local authority
Dale	Local authority
Scout	Local authority
Andy	Local authority
Jean	Local authority
Ash	Local authority
Harper*	Local authority, Community group
Eli	National government (energy and net-zero)
Taylor	NGO (climate think tank)
Ryan	Politics (MP)
Jessie	Public health
Courtney	Resident, Activist
Sam	Third sector (active travel)
Jamie	Third sector (housing)
Darcy	Third sector (nature)
Elliot	Third sector (active travel)
Drew	Third sector (nature)
Billy	Third sector, Activist (nature)
Freddie	Third sector, Faith group (refugee support)

Speaking to a humble and care-full approach, interviews have the potential to exacerbate existing power imbalances and produce problematic 'researcher vs researched' relationships. To try and mitigate against this, and following recommendations outlined by Yost and Chmielewski (2013), participants were contacted after the interview took place in the form of a 'member check' to ensure

that they were happy with their interview transcript prior to the thesis being finalised. This provides a more egalitarian and empowering experience for participants, affording them greater control over how their interviews are portrayed (Yost and Chmielewski, 2013). In some instances, anonymity concerns arose from interview transcripts shared with participants, at which point further clarification around what was being used as part of the research was shared, as well removal of any aspect the participant was unhappy with.

#### 4.4.2 Community workshops and collaborative methods

Given the topics of this research, having participatory and collaborative elements within the project was essential. These approaches are understood as practices where researchers and participants work together to examine a problematic situation and discuss steps to change it for the better in the hopes of making a real difference in people's lives (Caretta and Riaño, 2016) and are becoming increasingly common within human geography (Wynne-Jones et al., 2015). They therefore have the potential to be important tools in ensuring that procedural justice concerns are at the heart of research approaches. Russell (2015) asks us to rethink the University and our potential to use it as a resource to do good, and it is my hope that the School of Geography Engagement Hub funding used in this portion of the research as well as the outputs align with this notion.

In line with Chatterton (2023), participatory workshops and activities were used in this research to help to understand the challenges communities are facing within Nottingham (figure 25), as well as their desired visions for the future.



Figure 24 Illustration from Chatterton highlighting participatory workshop techniques (2023, p.50)

In this study, I held three participatory workshops, aiming to facilitate dialogue around justice and sustainability, and encourage collaboration within the community. These workshops complemented interviews by surfacing points of tension and consensus that are often more visible within group settings. The workshops were held at various locations across the city, including the Green Hustle Festival, the Heathfield Community Centre (albeit unsuccessfully, as discussed in section 4.5), and The Chase Neighbourhood Centre, St Anns. These locations were picked due to the importance and position within their communities, typically being accessed easily and providing spaces that a wide variety of people are familiar with and feel safe in as will be discussed later in the thesis. In addition, it was important to me personally to use my funding for these events to support local community ventures, especially given the

increasing austerity measures being placed on social spaces, as highlighted in chapter 3.

Each workshop utilised interactive activities, the first of which was a collaborative mapping exercise, drawing on principles of participatory GIS (Brown and Kyttä, 2018). The idea of the activity was for participants to pin various different places on a large map of Nottingham, with different colours and tags representing places they love, places of hope, places that need improvement, places with good memories as well as places that represent Nottingham's culture and identity. After an initial trial at Green Hustle, a further pin was added to represent places under threat from climate change (figure 26). These prompts facilitated stories and conversations between participants, and created a spatial representation of attachments, identities and memories tied to place. These were then digitalised using a collaborative online mapping tool 'maphub' (<https://maphub.net/>).

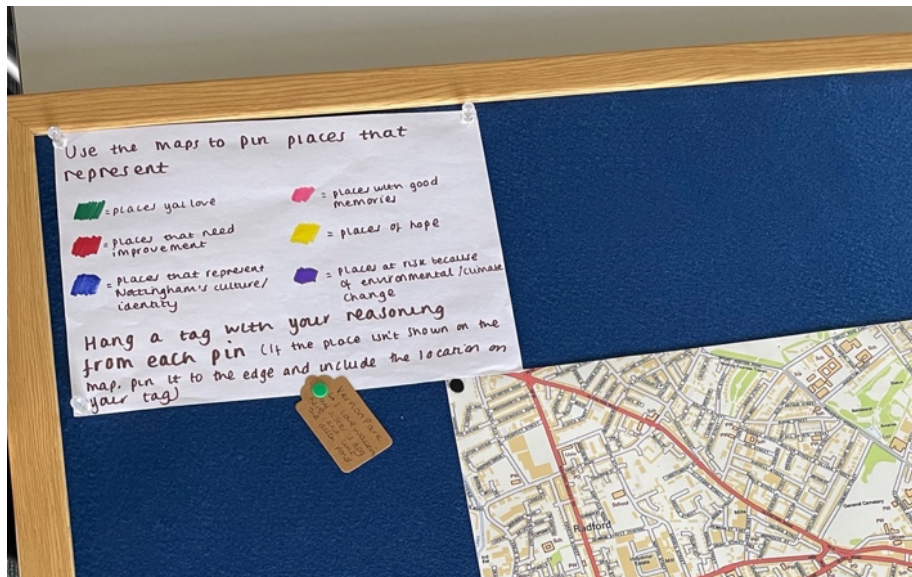


Figure 25 Overview of categories for participatory collaborative mapping exercise (2022, author's own)

This activity was followed by a series of questions that participants discussed as a group: *What are the best parts of your community? What are the main issues that you or your community is facing? What is needed to overcome them?* The participants also noted key points down on flip chart paper. They then also discussed what they wanted the future of their community to look like in 2050 (in line with national environmental targets and other visioning research)<sup>36</sup>, noting down their wishes under the themes of food, energy, buildings and homes, transport, communities and nature and green spaces. These outputs were then typed up and coded thematically.

The St Ann's workshop was more informal in nature than I had planned for due to the fact that all of the participants were already there when I turned up as they were all users of the centre for socialisation and other support, and started doing activities as I was setting them up, so I had to think on my feet and adapt timings and explanations.

Despite this (or maybe more likely because of the relaxed feel), I ended up having extremely rich conversations with the 14 people that were there<sup>37</sup>. This represented a collapsing of the usual boundaries between the researcher and researched, where participants organically took the lead in shaping the session, leading to great benefits and insights for the research. Such reflexivity and responsiveness in this context, with hindsight, reflects the very gentleness and humility I was trying to embed throughout

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<sup>36</sup> This 2050 visioning activity was contested by a member taking part in the workshop, stating that these changes are needed in the here and now, not in the future or at an arbitrary point outlined by the government, a notion that I would consider if rerunning a similar activity.

<sup>37</sup> For example, a voicenote taken after the after the event had ended reflected on how unhappy the community seemed about the trajectory that St Ann's had taken over the last five to ten years, I spoke about the very evident anger that many of the community members displayed, which might not have been shared in a more formal setting.

the research process. Similarly, the location of Green Hustle festival meant I was able to connect with people that were simply passing through the city centre who might not usually actively engage in such activities.

The participatory workshops focused on giving community members time and space to voice their perspectives, share their personal experiences, and explore solutions to shared challenges. Despite setbacks explored later in this section, the workshops created connections and collaborations that extended beyond the sessions, with some discussions leading to follow-up interviews and additional engagement with participants. Through these participatory approaches, the study aimed to foster an inclusive research process that prioritised the voices of community members, however I understand that despite best efforts, there are always concerns about the extractive nature of research and tokenistic participatory techniques, which will be discussed in sections 4.6 and 4.7.

#### 4.4.3 Participant observation and observant participation

To complement my interviews, I used a variety of ethnographic research to gain a greater understanding of the socio-cultural context, meaning, processes and social relations within Nottingham. Ethnographic research develops an understanding of the breadth and complexity of human experiences, discrepancies between narratives and what happens in everyday lives and the exploration of diverse relationships and networks (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, ethnographic research 'can yield insight into prejudices, inequalities and social exclusion, as well as offering people the means for



understanding the places where they live, work, shop, and socialize' (Low, 2016, np) which was a key consideration within this work.

To explore this within the context of the study, I immersed myself in the environmental landscape of the city, attending events and consultations by local authorities, festivals such as Green Hustle and Nottingham Green Festival and meetings of umbrella groups such as Nottingham Green Partnership and Broxtowe Green Umbrella. Additionally, a more 'observant participation' (Morean, 2009) approach was taken in many settings such as protests, meetings and events of local action and national groups, including XR's 'The Big One' and Nottingham Climate Justice Coalition's 'Now We Rise'. This allowed for a 'greater intimacy with and grounded perspective on the places, practices and people studied' (Laurier, 2010 p.170). This approach was an additional attempt to overcome the researcher/researched divide explored in the sections above. Ethnography is typically most successful when long-term observation occurs (Crang, 2002), and due to the fact I am a Nottingham resident studying Nottingham rather than having to go and do fieldwork further afield, I was able to attend a wide variety of events for over a year (table 3), therefore my research window was relatively blurry compared to a lot of PhD projects. This blurriness, while presenting challenges, allowed for a more precise account of activities over time (Hitchins and Latham, 2020). This more 'embedded' approach, where I was (and will continue to be) involved in the day-to-day operations of some of the groups in my research means I have fuller and deeper understanding of not only the group, but of the data I have collected (Langford, 2022). Thoughts and

observations following each event were recorded in a number of ways, sometimes in notebooks, word documents and voice notes. These were typed up and read several times alongside my other data before analysis took place. Other forms of media, such as photographs and videos, were also collected and included with these other forms of data (Cleland and MacLeod, 2021).

*Table 3 Events attended during fieldwork*

Event	Date
Eastside Planning meeting	18/10/21
Arkwright Community Gardens event	16/07/22
Green Partnership meetings	Several from 2021
NYCA and BAME Climate Champions meeting	30/10/22
Broxtowe Green Umbrella	10/11/22
The Big One	21/04/23
Green Hustle	03/06/23
Nottingham Green Festival	10/09/23
Broxtowe Green Festival	23/09/23
Nottinghamshire Youth Social and Environmental Action Week	22/10/23
Now We Rise – Day of Action	09/12/23
Shaping the Future of Nottingham's Centres – Place shaping Workshop	06/12/23
Mini assembly – NYCA/ XR	07/05/24
Sparrows Nest	10/05/24

#### 4.4.4 Secondary data

This thesis also made use of secondary data sources, primarily those created by Nottingham City Council relating to their decarbonisation efforts – their Carbon Neutral Charter, Carbon Neutral 2028 Action Plan as well as their CN28 Engagement Strategy. I used these to undertake further content and thematic analysis, where documents were uploaded to Nvivo<sup>14</sup> and coded accordingly (see section 4.5). These documents were extremely useful for my other data collection methods, helping inform interview questions, as well as highlighting differences between documents and what was being seen on the ground or in interviews.

This project also made use of Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) data compiled by Nottingham Insight (Nottingham Insight, 2019) drawing from the city's 182 LSOAs, and reports compiled by 'Centre for Thriving Places' using a variety of different datasets (ONS, Department for Education, Ministry of Justice, Public Health Data and others). These helped to provide information around a variety of social factors and characteristics, again adding to the contextual depth and richness of the study and helping to triangulate my primary data.

#### 4.5 Data analysis

Once collected, the data were analysed in various ways. Interview, workshop, and ethnographic data were all analysed in a similar fashion using thematic analysis. Interviews were recorded where possible to allow for ease of transcription and once typed up, the transcripts were then read multiple times before description, analysis, and interpretation took place. Interview data was initially transcribed using the

University of Nottingham's auto-transcription service, however due to the software not being particularly accurate and sub-optimal quality of some of the recordings<sup>38</sup>, I ended up mainly transcribing them manually. This helped me to familiarise myself with the data and helped me pick up on any nuance I may have missed when the interview was taking place. Nvivo14 was used for analysis of transcripts, along with any other notes taken. This allowed for ease of comparison between different interviews. Extracts that were typed up following ethnographic research were also treated in the same way. This allowed for greater cross-comparison between the two methods, creating richer codes.

Initially, a set of primary, dominant themes was created as 'parent nodes' within Nvivo (e.g. place, justice, action, emotion), often directly relating to my interview questions in a broad sense (figure 27). These were then broken down into sub-themes and analytical codes in subsequent readings (e.g. within barriers there were subthemes of funding, time, COVID19; within emotions love, fear, anger; within place attachment, identity, context) (figure 28). A 'Key Quote' category was then also created to help keep track of particularly insightful excerpts.

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<sup>38</sup> As mentioned, lots of my interviews took place in coffee shops or other public areas meaning they had quite a lot of background noise making auto-transcription more inaccurate.

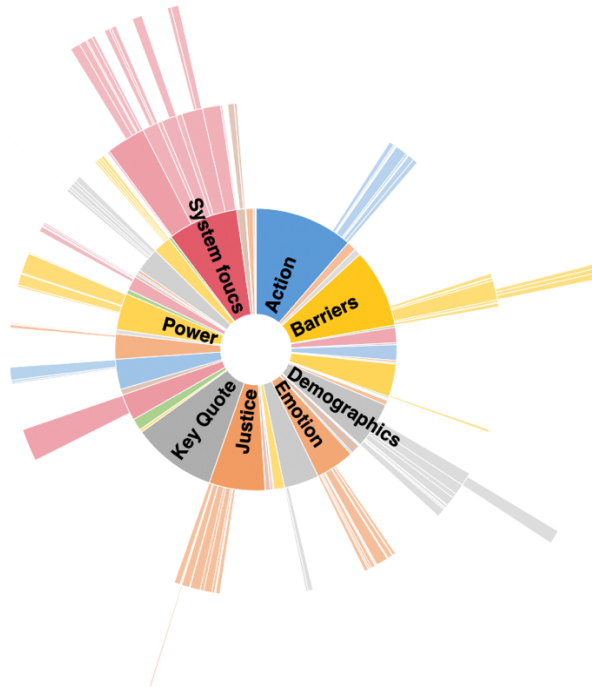


Figure 26 Visual representation of NVivo coding hierarchy illustrating key parent nodes and their density



Figure 27 Sub-hierarchy of the justice node, showing key sub-themes and analytic codes

This iterative approach reflects the interpretive and subjective nature of thematic coding as interpretations are influenced by perspectives and positionalities (Sector, 2010). By making my coding process explicit and reflexively engaging with evolving themes emerging from the research, this method seeks to hold up such transparency and rigor.

Collection and analysis of data occurred concurrently, which helped to shape and guide further research – a grounded, iterative approach (Hodkinson, 2008) was adopted whereby data collection and analysis were continual to allow new themes and concepts to emerge to inform future data collection. This was fruitful for the study, especially given changing political, economic and social contexts occurring throughout the duration of the study. It was also ensured that the context of each interview/observation was considered due to the diversity in the stakeholders and communities interacted with, as this was likely to impact the results.

#### 4.6 A note on methodological failure

This section takes a quick departure from the rest of the chapter, focusing on a more personal reflection that occurred while undertaking this research. Similar sections will appear in empirical chapters later in the thesis, in an attempt to prioritise honesty, as well as shedding further light on my positionality and emotions in this research, which will be expanded upon in section 4.7.

Horton (2020) states 'I am not a failure... but I feel like one' – a sentiment from a fellow geographer I wish I had found before becoming incredibly emotional about the fact nobody wanted to come and talk to me about the future of their neighbourhoods and

eat donuts with me on a Monday evening in June 2023. Since that point, I have been coming to realise that 'failure' within PhD research and indeed the academy more widely is common<sup>39</sup>, yet, when it happens at an important juncture in your research, the comfort of others feeling the same does not do much to remedy the sinking feeling. The below passage is a reflection from when I was in a community centre with my workshop set up, slowly realising that no one was going to come, published online as part of the department's 'Geog Blog'<sup>40</sup>:

*I am nearly two years into my PhD research, which centres around Nottingham's environmental transformation, specifically looking out how notions of social justice and place are considered within the city's journey to carbon neutrality. Procedural justice is extremely pertinent within this: making sure that local people are included in decision making processes and are empowered to have a voice about what happens within the places they live. With this at the forefront of my mind, and with the best will in the world, I set out to plan my 'community visioning' workshops aided by the school's wonderful 'Engagement Hub' funding.*

*My first decision was location. With social justice at the heart of my work, I wanted to support local organisations and use a space that felt welcoming for everyone (not the*

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<sup>39</sup> See Emotion, Space and Society Special Issue on 'Reclaiming failure in geography: academic honesty in a neoliberal world' Davies, Disney and Harrowell, 2021.

<sup>40</sup> <https://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/geography/2024/06/19/learning-from-fieldwork-failure-lack-of-engagement-with-my-community-engagement-project/>

*university, art galleries or other spaces that might feel 'privileged' or 'elite'). I therefore decided to go with Heathfield Community Centre in Basford, home of The Pythian Club, and The Chase Neighbourhood Centre in St Ann's, ran by St Ann's advice centre. These organisations are both doing incredible work around social justice and community engagement in areas that have high levels of deprivation and inequality.*

*With rooms booked, workshops planned and public engagement training certificate in hand, I was feeling excited for the prospect of engaging with and co-producing knowledge with community members. I had a really fulfilling and well received trial run of the activities at Green Hustle, which also helped boost my confidence. Flyers were put up in local spaces, on social media and LinkedIn; councillors, faith groups, community organisations were emailed with information for their networks and sign-up forms.*



Figure 28 Green Hustle activity (Market Square, Nottingham, 2022, author's own)





Figure 29 Community map created at Green Hustle (author's own)

*The day of the first workshop quickly approached. Zero responses on my sign-up form. After a brief panic during which I considered cancelling the event, I thought to myself 'It's fine, people know about it and will come regardless of whether they have signed up using the link'. I carried on my day as planned – quick stop off at Doughnotts to get treats for the community members, to Sainsbury's to get refreshments, sorting out my maps, making sure I have enough flipchart paper, checking over my activity timings, travel to the space, set up.*

*I sat in the empty room for around half an hour after the event 'started' before deciding that no-one was going to show. I failed. How am I going to explain this in my thesis? Will my supervisors think I am not working hard enough? Does this mean my work doesn't*

*matter? I've wasted the money I was trusted with. What am I going to do with all these donuts?!*



*Figure 30 Workshop set up (Heathfield Community Centre, Nottingham, 2022, author's own)*

*My next workshop is in three days time and I am entering it with a certain level of fear and apprehension. This feeling is also bolstered by a negative response I had from a community representative: why am I doing this research? Why am I including communities that have 'been researched' before and nothing has come of it? Why am I getting peoples hopes up? While upsetting, these experiences have also encouraged me to be more critical about my work moving forward – people are currently faced with a raft of different and intersecting crises, so is it really fair of me to expect that they will*

*willingly give up their Monday evening to come and talk about the future of their communities when so many lives are entrenched in the present condition?*

*After a second, more substantial panic, I realised that people's absence from engagement with this work is telling and rich data in and of itself and will certainly add a level of interest to my methodology chapter! Ultimately, I know that these hurdles are going to make me a more reflexive researcher, helping me deal with future 'failures' I will no doubt face throughout my career.*

These reflections mirror those of Nairn et al (2005), whose work sets out to trouble the notion of failure in this context, instead emphasising the need to reflect on and analyse such situations fully to learn from them as part of what Pillow (2003) describes as 'uncomfortable reflexivity'. They state that 'the qualitative research arena would benefit from more 'messy' examples, examples that may not always be successful, examples that do not seek a comfortable, transcendent end-point but leave us in the uncomfortable realities of doing engaged qualitative research' (p.193). In a special issue 'Antipode at 50' Pickerill (2019) writes that research is a process of 'learning by doing' and that the very joy of doing research itself is engagement with the unknown, and the creative risks that come with that as a 'release from the structures of conventional academic knowledge production' and as Preece et al (2023) argue, failure is inevitable and necessary part of knowledge production. Dorling (2019) encourages geographers to 'be kind', accept our (personal and disciplinary) failures and weaknesses, and combat 'academic arrogance and superiority' (p.3), failure and imperfection are not weaknesses, instead forming the basis for grounded scholarship.

#### 4.7. Reflexivity and positionality

Reflexivity is closely tied to the ethics of undertaking research, acknowledging that researcher's subjectivity has a significant sway over the research trajectory and outcomes (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). Reflexivity within research means that 'the researcher should constantly take stock of their actions and their role in the research process and subject these to the same critical scrutiny as the rest of their data' (Mason, 1996 p.6), an idea especially prominent within feminist geographies – Rose (1997) offers a critique of 'transparent reflexivity' advocating for a more dynamic approach that recognises the complex economic, political, and institutional contexts that impact research. Bukamal (2022) states 'the researcher is an active, not passive, agent in acquiring knowledge of the processes, histories, events, language and biographies of the research context' (p.328). This aligns with the reflexive approach I have tried to undertake throughout this research, which aims to help in contextualising the knowledge produced. Scholars such as McDowell (1992) and Neely and Ngused (2015) state that it is important for researchers write their reflexivity into their work, and the below is my attempt at doing so.

As outlined above, it is important for researchers to fully embrace and transparently address the factors that have influenced this research. My positionality as a British, white, cis-gendered woman, undertaking postgraduate research in geography, with an active interest in environmental change and activism has no doubt influenced my experience undertaking this research, both helping and hindering me along the way.

Additionally, it is important to recognise that my extensive involvement in environmental organisations since moving to Nottingham in 2018 will have impacted my approach to this research<sup>41</sup>. I bring to this project both 'insider' and 'outsider' perspectives. A researcher is considered an 'insider' when they share attributes with the participants of the study (in my case living in the city and being part of environmental groups), and an 'outsider' when they do not belong to the group to which the participants belong (not being from here for example, or belonging to a different social group) (Bukamal, 2022).

My first-hand engagement within groups and having been a Nottingham citizen for the past seven years affords me unique insights into the inner workings of environmental advocacy, particularly within the Nottingham context. Easterby-Smith and Malina (1999), suggest that an 'insider' perspective may prepare researches more efficiently, enabling them to interpret events observed in the research context, while 'outsiders' may find this more difficult. Despite this, I still remain an 'outsider' in many communities and groups within the city (as found throughout the research process). My dual positioning as both an 'insider' in some settings and 'outsider' in others most likely impacted the research process and outcomes in several ways. While the using the 'insider–outsider' positionality allows for reflection on how status enables and constrains research encounters, the inadequacy of such a binary has also been highlighted by researchers, who suggest that reflexive analysis needs to 'note the

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<sup>41</sup> It is however important to note that despite my personal positionality, I have taken every effort in avoiding jumping to conclusions, approaching every research opportunity with an open mind.

challenges, benefits, and privileges that come with fluid movements along the insider–outsider/researcher-at-home-researcher-not-at-home continua’ (Adu-Ampong and Adams, 2020 p.591).

Navigating reflexivity requires continual self-awareness and critical engagement with personal biases and assumptions. Due to this, throughout the research process I regularly interrogated my own positionality and its influence on research outputs. This involved discussing such dilemmas with other PGRs, my supervision team and internal assessor, as well as engaging in conversations with community group members themselves around how I had interpreted interview data. By embracing reflexivity as an important aspect of this research, I hope to have undertaken this project in a transparent manner, reflected in the humble and care-full approach taken in the research process.

#### 4.8 Ethical considerations

This work was conducted in accordance with the University of Nottingham’s Code of Research Conduct and Research Ethics and in accordance with the School of Geography’s risk assessment procedures (appendix 2). My research practice was at all times grounded in the importance of ethical research and was adapted accordingly when necessary. For example, when Fridays for the Future protests were started again in Nottingham, I sought advice and further ethical clearance to be able to undertake ethnography with young people.

Prior to interviews taking place, I informed all participants about my research in a detailed manner, ensuring they were aware that their participation was entirely

optional. I also gained written consent from each participant before data collection took place (appendix 3). After collection, data was anonymised using an online generator for gender-neutral names as an alias for each participant. Participants were aware of this before interviews took place, which hopefully allowed for a more candid and open conversation with limited biases (Sugar, 2021). As mentioned in the above section, I also performed 'member checks' (Yost and Chmielewski, 2012) to empower participants to engage with the research process, as well as allow their data to be conveyed in the way they meant it to come across. This allowed for any concerns to be rectified, with some participants asking for further steps to ensure anonymity during writing, or for some sentiments to be clarified. I did however still grapple with the ethical issues around power dynamics and imbalances, especially when community members had negative experiences being involved in research as detailed in the following section (4.9).

Participants for participatory workshops were also treated in the same way with regards to ethics, with the outputs being shared with host organisations via email prior to writing up. It is my hope that this fostered a level of transparency and trust between myself and the participants, mitigating potential power differentials.

Ethnographic research posed more of an issue, as gaining consent from every participant when undertaking large scale observations was not feasible (Nairn et al., 2020). When possible, I gained consent from all members (e.g. from a local action group), but when I was observing (and taking part in) a protest for example, this could

not happen. However, as the outcomes of these observations are generalized within this thesis, I am not concerned about a breach of ethics.

Finally, based on recommendations from my internal reviewer after speaking about my concern around ethics and extractive research, I have ensured to disseminate my research throughout my research journey at various community events including presentations and workshops at Nottingham College as well as a presentation to Bilborough College, and aim to continue to do so with interested stakeholders. Such concerns and their solutions link back to the feminist approach within this research, where an ethics of care has been central to the way I have approached this project and its dissemination.

#### 4.9 Reflections and limitations

The chosen methodology, while able to create diverse insights from various stakeholders and communities within Nottingham, is not without challenges and potential limitations. Localised, place-based research has been criticised for falling into the 'local trap' (Purcell, 2006) where the local scale is seen as preferable to other scales. The local scale also provides issues when considering 'scaling-up' or repeating research, something which is important given the extensive nature of the issues studied. Despite this, the main aim of this research was to gain place-based insights (due to the importance of considering context and appropriate action at the local scale as discussed in chapters 2 and 3), therefore presenting an in-depth case study was considered the most appropriate course. This becomes particularly important within in



the context of Nottingham's ambitious goal to become the first carbon-neutral city in the UK.

Additionally, my positionality acted as both a help and a hinderance within this research. When reaching out to key groups within communities in Nottingham, I was on two occasions met with a level of scepticism surrounding how the research was going to be used, and the impact it might have on community members involved:

*'I think the problem is that local people have been asked the same questions so many times and don't see tangible good outcomes come from it.'* (email on 28/06/23)

*'Do we know how this information will be used? I am very much aware of the research and consultation that has taken place with communities in the past and that comes to nothing. It has the potential to raise expectations and dash them simultaneously.'* (email on 06/06/23)

From this, it is clear to see that communities were (rightly) sceptical about being involved in research. My hope for the workshops was that they would bring people together to think about the kind of futures they would like to see and provide a space for open discourse between members of the community, so I was clear about this from the outset, making sure that participants were aware that the desired outcomes would not be achieved through the workshop/ my research alone, but hoped that it might be valuable for people regardless of this. I also remained in contact with some of the participants who were also then included in other aspects of the research, suggesting

that my presence during the workshops was not wholly negative, and that some trust was built. Additionally, I also plan on creating several different outputs from this research, which may provide useful for community groups and the city council when it comes to decision making processes. Despite this, I am aware that there is still a somewhat extractive element to this research, which is something I would consider in a different manner if I was to do a similar project again, aiming to delve further into participatory action research where communities would be deeply involved in all aspects of the research.

Additional complexities arose when considering the civic relationship between the University and the local authority and other actors present throughout this project, which sometimes made undertaking potentially critical research feel uncomfortable. The changing local and national ecosystem present throughout this research also posed difficulties at time, with shifting discourses around net-zero, the local council 114 notice and wider austerity politics often impacting the framing of the project.

I also acknowledge that given the limited time frame of doctoral study, data saturation may not have been achieved. This may mean that there are unexplored themes or questions arising within the study, especially given the change in direction of framing of the thesis. Ideally with more time, I would have spoken to a much greater number of residents who were not involved in activism in order to get more of a sense of concerns within a variety of communities. Relatedly, the emotional dimensions of transformation only became central to the project in its later stages, and as such some

of the interview material is less developed in this area than it might have been had emotions been a focus from the outset. I however see this as part of a humble and reflexive approach, with the project's recalibrations reflecting and embracing the voices of participants. Additionally, the embedded and 'blurry' nature of my fieldwork means that I am relatively confident, even with more time, that nothing would suddenly come up to undermine my current findings, and do feel like I appropriately bounded the scope of my work according to the constraints faced.

#### 4.9 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodology used for a detailed exploration of environmental activism, policy and social justice within the Nottingham context. The rationale for adopting a qualitative mixed-methods approach has been provided as well as critical reflections around my chosen interviews, ethnography and workshops, touching on both successes and failures in the field, as well as how I grappled with my 'insider-outsider' status. The complementary methods used within the study have not only aided in triangulating data, but have also helped to create embedded, nuanced knowledge that highlight the complex and multifaceted landscape of environmental action from above and below within the city. The following chapters outline empirical findings from the study in relation to the emotions of love, fear, anger and hope.

## Chapter 5: Love



*Figure 31 Mural in St Ann's created by students at Huntingdon Academy (Woodborough Road, Nottingham, 2025, author's own picture)*

*'I would rather begin my thought looking at the whole field of what it takes to sustain an attachment to the world. The ambitions and capacities of love would be magnetized to attachment, but other modes of relating would be too, the ones involving proximity, solidarity, collegiality, friendship...and then the hatreds, aversions, and not caring ...I want a bigger imagination of the affective dimensions that it would take to (re)build a world.'* (Berlant, 2011, p.687)

## 5.1 Introduction

In 2012, Nottingham residents and businesses caught widespread attention by making Nottingham the first city to trend globally on Twitter, using the hashtag 'NottinghamRocks'. These expressions celebrated the things people loved about Nottingham from its cultural scene, rich history to its community spirit to name a few. The mind behind the campaign stated that it led to 'a wave of positivity' within the city (Leftlion, 2020), highlighting the longstanding deep affection that people hold for Nottingham and effectively emphasising emotional expressions of place attachment in the city context. Such sentiments are mirrored, and sometimes contested, through empirical findings in this chapter.

What follows is a brief review of existing literature on love, especially work related to geography and environmental fields, with a focus on plural feminist understandings of love. I then reflect on how love has influenced this research (something I will do in relation to each emotion at the start of each of my empirical chapters).

The chapter then explores multiple dimensions of love within the city, drawing on empirical data and narratives from residents, activists, political figures as well as spatial data from collaborative mapping exercises. From mutual aid networks in St Ann's, deliberations on Robin Hood and grassroots environmental action in Sherwood, the chapter reveals how love, as a multifaceted and contested emotion, can both help and hinder transformative action for environmental and social justice. While highlighting Nottingham's strong community spirit and identity, the chapter also

discusses the complexities of love as a force that can both unite and divide, raising important questions about the consideration of emotion in building just urban futures.

## 5.2 Literature on love

Love, in a plurality of forms, is a profoundly influential emotion and has been explored in a variety of academic fields including sociology, psychology, theology, and anthropology, and through feminist (hooks, 2000; García-Andrade, Gunnarsson and Jónasdóttir, 2018) and queer studies (Wilkinson, 2009). Within human and physical geography, love is explored in several ways, including love of place and of nature (topophilia and biophilia) (Tuan, 1974, Wilson, 1984) as well as how love is an important consideration in achieving social and environmental justice as a means of promoting action (Hall, 2019). Godden and Peter (2023) emphasise that love assists activists in understanding the complex relationships and interconnectedness amongst humans, and between humans and nature, justice and wellbeing for all species. Despite this, Morrison, Johnson and Longhurst (2013) have long suggested that 'there does not seem to be a lot of love in geography, at least not love that is labelled as such... geographers have not tended to engage in explicit, concerted and sustained ways with love' (p.506) which is particularly troubling in a time when 'the worlds that we love are being trashed' (Rose, 2017 p.52), with Clayton (2020) adding 'climate change is nothing if not about loss. It brings us directly in contact with what we love because it shows us all that we and the next generations have to lose' (np). Outside of geography too, American radical historian Kelley (2002) argues: 'freedom and love



may be the most revolutionary ideas available to us, and yet as intellectuals, we have failed miserably to grapple with their political and analytical importance' (np).

Scholars studying love have challenged the notion of 'modern love', one which Hardt and Negri (2005) describe as 'almost exclusively limited to the bourgeois couple and the claustrophobic confines of the nuclear family' and 'a strictly private affair' instead stating that 'we need a more generous and more unrestrained conception of love' (p.351) building on Hooks' (2000) assertion that we should strive for a common understanding of love that does not prioritise or over-emphasise romantic love, instead defining love as a choice to nurture others. Brown and Pickerill (2009) suggest that defining emotions, including love, is challenging, with Mouat (2023) suggesting that rather than seeking to define love, it is more productive to ask, 'What does the language of love do and how does power circulate in the name of love?' (p.306).

In a time when neoliberalism, competition and individualism are pervasive political forces, scholars are increasingly promoting the 'terrain of love' as a 'vital site of collective transformation' (Wilkinson, 2017 p.59) as well as a manifestation of revolutionary political transformation (Hardt and Negri, 2005, 2009). Indeed, bell hooks in much of their work (1994, 2000) called for a renewal of a 'love ethic' with a genuine dedication towards the wellbeing of others – they state that

'without an ethic of love shaping the direction of our political vision and our radical aspirations, we are often seduced, in one way or the other, into continued allegiance to systems of domination—imperialism, sexism, racism, classism' (1994, p.289).



Reflecting on the UK's political history, Segal (2023) states that the Thatcher administration aimed to 'to change the ideological mindset from concern with equality to competitive individualism... set out to destroy any discourse of collectivity and solidarity with the vulnerable or threatened' (p.103). These passages highlight the importance of focusing on collective forms of love (as an important part of a care ethic) in the pursuit of a just future (Segal, 2023).

In pursuing said 'just future', love is seen as a verb – it is about taking action with characteristics of care, affection, responsibility, respect and commitment in service of the futures we want to see, as well as the things we want to protect (hooks, 2020; Msimanga and Nijenhuis, 2017; Godden, 2018; Clayton, 2020). People, individually and collectively, cannot participate fully as relational beings in families, professional, political, or other areas of life without the experience of being nurtured (Morrison, Johnson and Longhurst, 2013), moving beyond the notion that love and care are just for the traditionally 'weak and defenceless' women and children (Segal, 2023). York (2023) shows that throughout history there have been several examples of 'political actors revolutionizing love to align with specific political and social ideals' (p.4)<sup>42</sup>.

It is however important to challenge the notion that love is a purely positive force as Wilkinson (2017) highlights

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<sup>42</sup> Within the book York provides a 'radical lineage' of love (p.13), showing how influential figures like Leo Tolstoy, Karl Marx, Ghandi, Che Guevara, martin Luther King Jr expressed love within their work towards revolution.

'Love is not just a generative power for good; love can also close down dialogue, narrow our worlds and limit our imaginaries. As feminist critiques of romantic love have long argued, love can often be as much about violence and domination than it is about care and support' (p.67)

Here, we can see that love does not take a singular form – on one hand it has the potential to overcome separation and competition, encouraging radical solidarity yet it also has the power to legitimise nationalisms, populisms, patriotisms and fascisms as well as religious fundamentalism (Clark in York, 2023, p.ix). Carabelli (2021) states that 'at the very core of nationalism exists a kernel of love – the love for one's nation, and a hatred for those that do not belong' (p.188) in a form of love Hardt and Negri (2009) brand 'corrupt love' (p.182). Beyer and Weisskircher (2025) for example highlight how, in the context of far-right environmental activism, love is used in various ways to further their movement's objectives.

Scholars have also shown how love can entrench oppressive relations between privileged and subordinate groups (Emerick, 2020). Gotby (2023) discusses how feminised forms of emotional labour are oriented towards 'affirming, enhancing, and celebrating the wellbeing and status of others' (p.20). This emotional investment often involves levels of responsibility and pride, preventing people from cutting attachments even if they are exploitative (Federici, 2012), allowing love to become a force for domination (Wilkinson, 2017; Gotby, 2023). Wilkinson (2017) suggests that 'it is important to challenge this fantasy of joyful coherence and togetherness, we need to question how this fantasy of political love is distributed, and in whose interests, it

might serve' (p.68) to prevent notions of 'love' creating new forms of exclusion and othering. This highlights the complexity of dealing with emotions, as well as the necessity of grappling with this complexity to prevent injustice in the name of love.

While these definitions of love may seem like they fall into binary categories – 'good' love and 'bad' love, Wilkinson (2017) states that 'a truly political understanding of love would recognize the messiness, ambiguities, and unruliness of affective life'.

Embracing the complexities of love and its various dimensions, including its potential for both positive and negative outcomes, is crucial for fostering a more just and equitable world. Geographers Morrison, Johnson and Longhurst (2013) argue 'that understanding love as spatial, relational and political opens up possibilities for geographers to consider love in all sorts of different spaces, places, configurations' (p.516) – they embrace this within their study, examining love in a variety of places from New Zealand and Mumbai to online gaming spaces. Love, as they argue and this thesis also asserts, is therefore understood as deeply embedded in particular places and shaped by local contexts. It arises from and influences connections between people, their communities and environments, and is entangled with power dynamics, social inequalities and broader political structures, shaping how it is expressed and experienced.

Emerick (2020) suggests that we should use love not only to inspire our efforts, but also to help set out and determine our agendas and aims for the political struggles we take up in the first place. Love (along with a whole host of other emotional and affective states), then, becomes a key site for informing alternative imaginaries (Davis

and Sarlin, 2011), moving beyond a naïve or sentimental illusion towards a powerful force for change (Clark in York, 2023, p ix). From this literature, we can see that love is not an abstract concept, but one that is situated in the messy and lived realities of place – by situating love within spatial, political and relational contexts, we may be better able to grapple with its transformative potential.

### 5.3 Placing my own love

There are many manifestations of my own love in this research that I could have picked out to reflect on. In fact I think my own rationale for dedicating over three years of my life to researching the relatively small city I call home stems from a place of love. Nottingham is the place I have lived for the longest time since my childhood home, and the first place I found stability in my adult life. I moved here at 23, not knowing a single person other than my sister, and was quickly swept up into a beautiful, creative, caring community of people, many of whom I feel like I have known my whole life. The following section reflects on one of my favourite weekends of volunteering/ fieldwork in 2023:

It was sunny for once in the British summer time, Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> June specifically, and I had just arrived at Green Hustle (GH) on Market Square in Nottingham with my community group hat on as I was spending the morning in the 'Knowledge Tent' with Nottingham Climate Assembly (NCA), talking to the festival population about climate assemblies and deliberative democracy. After some hiccups setting up (lack of power for the monitor showing a video from

Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies), myself and a fellow member of NCA relaxed into the space, chatting and catching up with the other organisations we were sharing the space with (Nottingham Open Spaces Forum, Nottingham City Council, Nottingham City WI), waiting for the festival to start.

After opening, there was a wide variety of events and activities – talks, live music, dancing, stalls, free food and more to entice people into the city centre, making it a buzzy, charged atmosphere. Having a place and holding space for open conversations with passersby about the environment in Nottingham, as well as democracy and assemblies felt important – indeed, these conversations were not all positive and supportive of NCA's cause, but these contestations felt celebrated, not narrowly shut down. I overheard similar conversations with the City Council about their CN28 ambition, people intrigued but sometimes sceptical. People I knew from my PhD, community work and general life floated in and out throughout the morning – I spoke with some students I had recently been leading a seminar for about their plans for the day, before taking a quick break to grab one of 'Veggies' vegan burgers (the famous activist food provider mentioned previously in chapter 3) to enjoy in the sun. The afternoon was much of the same, followed by a quick pack up.

Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> of June – the morning began much like the one prior, helping NCA set up their stall, however I wasn't on duty with them today, instead wearing my fieldwork hat. Having planned to undertake community workshops as part

of my research methodology, GH felt like the perfect opportunity to run my activities, comprising of a collaborative mapping exercise and a visioning activity. Working alongside another researcher, our station was set up right next to samba drummers and a capoeira exhibition, providing entertainment and soundtracking our afternoon during lulls in engagement with our activities. My mapping exercise proved popular, and I had some uplifting conversations with people who had lived in the city for their whole life, telling me about their childhood homes that no longer existed and their fond memories of that time (one of my prompts for the map was for places with good memories), as well as conversations about the places people loved and felt connected to in the city. I also chatted to a person who had come to the festival specifically for Himmah's food as the word had gotten out from the day before that they were providing free hot meals to anyone that needed one but had stayed to enjoy the music and other activities on offer. Our slot came and went quickly, and after packing up I met a friend to grab a drink and enjoy the final sets of music, tired but happy. I had supervision the day after on Monday, and spoke at length about what a great experience the festival had been and how it had sparked further excitement about my research project (and in some ways reignited my waning love for it after a year spent planning and literature reviewing). That week I also undertook an interview with someone I had met at the festival, who ended up speaking to me about how excited the festival had made them feel in terms of the energy it filled the city centre with, the diversity of voices present and the

strength of community, and we both reflected how our involvement had put us in a good mood for the rest of the week. Being part of something like GH, and taking action more widely is both informed by and informs my own sentiments of love, something which I now see as integral in creating a just future.

In the next sections, I outline how the influence of love (in a plurality of forms) both helps and hinders transformative change in Nottingham.

#### 5.4 Mapping love and identity in Nottingham

As part of the community mapping exercise outlined in chapter 4, I invited residents to consider, then pin, the places they loved in their communities and wider city (green points), as well as places they felt represented the identity of Nottingham (blue points). These were then digitalised as seen in figure 33, and themed as seen in table 4.

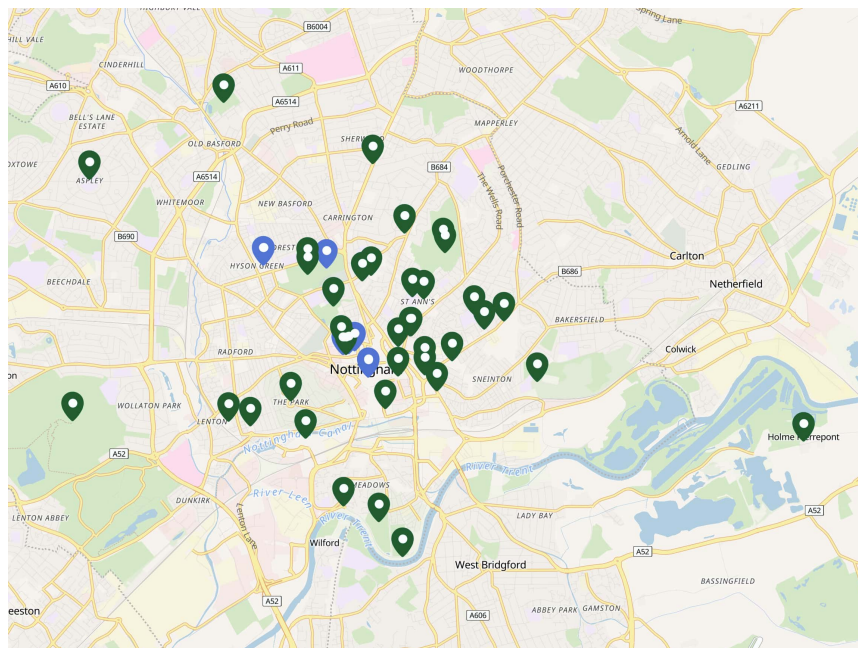


Figure 32 Mapping points from collaborative exercise showing love and identity (due to the simplicity of the mapping software used, exported maps do not have a scale, North arrow or legend) (OpenFreeMap © OpenMapTiles Data from OpenStreetMap)

Table 4 Breakdown of mapped points representing love and identity supported by key quotes

Type of place	A place I love	A place that represents Nottingham culture/ identity	Key Quote
Charity - animals and nature	2		'Stonebridge City Farm - a great place for kids and adults to go free, brilliant cafe'
Educational establishment	5	2	'We need to love Hollygirt School because then we can learn' 'Great memories of my infant and junior school'
Green space	14	1	'beauty of nature'  'Colwick Woods viewing spot - immaculate view of Notts that I've shared with different people'  'Allotments because of its heritage in St Ann's and how it has lasted in time thanks to diverse people'
Independent shopping and food district	2		'Always changing, place of creativity and care'
Music venue	1	2	'happy memories of happy gigs' 'Rock City - huge tunes, lots of history'
Neighbourhood	5		'the people are nice, it is a nice safe area, it has good food, a cute market, it is lively' 'I was born and raised here but was moved from my home on Clayton Street due to demolition'
Religious building	3		'Holy Trinity Lenton - I love God!'
Retail area	1		



<b>Sculpture</b>		2	'The Left Lion - goes without saying'
<b>Sport facility</b>	4		'Skateland - time as a family'
<b>Youth provision</b>		2	'Hyson Green Boys Club (now Hyson Green Youth Club) was important for me growing up'

These results show a strong attachment and love for green space with both Colwick Woods and St Ann's allotments standing out as places that residents of the city have a deep connection with, with one resident describing Colwick Woods viewing spot as having an 'immaculate view of Notts that I've shared with different people'. Participants' personal reflections highlight the role of green space as places that help foster interpersonal relationships and create lasting memories. Another resident linked St Ann's allotments directly to the city's heritage and history, reflecting on how they have managed to survive across generations because of efforts by the community.

Differing Nottingham neighbourhoods were also frequently cited as places people loved, reflecting feelings of belonging and community attachment. One resident described their area as 'nice, safe, with good food and a cute market, it is lively', while others reflected on the place that they grew up, while no longer present, continues to hold emotional significance. One resident shared 'I was born and raised here but was moved from my home on Clayton Street due to demolition'. This memory shows how love for place can persevere beyond its physical existence as such expressions are

deeply tied to personal histories. Sculptures like the 'Left Lion'<sup>43</sup>, as well as music venues like Rock City were said to be representative of Nottingham's identity, demonstrating the importance of cultural and civic landmarks within the city.

The mapping exercise highlighted clearly the relationship between place, emotion and identity in Nottingham, showing how love for place can be deeply personal, built through relationships and memories, but also how places can hold a shared cultural significance. Taking an emotion lens, the importance of place and identity within changing environments is revealed.

### 5.5 Love as community

Despite documented low levels of social cohesion in Nottingham (Cauvain, 2018; Centre For Thriving Places, 2022) related to integration, belonging and unity, several interviews illuminate feelings of connection, care and solidarity within communities<sup>44</sup>. This care and connection are often rooted in a deep love for place and the people within it. As Pollard, Studdert and Tiratelli (2021) state, 'community power' (p.24), linked to a strong sense of community, is essential in mobilising transformations, which makes understanding these dynamics within Nottingham essential. Despite the damning data Riley, who runs an environmentally focused CIC in the city, expressed a

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<sup>43</sup> According to Visit Nottinghamshire, the lions are 'Beloved by locals as a famous 'meeting place', Nottingham's Left Lion is one of two stone lions situated either side of the steps leading to the front entrance of the Council House. The lions, like the Council House, have become etched in the psyche of local people who will probably have clambered over them as children and used them as a meeting point with friends and 'dates' in adulthood.'

<sup>44</sup> Important to note here is that while strong community cohesion was noted in certain areas and social groups involved in this research, I am not necessarily suggesting that this is ubiquitous across the city/county.

profound appreciation for Nottingham's community networks, and their caring ethic, sharing

'We've got such amazing community networks and stuff because people do look out for each other...I think like, we've got strong community...it kind of makes Nottingham punch above its weight, and enriches lives.'

The spirit of community support and solidarity is integral within transformative action, as Milstein (2017) notes, 'as we strive to make our social relations less alienated, almost anything becomes far more bearable' (p.6). Alli, who works in a community centre in a deprived area of the city, reflects a similar sentiment. Their perspective captures the nature of one of Nottingham's tight-knit communities

'you can still knock somebody's door and say if you got a little bit of sugar or, you know, somebody's down and everybody's there...there's no shame in poverty or asking for stuff...the community spirit is very good.'

This sense of care, and the absence of judgment, has helped to foster an environment in St Ann's where individuals look out for each other, overcoming adversities they may face in a collective and relational manner. Alli's reflection is a lived example of hook's 'love ethic' (2000) and Segal's 'politics of radical care' (2023), where community networks provide resources and emotional support, allowing residents to navigate challenges together. Within community workshops, residents also noted these loving and caring relations 'no matter the hardship of the times St Ann's keeps its spirit of community, also thanks to central service providers like Chase Community Centre' and 'the community café has help build friendships, support hardship and has helped

develop cohesion in the area'<sup>45</sup>. These sentiments are mirrored in McKenzie's (2012) in-depth ethnographic account of working-class life in St Ann's, which states 'from a collective feeling of exclusion, and abandonment, the residents know that where they are is where they will stay, therefore they invest in their communities, through a sense of ownership and belonging' (p.473).

Often when denied access to resources, residents have been able create value for themselves, their families and their locality using what is available to them, building forms of social capital (McKenzie, 2012) in the face of mounting financial pressure. Recent research also highlights that levels of social capital in a community often determine the ability for a community to support itself during a crisis (Goulden, 2025). Ollie, a community organizer working in Nottinghamshire, accounts their love and admiration for their mother in creating informal networks of economic support in her community, using a pardner<sup>46</sup> system to help people to overcome racial discrimination in the Windrush Generation

'my mum was like a...warrior queen, really...not just the love of a parent, but the admiration for what she did...Jamaican families when they came over here...they were living in all the racism and the banks wouldn't give them loans ...they were at the bottom and they were gonna stay there ...you couldn't even get a bank account...So they empowered themselves...basically everyone was

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<sup>45</sup> Something which McKenzie (2012) describes as not just 'belonging' in and to St Ann's but also 'being St Ann's' (p.469).

<sup>46</sup> BBC News (2020) describe this as: 'The pardner savings system is common practice among people from the Caribbean in the UK. It is essentially a partnership among people to save collectively. When the Windrush generation came to the UK they discovered credit services from banks were not easy to come by and pardners allowed many to save to buy homes or cars.'

putting in a couple of pounds a week each...a bit and a bit more. And then they had 50 or 60 people involved and then one week somebody could have it... this was enough money to get the deposit for your house and that... So they all kind of helped each other.'

Here, even hyper-local networks, with relatively few people can create powerful economic support structures that help residents address immediate financial concerns. Such community-led initiatives have also helped to build long-term resilience in communities, especially those facing systemic barriers including racial discrimination. These forms of grassroots efforts meaningfully impact individual and community wellbeing. One volunteer for a social justice and environmental focused group I spoke to, who was living with a long-term disability, highlighted how the group they are involved in is 'just like a massive, massive hug when you come here...it's like being in my living room... I just love it. Love it to pieces' exemplifying the profound sense of home, safety and belonging that community networks can foster.

These examples emphasise the impact of both informal and more formalised support networks (e.g. community centres)<sup>47</sup> alongside collective action in fostering resilience and community collaboration. The role of love and mutual respect is also shown within these accounts, as people come together to support one another, echoing Traill et al (2024) who highlight the importance of these 'care-full spaces in uncared for places'

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<sup>47</sup> Community centres can however also be more or less formal, with differences existing between community spaces like the Sumac Centre and council funded spaces.

(p.198) in fostering sustainability in areas experiencing high levels of urban deprivation.

#### 5.5.1 Activism and community

Similar support systems, and related feelings of belonging, exist in activist and community organisations – Willow raises an interesting scalar point, reflecting how activist organisations with a national profile such as XR are 'overwhelming and I think it switches people off' however at the local scale states 'XR Nottingham...you know, are just a bunch of lovely local people doing what they feel is best. So I think community groups can be a be a real way in [to action] for people, because where you might think of climate hippies but then it's also someone you know and work with who is involved in a local group'.

Seeing themselves in other members of activist groups was also an important part of becoming involved with and sustaining action for activists. For example Dylan, a local business owner, highlighted how after a protest they met a likeminded individual which contributed to their sense of belonging within the XR group

'his job title was something like business owner. And again, I was like, huh, maybe this is where I could fit in. It's very striking how...seeing somebody...who's in your tribes... has something in common with you is incredibly motivating. So I was like... maybe I should be involved with this. So that was really the start of it, of going from 'this is a bunch of crazies that I don't want to have anything to do with' to then dipping my toe in...he's lovely

and he's an accountant. And I was like, 'Fucking hell'. If accountants are getting involved, I think I'm in the right place.'

Together, Willow and Dylan's reflections highlight how activism at a local scale can nurture strong social connection, playing a key role in shaping motivations and senses of belonging within climate movements. Shared identities and goals can therefore motivate individuals to participate in collective action, which may be why groups such as XR have created a number of subset groups such as XR Unify (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour), Disabled rebels, and XR Faith Bridge to name a few. These groups are described as 'a way to connect and work together through communities of shared self-identity'. In this way, the conception of these sub-groups acknowledges that the path to broad social change involves multiple, intersecting journeys, each with distinctive challenges and opportunities, and shared self-identity may help in budling a more diverse system of activists.

#### 5.5.2 Pride and attachment in place

Connections and commonality can also help to foster a sense of pride in place, inspiring residents to fight injustice in the form of action (Carabelli, 2019). Brieger (2018) highlights the significant role of social identity in nurturing environmental concern – indeed Courtney, as resident of Nottingham states 'it's my area. I love this area. Why would I want to see all the litter and the rubbish?'. This motivates them to act for the environment in their community, regularly doing litter picks and clearing

overgrown areas, yet this sentiment is not necessarily widespread in the area, as they share

'I did some cleanup down near Victoria Park....So I went around and I was knocking on people's door...Do you wanna come help? One person said to me, uh, that's none of my business. And I thought, well, yes it is...because I'm cleaning the path that you use to bring your bin down. So it is your business.'

For Courtney, being part of the community means actively caring<sup>48</sup> for it, resulting in feelings of anger when others do not do the same, highlighting a complex interaction of emotions, with love for a place generating anger when others do not feel the same duty of care towards it. In the community workshop, they elaborated on this, describing the neighbourhood as a 'dysfunctional family' stating that you can call each other out, shout at each other, speak candidly about some of the more negative aspects of the estate – yet when others do it (who do not belong to the community) they will always have each other's back and rally together in solidarity – in this way, love in St Ann's aligns with Wilkinson (2017), where they challenge the fantasy of joyful coherence and togetherness – love in this community is messy and complex, mirroring the relationships one might have with their own families. They add 'if there is anyone who can insult St Ann's is me. It's mine. It's my community'. This highlights a protective attitude towards their community, as well as a deep sense of belonging, attachment and ownership.

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<sup>48</sup> To a certain extent I am conflating love and care here, building from scholars including Frankfurt (2004) who suggest that love is a powerful and enduring form of care.



The area is however often associated with stigma, that Alli describes stemming from 'youth crime, no resources, drug selling which then ends up in youth violence. And you know substance abuse... homelessness', as well as stigma towards Nottingham more widely<sup>49</sup>. Courtney goes on to explain that there is a perception that success means leaving the area, and their use of love as defiance against such an idea

'they've done well for themselves. They don't live in St. Ann's. And I think, wow, how insulting...you're saying that for those of us who've stayed, have not done well, no, I stayed because I love it here... I'm not forced to'

Changing demographics of the area, especially since the 'slum clearance' implemented as part of the Housing Act in the 1930s but largely occurring in the 1960s, changed the community dynamic. Many original residents have left, and new people from different areas of Nottingham have moved in, leading to a mix of mindsets and ways of doing things as Courtney notes

'A lot of St Anns, original St Ann's, people were leaving. New people were coming in and, you know, when I say new people, I'm referring to people from different areas of Nottingham. So, you know, well, even if it is, we're all in the same area you do have different mindsets. 'cause someone from Basford...you can tell us apart. I think we actually even do speak differently, you know? So,

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<sup>49</sup> Especially in the 2000s Nottingham had a reputation for high crime rates and gun crime, leading to a nationwide branding as 'Shottingham' or 'Assassination City'.

you know, different mindset, different way of doing things. And so the area, the face of St Ann's started to change.'

This evolving landscape highlights the complexity of community identity, attachment and the ongoing negotiation of belonging and cohesion within urban neighbourhoods. These reflections raise questions about 'otherness' and 'non-belonging' even at the hyper-local scale, with Traill (2018) suggesting that 'being communal creates insiders and outsiders, through practices of (relatively porous) boundary making and symbolic distinction' (p.69). As Collins (2019) notes, for 'people who have lived in a place for a long time or who are actively involved in their local community...issues are emotionally charged and invite emotional kinds of responses. They strike at people's sense of identity, their moral and political values, and the kinds of aspirations they have for their local area' (p.398). Courtney's reflection also highlights a relatively bounded understanding of place, framing place as fixed, enclosed and tied to ownership within a community. Others, like Jordan, a member of an environmental community group express a more expansive understanding of place. They share 'I don't come from here, but you know, I want to protect it.' Unlike Courtney, whose love for place and community is tied to deep and historical connections, Jordan expresses a form of love and care emerging from a sense of shared responsibility. This illustrates how attachments to place, and resultant love and care, may not always rely on rootedness or origin, but can be made through personal values and experience and reflects the diversity of local identities across Nottingham.

Such complexity can also be found in other areas of the city, with Billy reflecting on increased community engagement with environmental projects in Sherwood, colloquially known as

'The People's Republic of Sherwood...we still got a much greater take up than I think we would have done five or six years ago and the fact that for the poison free pavements thing off we had, I don't know, 120 people sign up as street champions... that was excellent...we have definitely seen a greater interest and also a greater willingness to stand up and do something.'

The community's widespread shift towards environmental action and the reference to 'The People's Republic' symbolises a collective identity may be emerging, encouraging people to care for and take pride in their neighbourhood. As Billy notes, this can help create tangible outcomes for nature in the area, again demonstrating the power of collective action within communities. Yet, the challenges of fostering truly loving and inclusive places and spaces are evident. Other residents in Sherwood, including Ellis who works in sustainability at a Higher Education establishment in the city, suggested that when they tried to encourage opening the allotment to the public during a board meeting, they faced fierce pushback from the current users who feared that 'other' people using the space would create tension. Much like issues described in St Ann's, Ellis' reflection highlights ongoing conflicts between inclusion and exclusion, showing

how deep-seated fear and prejudice can hinder broader community cohesion, as well as work towards social justice and environmental sustainability<sup>50</sup>.

Indeed, love, community and place identity are messy, ambiguous terms that are intangible and therefore hard to measure (Wilkinson, 2017; Mair and Duffy, 2015), but are deeply emotional. Massey (1994) states that 'the identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple. And the particularity of any place is, in these terms, constructed not by placing boundaries around it and defining its identity through counter position to the other which lies beyond, but precisely (in part) through the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections to that 'beyond' (p.5).

### 5.5.3 Towards relational understandings of community and action

As we can see, Nottingham does in ways benefit from strong community networks, yet fragmentation does occur within them and across the wider urban landscape, reflecting the need for a more interconnected approach to social and environmental action. Segal (2023) warns that 'if we are not to fade into varieties of paranoid solipsism, we need to be able to care for and about others' (p.2) and builds on Butler's assertion that 'in the face of mounting global violence we must always begin from the recognition of our inevitable interdependency' (p.5). Such relationality is increasingly reflected in sustainability science literature too (e.g. West et al 2020), highlighting the need to move away from individualistic approaches towards a more collective and connected view of society to support action towards environmental and social

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<sup>50</sup> This will be explored more deeply in chapter 7.

sustainability. Such considerations have long been discussed in place research (Massey, 2005) with Davidson (2025) asserting that 'to be alive is to be in relation with others' (p.157). Indeed, as participant Riley aptly notes 'you can't put a price on love and community'.

Despite data on Nottingham suggesting low levels of social cohesion, as shown here, the lived experience of many residents tells a different story – one of connection, care and solidarity, which can be harnessed to promote place protective community action. However, these strong community ties can also lead to division and exclusion of 'outsiders' in neighbourhoods, creating barriers for enacting inclusive and justice-oriented change within them, reinforcing boundaries and deepening divides. To navigate these complexities, we must embrace understandings of love, community and place identity that are messy, plural and complex – love is a powerful, often contradictory, force in shaping place based environmental action. Bohman, Evers and Lövbrand (2024) also remind us that a 'vision of an inclusive transition requires a more nuanced approach to the concept of 'community' which recognises different stories, voices, and perspectives and challenges taken for granted assumptions about local people's priorities in debates on just transition' (p.433). The findings within this section demonstrate how community, when viewed through a lens of love, can be understood as a site of solidarity, but also one of contestation, where love centred emotional attachments shape the potential and boundaries of just transformations.

## 5.6 Love as rebellion

Massey (2007) highlights the importance of asking of every place: 'What does this place stand for?' – insights from this research highlight a multifaceted and contradictory Nottingham identity in the present day. However, a popular answer for this question, arising across numerous interviews, was a sense of rebellion.

Nottingham has been long associated with the folklore of Robin Hood, as well as social activism as previously described in chapter 3. Collins (2019) describes how Nottingham 'was a centre for nineteenth-century movements such as Luddism and Chartism and has strong connections with activists and philanthropists such as Lord Byron, Jesse and Florence Boot, William Booth and Mary Potter' (p.393). Rebellion remains a central aspect of Nottingham's identity and is a great source of pride for many residents (Collins, 2019), aligning with love through the continued pursuit of justice and collective care.

For many, involvement in social and environmental activism arises from a deep emotional connection to community and place citing love, taking many forms, as motivation for involvement in action. Theo, a trade union activist in Nottingham shared insights into their upbringing and background, reflecting on how it inspired them to become involved in trade union activism, sharing

'I come from a working class background. I grew up on a in a terraced house down in Kent, my dad was a building worker. My mum was... a housewife....I had a motivation from quite early on in my life to make sure that I tried to

improve the lives of the people that I saw in my in my own life...and also in the community I grew up in'

Theo's motivation for action stems from an aspiration to better the lives of those around them, emergent from a deep love for his community, and a desire to see it thrive. Elliot also expresses a similar sentiment, stating that 'my activism is the rent I pay to be part of this community' encapsulating how their activism is an expression of love, duty and commitment to one's community. In being an active participant in social and environmental causes, Theo and Elliot felt they were contributing to the improvement of the communities and places they love. These personal commitments highlight how love and care can, and do, serve as an important motivator for people sustaining activism.

Ellis notes how love, taking a more personal rather than collective form, can also lead to environmental action. They reveal how having children changed their attitude towards the world and ignited their passion for the environment, leading to them seeking out a job focusing on sustainability

'I started to question everything. And then I thought, what am I doing bringing the child in this world...you know, you look at the news...So then I think I, I saw started being slightly more active in thinking what I could do as a parent. And then it sort of just snowballed.'

For Max, who works at a large Nottingham based business and chairs their sustainability group, the love for their child, and even their child's potential children,

caused increased concern for their future in an uncertain world. This uncertainty spurred greater involvement in environmental action, as they reflected on the fact they do not want them to miss out on the same opportunities that they look fondly upon from their childhood

'I grew up in a small village with lots of surrounding farmland, woodland, green, lots of green space. I realised that a lot of that is going to be gone...If we continue the way we are, then those things are going to be gone and maybe not my daughter, but my daughter's children...the things may not be there to be seen as they were. So I felt that. Regardless of what my impact level can be, I can make an effort to do something on my own front'

Max describes how their love for the place they grew up, and the nature within it, motivated their action, so that their children can enjoy the same environments and create the same lasting memories. These reflections mirror findings from Howard (2022) who show that parents are often highly emotionally invested in climate change impacts and mitigation and find hope and solidarity in taking part in various forms of activism. This links strongly to principles of intergenerational justice, again highlighting the enormity of the impacts young people could face if action is not taken.

Here we see where love intersects with a plurality of other emotions, an ethic of care and a deep love for family can also evoke feelings of fear, grief, and guilt, catalysed by climate related events and discourses (Howard, 2022), and acting or 'rebellious' can foster more hopeful or traditionally positive emotions. Max's motivation to become



involved in environmentalism stemmed from a fear of loss and of worsening future impacts for their family, while Ellis' stemmed from guilt in bringing a child into a world inflicted with intersecting crises. These accounts illustrate the messiness of emotional encounters with climate change and highlight how complex and interconnected feelings about climate change can be. Love, as shown here, does not exist in isolation but is tangled with a range of other emotions, in the past, present and future, requiring a nuanced understanding of how love can drive environmental action, and an acknowledgment that these mixed emotions can both challenge and motivate individuals. We also see distinct yet complementary notions of love, one taking a more abstract stance for community and the environment (sense of belonging to something bigger, shared responsibility), and the other a more intimate, personal love people may feel for family members (more tangible, deeper emotional incentive to create change), highlighting the diversity in how love is enacted.

#### 5.6.1 Rebellion as identity

Riley provides an insight as to why this sense of rebellion is important within the Nottingham context, especially given their ambitious climate related goals

'we are like a rebel city and we are very much like steal from the rich and give to feed the poor kind of attitude. I think it's why it doesn't feel like a poor city, and we're not cold, disinterested, London...we're a warm, welcoming... there's a lot of things in our identity...we are...well positioned to understand the sort

of world that we need to live in if we're gonna reverse ecological decline and capitalist domination.'

Like Collins (2015), a 'we're better than London' narrative was observed, inverting central-provincial relations, and feeding into the narrative of rebelliousness (and a love for place) – despite not having the resource or capital potentially available to those in London, the city 'doesn't feel like a poor city'. Despite Massey (1994) suggesting that place identity does not necessarily arise from internalised histories, here we see a direct link to the Robin Hood folklore, where the 'legendary outlaw' would steal from the rich as they passed through Sherwood Forest and redistribute the money and food to the poor, thus acting as a figurehead of the proto class struggle. Riley positions Nottingham's identity as important in overcoming 'capitalist domination', with them suggesting a necessary move towards a fairer economic system and the reversal of ecological decline. Here we can see that many people in the city see these issues regarding people, the environment and the economy as intrinsically linked.

They go on to say

'I think like there are a lot of lessons in our history and our rebellious nature and our protesting, gobby, you know, like the cheese riots and stuff. Like think it's all like, 'I aint paying for that cheese. I got to eat. I'm not paying these ridiculous cheese prices.' I think it's all very important.'

Here we see how historical lessons can still be useful and important for the city today, demonstrating how past 'rebellions', such as the Great Cheese Riots of 1766<sup>51</sup>, continue to influence the city's current identity and people's action within it. They also reference Nottingham's 'gobby' nature, emphasising the proactive and vocal stance against injustices – a trait described in Collins (2019) as a 'bolshie' identity. One participant Ellis, who moved to the city after living in London reflects on a sense of belonging and 'fitting in' within this rebellious narrative, reflecting on why they have stayed in the city for so long

'it's really hard to put your finger on. It's because of a vibe, a feel and it fits in with you...I'm anti-establishment in a way...not to a point where I would go and glue myself to a pavement or that, but I am you know I'm against the elite, I'm against the class system. I think that it's all corrupt.'

Relatedly, while seemingly tired of the Robin Hood association, as Ellis notes, there is something enduring about this narrative

'people are a bit bored of Robin Hood and all that. And I get that. But it's interesting. Wherever you go in the world people know Nottingham... I also feel that there is kind of a gritty fighting spirit.'

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<sup>51</sup> According to the [University of Nottingham](#) 'On 2 October 1766 the Great Cheese Riot of Nottingham began during Goose Fair. Angry at the excessive price of cheese, a mob formed who seized it and began wheeling or carrying the cheeses away. The mayor attempted to restore order but was knocked down by a cheese.'

Ellis describes this spirit as not just historical, but currently alive in the city, reflecting how current residents view themselves and the city more widely. Similarly, Billy adds

'I don't want to slip into the Rebel Nottingham cliché or anything, but I think there is something in it that there are quite a lot of people and willing to stand up'

Billy here reflects a cautious embrace of the rebellious identity, mindful of the risk of falling into a cliché but insisting that there is substance in the idea of Nottingham being a rebellious city. They signify a readiness among residents to act and advocate for change, helping to connect its rich historical narrative to its current and future potential. In Chapter 3, I highlighted how the activist scene is alive and well in the city, with a wide variety of groups working to make the city more just and more 'green', which seems to fit this 'rebel' narrative.

### 5.6.2 Rebellion and legacy

Outside of the city, the identity also seems to resonate. Rory, a socially engaged artist involved with galleries and grassroots groups in the city, contrasts Nottingham's identity with that of their hometown and current residence, Leicester

'In Leicester where you know, there is definitely this kind of undertone of...kind of rebelliousness. But it's nothing compared to Nottingham. I feel like Nottingham's really edgy...it has this real sort of like... a very strong kind of presence of the kind of things that we're talking about [activism and grassroots

action], whereas Leicester, it's there, but it's. I don't know. I think maybe it just has the edge I think compared to a place like Leicester.'

While a similar sized city and in a similar location within the country, Rory feels that Nottingham has a distinctive 'edge' over Leicester in terms of grassroots action and active engagement with social issues, suggesting that a culture of activism is more distinct and embedded within the city identity when compared to other places.

Despite being from a different city, Rory speaks lovingly about their long-term involvement in the grassroots scene in Nottingham, reflecting on the enduring sense of connection and attachment this has fostered

'Since my teens, really, but I used to go clubbing there quite a lot at the Marcus Garvey Centre when I was at university in Sheffield, so we used to travel down there...and the reason I'm bringing that up is because obviously that's quite... a legendary place...in terms of grassroots organisation...I feel like I've always been connected to that part of Nottingham's history'

The Marcus Garvey Centre, formally the head office of Raleigh Cycles, mentioned here by Rory represents an important pillar in Nottingham's activist history and represents a modern-day stride towards justice and equality. Alongside the venue operating out of the building, The Marcus Garvey Day Centre offers care primarily for the needs of older African and Caribbean citizens with dementia, physical and mental health needs

(Landaid, 2023)<sup>52</sup>. Spaces like these represent places of not just citywide importance but also create regional legacies, producing and sustaining action within and outside of the city as seen in Rory's example. Such spaces therefore also represent an important intersection between care and rebellion – a present-day service provision for those in need, with a vibrant history of rebellion against racism.

### 5.6.3 Contestation of the 'Rebel City'

However, this strong sense of rebellious identity perpetuated by many residents is not universally embraced or recognised. Eddie, a resident who created a successful petition to reclaim the Broad Marsh area of the city to green space, aptly named the 'Green Heart', reflects on a perceived lack of a strong, unified Nottingham identity in comparison to other cities and areas in the country

'people do want to feel a sense of belonging to a place and I personally think that Nottingham doesn't have it as strong as other places like Liverpool, or maybe Cornwall...these places seem to have a bit more sort of strength, stronger identities...We are sort of in the middle, we're not north and we're not south...there's almost a sort of incipient northern identity that you see sometimes now. And Nottingham isn't really part of that. But at the same time, it's not really the south either... the East Midlands is a bit of a liminal zone...It's a bit sad, in a way...we don't have that identity as much as we could have.'

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<sup>52</sup> For a detailed exploration of the site's history see researcher Panya Banjoko's 2019 article in Leftlion. As of February 2025, the centre was shut and the building is likely to be sold by the council due to repair costs (see Waston, 2025)

Eddie's sadness here links to the idea of the midlands being 'the missing middle' (Hardill, Bentley, and Cuthbert, 2006 ) of the country. Moving beyond the hyper-local, Eddie discusses the importance of regional and spatial identities, feeling that Nottingham, and the East Midlands more generally, lacks a distinguishable identity that can be overtly seen in 'Northern-ness' or 'Southern-ness'. This 'identity crisis' may hinder efforts to mobilise residents around causes, impacting action to address social and environmental issues. This may be worsened by the 'placelessness' of wider net-zero and carbon neutrality targets that act as the basis for the Council's environmental policy, which are often emotionally detached from the lived realities and contexts of specific places.

Chris, an activist involved in many local groups, also speaks to the historical 'anti-authoritarian' identity struggling to find a place on the ground in contemporary environmental action in the city, which may hinder potential for widespread engagement.

'I mean you'd expect the fact that it's got this kind of cussed, anti-authoritarian history to kind of work in favour...But...I don't really get much of a sense of it when it comes down to action'

This point highlights the disconnect that some activists feel between Nottingham's past rebellion and present-day action, despite there being strong grassroots and activist communities working on various causes across the city. Chris' reflection raises important questions regarding the authenticity of the 'rebel' rhetoric in the current day, with one resident stating the identity has 'been co-opted by the, you know, like

Nottingham Castle', raising concerns around commercialisation or romanticisation of the identity for political and economic purposes by the city council<sup>53</sup>. While the council positions their initiatives as bold and innovative, some participants felt there was a lack radical and progressive action (explored further in chapter 7), producing a dissonance between how the city has been portrayed historically (and still currently branded by the council) and how some residents perceive it. These contradictory perspectives illustrate a multifaceted and complex Nottingham identity in the present day.

Though the 'rebel Nottingham' identity provides a powerful shared narrative between residents and the local authority, representing a deep-seated love for the city and its potential for social and environmental justice, it must be critically examined and authentically integrated into current efforts for social justice and environmental action. As Kew (2023) states, 'the prevalence of this myth in the popular imagination, such redistribution of wealth has yet to materialise in Nottingham' (p.26).

Bringing emotion into the framing of urban identity reveals how love, rebellion and activism are intrinsically entangled with the city's and resident's sense of self.

Responding to Massey's (2007) question – 'what does it stand for?' the findings here suggest a contested, partial and sometimes even commodified answer. Place (and its identity) are therefore not static, instead operating as an open and fluid concept, that is shaped by personal contexts, power, history and emotion (Massey, 1991).

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<sup>53</sup> This 'co-option' does work both ways however, as when discussing this with a resident involved with an anarchist group in the city, they stated they too feel as if they use this branding to their advantage



### 5.7 Love as collaboration

As shown in section 5.2, love extends beyond intimate personal relationships and can manifest as a force for relational collective action towards social and environmental ambitions. In Nottingham, there are strong examples of partnerships, collaborative efforts and shared visions effectively uniting diverse groups and organisations to address social and environmental challenges. Yet, participants also reflect on the difficulty of undertaking such collaborative work.

Collaboration among individuals, communities and organisations is important in fostering efforts towards shared goals, and, by working together, organisations can achieve more than the sum of their individual efforts, utilising differing expertise and insights (York, 2023). As Riley reminds us

'[there is] symbiosis at every level. That's recognising that our bodies are made-up of millions of creatures beyond ourselves. You know...'no person is an island unto themselves'... and it's just about realizing we need to move beyond general like Thatcher-Reaganite individualism...I'm definitely more kind of collectivist I believe we all need to kind of act together but it's a kind of mindful and interdependentness rather than any kind of individual... we need to like recognise our own needs and the needs of others and in all of our actions, I think, act together in that way.'

### 5.7.1 Organisational collaboration

This emphasis on interconnectedness acknowledges mutual responsibility and care as a foundation for collective action. Sam who works at an active travel charity<sup>54</sup>, highlights the importance of such collective working within organisations

'we do a lot of work with Sustrans around...the infrastructure and networks and future lobbying... We work with Nottingham Bike Works...they predominantly look at the bike repair and supply side and we work with MySight because we provide support for people that have got visual impairments...And the list just goes on...we're really good at delivering what we deliver, but when we can't be the right person for every community. And so the strength really is in the partnerships. So if we work with MySight, for example, they're already a trusted liaison with groups of people who are experiencing visual impairments... we will then offer services through them...there's an authenticity about that. We don't want to try and embed ourselves everywhere because we can't do it properly and we want to work with partners that can do it properly... we have a really broad networks across vast numbers of people.'

Sam here reflects on the value in working with and through organisations that already have the trust of the communities their initiatives are trying to target, creating more genuine and effective engagement. They express how these types of collaborative

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<sup>54</sup> Active travel refers to human-powered transportation (e.g. walking, cycling, manual wheelchairs)

efforts may provide more 'authentic' experiences for users of services. Additionally, each organisation brings their own strengths and areas of expertise and therefore this collaboration can enhance the overall effectiveness and inclusivity of initiatives. Sam's example comes from a third-sector organisation, who are often facing resource shortages due to the nature of grant funding, therefore collaboration and partnerships also offer the opportunity to pool resources for delivery of projects.

Collaboration is also essential for grassroots action and activist organisations. Several partnerships exist across the city, which aim to bring together a wide range of people and causes. Grassroots collaboration has been used to build power through strategic alliances, which in turn may help in balancing issues of power asymmetry (Flores and Samuel, 2019; Oscilowicz et al., 2023). Such an approach helps to contribute to a stronger, more connected community of grassroots organisations. Groups like Green Hustle employ a wide range of perspectives from varying groups working towards a wide range of goals, and in doing so can tap into different areas of expertise, allowing for a plurality of services and initiative for Nottingham residents. The festival organiser also reflects that festival partners speak about the festival in terms of it 'belonging to them', highlighting the truly collaborative approach grounded in a collective care for the city. Green Hustle engages with traditionally environmentally focused organisations such as the Wildlife Trust, but also engages and works with arts organisations like Acoustikle who platform and champion music of global origin, refugee support groups including Refugee Roots, as well as charities tackling homelessness like Emmanuel House. These cross-sectoral collaborations are essential

for justice and equity, allowing various community needs to be addressed concurrently. The localised examples, as reflected upon by participants, provide examples of a more intersectional approach to environmentalism. Such examples mark an important step towards beginning to overcome injustices the injustices described within the sector.

### 5.7.2 Creating holistic policy

A multifaceted approach is also championed within Nottingham's policy implementation, as within the CN28 action plan the council acknowledges that 'sustainability, economic growth, alleviating poverty and tackling climate change are all complementary and interlinked' (p.5). This is also reflected in their carbon neutral charter where 'delivering carbon neutrality through a narrow carbon only perspective would create the risk of interventions and policies that at best missed out on opportunities to deliver other city objectives, and at worst, had negative impacts upon certain groups of people, the economy and the wider environment. Climate change is linked to many other sustainability issues connected to food, water, land-use, energy for homes and transport, consumption and production' (p.4).

Mikulewicz et al (2023) show that intersectionality offers a lens for us to consider a holistic approach to tackling these intersecting issues, with positive outcomes for justice

'climate justice scholars and activist shave long argued that climate change is not just an environmental issue –it is a social crisis within which multiple

oppressions intertwine and inter-act...Intersectionality offers to untangle this complex web, leading to more nuanced understandings and less-exclusionary solutions to the climate crisis.' (p.1281)

Indeed, the engagement of diverse groups and perspectives in multiple projects across the city and county helps in building a united front to tackle pressing social and environmental issues. These examples show love in action through expressions of collective care and solidarity, evident in mutual respect for various perspectives, commitment to addressing overlapping issues as well as creation on spaces where voices are heard and actioned.

### 5.7.3 Towards collaborative networks of care

The outcome of the projects referenced here can also sustain networks of care, with Rory commenting on the legacy of many projects they have been involved in

'so that ends up being the legacy, you know. So that ends up being really the best thing that can come out of a project...where you're still this kind of interconnected, you know, spider's web of people that are still doing the things, you know.'

The interconnectedness created during these collaborative projects helps to drive enduring change, potentially acting as a powerful force for social and environmental transformation. Linking back to section 5.5, community here is a product of action, something that emerges through collaboration, organising and resisting together. As Segal (2017) states 'protest networks' often start at the local scale, but through

continued collaboration and solidarity, create ripple effects that have impacts beyond the local. Throughout this research, I have observed and been a part of numerous collaborative projects <sup>55</sup>, as outlined and described in table 5, each contributing to a broader, connected movement for change.

As we see from this section, collaborative efforts among communities, organisations and individuals help to create meaningful change within the city for both environmentally and socially, aligning with a broad notion of love through shared action and common objectives. Partnerships and collaboration are vital for achieving ambitious goals, in both grassroots and third sector projects. We see at both scales, leveraging of expertise and resource towards a collective vision. However, by foregrounding the emotional and place-based dimensions of collaboration, we see that such efforts move beyond a simply pooling of resource and expertise, revealing how authenticity, trust, mutual care and love for place underpin collective work. Here, enduring 'networks of care' are often produced, speaking to an inherent relationality between groups in the city.

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<sup>55</sup> This is by no means an exhaustive list, but serves to highlight the significant amount of collaborative work happening within the city.

Table 5 Key examples of collaborative working across the city

Collaboration/ Project	Key Groups/ Partners	Focus/ Goal	Significance/ Impact
Resolve Nottingham, Save our Services	Unison, Unite, NCA, Nottingham City Council	Anti-austerity protest and advocacy for public services	Broad alliance against austerity, engaging unions, local politicians and grassroots activists
NCA Mini Assemblies	XR allies, Sumac Centre, grassroots organisations	Gathering diverse groups for action coordination	Fostering unity across various activist groups in Nottingham
Climate Action Nottingham - United for Warm Homes	Broxtowe Green Umbrella, Nottingham FoE, Tiger Community Hub, NCA	Campaign against fuel poverty, promoting affordable warmth	Multi-organisational support for social justice and climate action
Green Hustle	Wildlife Trust, Hummah, Dr Bike, Refugee Roots, Emmanuel House	Community-focused event combining environmental and social justice efforts	Inclusivity, broadening traditional environmental and social justice activism
XR - The Big One	Global Justice Nottingham, XR Nottingham, 200+ organisations	Large-scale protest in Westminster for climate and social justice	National action showcasing the power of diverse alliances for climate action
Broxtowe Green Umbrella	Incredible Edible, Hope House and other local organisations	Community- led environmental and social initiatives in Broxtowe	Strengthening local activism and creating a broad support network
Nottingham Coalition for Climate Justice	Anti-facist groups, trade unions, climate groups, Palestine solidarity organisations	Uniting diverse groups to advocate for climate justice with a focus on intersectionality	Building solidarity across multiple justice movements

## 5.8 Love and plurality

Linked to these collaborative approaches, in recent years there has been increasing recognition of the importance of having a variety of ways to transform societies to become more inclusive and sustainable. As people and places face complex challenges, including climate change and increasing social inequality, embracing diverse perspectives becomes essential in combatting them. Bohman, Evers and Löwbrand (2024) remind us that there is 'more than one story' when it comes to

transformation, with many initiatives in Nottingham showcasing how engaging with diversity beyond tokensim can strengthen local initiatives and can contribute to a deeper understanding of the issues communities are facing.

The environmental sector has been traditionally homogenised in terms of gender, ethnicity and class (Bell, 2019, MacGregor et al., 2024), posing significant challenges for justice and equity as it often fails to effectively consider or address the complex needs of diverse communities. Numerous interviewees pointed to diversity and inclusion as a key priority area moving forward, showing that individuals and organisations in Nottingham are committed to ensuring that a wider array of perspectives are heard. Indeed, Billy reflects 'the issue with the traditional friends of groups of parks and so on is that they all look like me. They're white, middle class, of a certain age, and so diversity is a big challenge.' At a Climate Justice Coalition protest, a young activist that I know well from the Youth Climate Assembly ran over to me, mirroring my own sentiments about the protest, stating how 'white and old' everyone in the crowd was. Highlighted here, we see the importance of having a variety of ways to become involved in environmental action as well a broad understanding of what action and activism means, with Solnit (2016) calling for climate organisers to 'do better at reaching out and offering everyone a part in the transformation, whether it's the housebound person who writes letters or the twenty year old who is ready for direct action' (p.135).



### 5.8.1 Towards everyday action

While some people participate in groups such as Friends of the Earth, or in direct action and disruptive efforts, it is vital to recognise that such groups and tactics may not be feasible or appropriate for everyone. Noah, an activist in XR, acknowledges this distinction, expressing a sense of responsibility for using their privilege to amplify the voices of those who might be subject to more limitations or danger. Eddie, a resident involved in a community group in the city, too highlights the importance of engagement beyond traditional activist circles

'in terms of reaching out to people, it's how do you reach those people who aren't activists? How do you speak to them? And actually, it's not really about putting information into their heads. It's about giving them access to be creative and intellectual themselves'

Here, we see the importance of cultivating spaces where people's own knowledge and creativity can flourish. In Nottingham, we see a huge variety of groups in Nottingham related to environmentalism in a broad sense, offering differing entry points into action, and representing diverse interests. A network of over 25 community gardens operates throughout the city, many of which provide free food, activities and training in their local communities. There are travel charities, offering financial support and training for active travel as well as grassroots initiatives with a focus on community energy and retrofitting (Kiamba et al., 2022; Preston, Mazhar and Bull, 2020). Steps are also often taken by groups to ensure that any commitments are manageable – for

example, Willow's group only meet online to stop issues with travel affordability and to prevent childcare responsibilities acting as a barrier to participation. Actions taken in this group are also manageable in terms of time commitment, including actions like sending an email (with a template provided) to lobby a councillor with the aim of not burdening individuals, instead directing calls to action towards those who have capacity and power to challenge incumbent power structures.

As mentioned in the previous section, Nottingham's 'Green Hustle' festival is another example of collaboration and connection, offering an entry point for people to become involved with environmentalism how they see fit, without pushing predetermined ideas. Riley, revealed the motivations behind starting the festival back in 2019

'It was all about reflecting the communities of Nottingham properly within an environment... It's always been about inclusion and diversity and kind of giving everybody a platform and a space and Green Hustle was sort of primarily about carrying that through to environmental movement, which I saw as predominantly white, middle class and grey'

Green Hustle sought to challenge this perception and breathe new life into the environmental movement (Keddie and Ives, 2024) in the hopes of making it more inclusive

'I think like representation is really important and just showing people from all walks of life doing positive things and taking part in something that speaks to them like our events, our festival is much more about, it's not a festival of

environmentalism, it's like we're going to be doing lots of green stuff...but it's a festival about food and fashion and sport and travel and all these things that everybody does or that all matters to somebody and it's about connecting with people, meeting people where they're at on climate change'

By combining environmental initiatives with everyday activities including food, fashion, sport and travel, the festival hoped to create connections and foster dialogue, encouraging collaboration and accessibility (Keddie and Ives, 2024). The festival represents a departure from the more conventional narrative of environmentalism (as stated numerous times by interviewees as middle class, white and grey), with a deliberate effort to expand the movement's reach by championing diversity and relatability, aligning with a more intersectional approach. This sentiment is also shared by Jamie, who works for a local housing association, noting that we should not be 'telling people to recycle or go vegan, but meet people where they are at'.

Their approach seems to have worked, with Billy noting that 'Green Hustle...was probably the most diverse event I've been to in the last umpteen years....it was so noticeable, motivating...so yeah there's progress'. They go on to reflect on the importance of this level of diversity in ensuring the resilience of the city

'the strength of Nottingham... it's diversity is a real strength... Really massively so. Yeah, you walk through well, even Sherwood and Hyson Green<sup>56</sup> or

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<sup>56</sup> Sherwood and Hyson Green are both neighbourhoods to the north of the city centre. Hyson Green particularly has a very diverse population, with the highest level of global majority residents in the city.

something, and there are so many different languages, cultures, foods, everything that. That helps to make a resilient city.'

Similarly, an event St Ann's allotments garnered the same sort of outcome with Jody expressing their sense of pride at the wide cross-section of the community in attendance

'So Apple Day on Saturday we had probably around 160 a 170 people at that event. The spread of languages was phenomenal. It was lovely...very diverse and people enjoying the space and enjoying being part of an Event Community. I think that they're the, they're the main things that kind of filled me with pride, really. When you look at how relaxed people are, how much they're enjoying the space, how the kids can just come in and the family see it as a safe space.'

Outside of grassroots action, and in response to the diverse needs of its residents, the county council has introduced a role known as 'local area coordinators.' These coordinators play a crucial role in bridging the gap between individuals and the community, providing practical care and creating the conditions in which participation then becomes possible, as explained by Ollie

'local area coordinators... are there to do this bit of work between, before me...I might be working with local area coordinator that will really be interested in what is your personal stuff going off? Where can...we help? Where I'm trying to interest them in starting action. This person is like...What's your

problem? Is it the gas bill that you just come through and it's £400 for this month when it used to be £80? What is it that's really causing you your most stress right now? The local area coordinator will help that person with any problem, whether it's a housing problem and they will hold their hands on that journey...whatever your problem is, give you referral to drugs and alcohol agency, go with you to the meetings. They'll do all that kind of stuff...they're preparing them for me... they need to get that resolved before we can now think, OK, what's your actually what what's your ideas to improve your community? You said that you're interested in allotments and growing...did you know anybody else that shares your passion? Would you be up for having a meeting with them now that they haven't got this other baggage going on?'

This example shows the importance of love and care, understood here as concern for others' immediate wellbeing, in fostering a collaborative atmosphere, where immediate concerns are addressed so that residents may be better able to contribute to community led change. This type of model therefore ensures that a greater diversity of voices and experiences are heard within communities.

### 5.8.2 Challenges to plurality

Yet, despite such efforts, challenges remain. Former councillor Avery reflects that

'engagement is one of our biggest issues...I've tried to get backing for climate assembly and to do it properly cost quite a bit of money... I'm determined to get something in the pipeline, but thus far not.'

They add that while there is an appetite for community-driven spaces, there are spatial inequalities in where engagement takes place

'A few groups that have come to me and said would I back them to do to have a drop in place in the city centre or you know, to somewhere where they could do engagement with people... there's plenty of empty shops in in Bulwell, for example, or Clifton. Or Sneinton maybe, it would be great if you would think about doing it in one of those neighbourhoods where we really need to get the message out. And it's quite often the case that tumbleweed blows through...The idea of going to spend time in a shop in Bulwell doesn't really appeal to lots of them...But...it just reinforces this feeling among some people that it is a middle-class interest, but it will remain that way if we don't engage with all those communities.'

Avery's reflection echoes divide mentioned in section 5.5, where a narrow definition of 'community' can create exclusions, which reveals the tensions and complexities in working across difference. Despite a loving affective atmosphere existing throughout much of the city, feelings of 'othering', anger and fear persist, which will be discussed in coming chapters. Working across difference and within these complex emotions is paramount, as Segal (2017) notes 'Bringing people together...can only endure when there is also space for the recognition of a plurality of differences, which – in consciously combating the hierarchies of privilege and power consolidated around difference – creates spaces of excitement, respect and hope' (p.31). Carabelli (2019)

echoes this, reminding us that action rooted in love is about creating inclusive spaces that recognises difference rather than trying to homogenise or erase it.

## 5.9 Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted how love is enacted through community, rebellion, collaboration and plurality within the city, providing an insight into what emotions *do* (Ahmed, 2014) within the Nottingham context. Interviews show how love and powerful attachments to place are deeply tied with protective behaviours and care for both the people and physical spaces within neighbourhoods yet can also foster divisions within and between communities. Examples show that love can both enable and complicate collective visions of transformation and justice (RQ2), expanding on literature that states love is not a straightforwardly 'good' emotion (Wilkinson, 2017).

Nottingham's enduring identity as a 'Rebel City', while not universally felt and therefore contested, serves as a reminder of the city's past and present efforts in working towards social and environmental justice (RQ3), further highlighting how historical memory and legacy can impact mobilisation (Rootes, 2007). While notions of a 'Rebel City' linked to the Robin Hood folklore provide a symbolic resource for mobilisation, it also risks being commodified. Activist networks, grassroots groups and to some degree the city council do however work to uphold this identity in terms of both environmental and social goals, and in doing so create networks of solidarity, care and camaraderie, exemplifying expansive and collective forms of love, highlighting how actors collaborate around justice-oriented transformation (RQ1).

In this collective and collaborative atmosphere, a plurality of ways to become involved in environmental initiatives emerge that connect with the everyday. Here, the importance of moving environmental movements beyond their stereotypically white, middle class and old confines is reinforced, with calls for a movement that celebrates diversity, works across difference and adopts an intersectional approach (Bell and Bevan, 2021; Amorim-Maia et al., 2022).

The themes presented here show that love in the Nottingham context is a deeply situated, relational and political force in the pursuit of just transformations. It is plural not singular; it is sometimes rebellious but occasionally co-opted; it is collaborative but holds tension and highlights uneven power relations. In examining these dynamics, this chapter contributes a nuanced account of love's role in environmental and social action, one that embraces the emotional messiness of ongoing work to create more just and sustainable futures.



## Chapter 6: Fear



*Figure 33 Apt messaging in my university office from Nottingham's 'no place for hate' campaign (Sir Clive Granger Building, 2025, author's own)*

*'I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act' (Greta Thunberg, 2019)*

## 6.1 Introduction

This chapter reveals the multifaceted experiences of fear within the Nottingham context, exploring the impact it has on environmental and social change in the city. The chapter starts with introduction to existing literature on fear, highlighting its power to shape social relations, power structures and spatial dynamics. Then follows a short personal reflection on fear, commenting on the racist attacks that occurred in 2024 in Nottingham and around the country, highlighting the importance and power of love and community within such a scary affective atmosphere.

Following this, expressions of fear emerging from data are interrogated, considering the role of fear within insecure contexts, how fear can at the same time motivate and hinder action, how changes in policing and protest laws impact activists as well as how fear of the 'other', sometimes tied to place protective behaviours in the name of love, can detrimentally impact justice and senses of belonging.

## 6.2 Literature on fear

Fear is a pervasive emotion, and as such has been the subject of study across a multitude of disciplines, with the geographies of fear having been studied by feminist scholars for decades (see Swyngedouw, 2013). These studies have considered the ways in which fear shapes behaviour, societies and geopolitical landscapes. As Pain (2009) noted 16 years ago, 'fear is back in fashion' (p.446), which still resonates with the current emotional landscape of a world fraught with intersecting crises and uncertainties. Dekeyser, Zhang and Bissell (2023) reflect on these crises, stating that

'we live in negative times. Just look around and witness the intensification of racial violence, the rise of ugly forms of authoritarianism, the vilification of minorities, mass environmental degradation, looming planetary collapse. Bad feeling is omnipresent.' (p.190)

Fear is complex, and can manifest in various ways depending on cultural, social and personal contexts, however it is generally defined as 'a distressing emotion aroused by impending danger, evil, or pain, whether the threat is real or imagined' (Trogisch, 2021, p.21)

When considering climate change, where the threat is very real but disconnected spatiality and temporality for many, fear can play a pivotal role in shaping human connection with the natural world and non-human entities, and can influence public perceptions, policies and socio-political responses to environmental issues. Scholars like Tuan (1974) have long reflected on this complexity, stating that

'fears are felt by individuals and are in this sense subjective; some, however, have a clear source in a threatening environment, others do not. Certain kinds of fears haunt children, others emerge only with adolescence and maturity. Some fears burden peoples who live in stressful environments, others appear in complex technological societies that have vast powers over nature' (p.3).

Blais (2023) reflects on another layer of complexity, highlighting that fear exists on a continuum. They observe that individuals may describe their emotional state using terms like concern when they find fear too strong of a word and conversely use terms

like 'doom' when fear is not strong enough. As such, this 'fear continuum' ranges from mild concern at one end to intense feelings of doom at the other with emotions such as stress, worry and uneasiness falling somewhere in between. The study found that a range of both high and low intensity emotions had impacts on involvement in action and therefore highlights the importance of recognising and addressing a full range of fear-related emotions and their impact on social engagement and activism.

Beyond its impact on social behaviours and structures, scholars have also explored how it manifests in a spatial way. Tuan (1974) highlights the connection between fear and the environment in which it is experienced, with Koskela (2010) noting that 'most often, the consequences of fear take spatial forms. Fear has the power to modify spatial realities. Without a spatial dimension, fear would be nothing much but a feeling – a state of mind' (p.389). Space has been shown to shape fear in several ways, through its material qualities (e.g. lighting, visibility, enclosure), social composition (who is present and absent) and temporal variation (England and Simon, 2010). The spatiality of fear is particularly evident in feminist geographies, which have long examined how fear is embedded in and influenced by spaces (England and Simon, 2010). This literature highlights how fear can often influence 'everyday geographies' along gendered lines, with fear dictating daily routines, choices and sense of safety. For example, women have been shown to avoid certain neighbourhoods or areas that are perceived as threatening or might avoid poorly designed and dimly lit green spaces especially at nighttime or when alone (Kumar, 2021). Kilian (1998) adds that 'cultural identity, including who is safe and who is part of one's community, are also deeply

affected by who appears in public space' (p.118), showing how feelings and expressions of fear and safety shift based on a person's social position. Ahmed (2014) highlights that there is also a gendered aspect to fear, stating that it is often seen as more socially and culturally acceptable when expressed by a woman than a man. This reinforces the notion that fear is a force that is actively negotiated in specific social and spatial contexts.

Fear, in a similar vein to love, is an important emotion in both deterring and driving mobilisations (Blais, 2023). While feelings like eco-anxiety<sup>57</sup> have the potential to create withdrawal from action, Kleres and Wettergren (2017) and Marczak et al. (2021) show that, in the context of climate change activism, fear of future planetary catastrophe can also help to drive collective action, showing that the impact of fear depends on how it is experienced and framed. Howard (2022) also shows how emotions like fear and anger are counteracted by interactions with fellow activists, resulting in feelings of affection and care. Boluda-Verdu et al (2022) however state that 'eco-anxiety was associated with depression, anxiety, stress, insomnia, lower self-referred mental health, functional impairment, and reluctance to have children, mainly in climate-concerned populations, women, poorer countries, and younger

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<sup>57</sup> Verlie (2024) critiques privilege within conversations about climate anxiety, highlighting how 'conversations about climate anxiety seem to centre white and privileged experiences, and the ways in which conceptualisations, methods and practices of understanding and responding to climate distress may need to change to better witness diverse people's differentiated experiences. It contends that if the field of climate emotions fails to do this, it too will enact affective climate injustice through ignoring or silencing those most affected by climate crisis' p.1604.

generations' (p.1) highlighting how complex, connected and context-dependent emotions related to climate change can be.

The power of fear has been harnessed within broader social and political discourses, and in terms of the environment, particularly through 'fear appeals'. These are commonly used by environmental organisations and the general media to 'scare information receivers into compliance by threatening them with negative consequences of noncompliance' (Witte, 1992, p.330). Ranging from images of polar bears stranded on melting ice to hard-hitting accounts in documentaries such as *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), environmental media has often been designed to inspire pro-environmental behaviour change. However, the effectiveness of these fear-based appeals is mixed. Tang et al. (2024) show that find motivation to act, others see the messaging irrelevant to their own lives. Ettinger et al (2021) also suggest that the impacts of fear appeals (and hope appeals) are often overstated in terms of producing action.

Fear is also not felt equally. Within human geography, Swyngedouw (2013) note that while 'elites' may fear both economic and ecological collapse, they are often abstract and distant fears compared to the real, immediate socio-ecological and economic catastrophes, and the fear that comes with them, that many already face globally. They state that 'the apocalypse is combined and uneven... It is only within the realization of the apocalyptic reality of the now that a new politics might emerge' (p.15). This highlights how fear is not only a tool for motivation but also a reflection of

deeply entrenched inequalities in who is affected by and who is insulated from environmental crises.

Fear-based narratives are also increasingly used to create and sustain division in societies. Governments and social institutions manipulate fears to maintain power and control with Askins (2019) stating, 'this re/produce(s) enmity and otherness between marginalised groups, such that the status quo and the '1%' remain unchallenged' (p.107). Critical conservation scholars have studied how governments justify increasingly violent and militaristic practices in the name of 'protecting' the natural environment. Practices have been legitimised through geopolitical discourses linking conservation and broader global security narratives such as 'the war on terror' as well as through concepts of political sovereignty and territorial integrity (Trogisch, 2021). There have been instances where strategies in protected areas have used imaginaries of existential threats to justify violence (Kelly and Ybarra, 2016), often criminalising those who enter protected areas unauthorised, branding them 'poachers-as-terrorists' or 'rogues for elimination' (Pennaz et al., 2017; Fairhead, Leach and Scoones, 2012) in the name of 'green security'. This framing enables a form of green violence, where fear is weaponised to rationalise the use of force against communities in the name of environmental security and protection. Trogisch (2021) highlights how, by portraying certain groups as threats, states can reinforce their control over contested spaces and populations, further adding to power imbalances. Moore and Roberts (2022) similarly highlight a concerning rise in eco-fascism, while Turner and Bailey (2021) discuss 'ecobordering', where immigration is blamed for national environmental degradation,



therefore playing a part in increasingly racist and violent border practices. These dynamics show how fear-based security and environmental narratives can be used to legitimise exclusionary and violent practices, entrenching broader systems of power and control and fuelling social division.

Fear is a powerful emotion that manifests in varying contexts and in a variety of ways, shaping social relations, power structures and spatial dynamics. Whether driving action or justifying control, fear plays a multifaceted and complex role in our world. Its influence highlights the importance of considering fear within research across disciplines, where understanding its impact can lead to more equitable and effective outcomes. The following sections will explore fear within the Nottingham context, analysing key issues such as insecurity, motivation for and barriers to action as well as processes of othering, examining how these dynamics shape relations and impact change within the city.

### 6.3 Placing my own fear

When first trying to locate my own personal fears related to this research, I anticipated writing about the fear that has accompanied my academic journey. Me and my sister are the first generation in the family to go to university, and I am the first to go on to postgraduate study. While I am extremely lucky that my family are loving and supportive, this has come with a certain level of self-imposed expectation and pressure. Imposter syndrome is pervasive in academic settings and is certainly something that I have experienced vividly during the past four years – I am not smart enough, good enough, don't belong etcetera. When tasked with writing a blog entry

for my department's 'Geog Blog' I reflected on the 'failures' I had experienced in my research – the setbacks, mistakes, moments of doubt – and the anxieties and fears these experiences created (section 4.6), relating to literature on failure within geography (e.g. Davies, Disney and Harrowell, 2021). I could have also written extensively about my own eco-anxiety, which is somewhat mitigated by this work, but also somewhat exacerbated. Being part of community groups and activist circles comes with a sense of shared purpose but also sharpens focus on the everyday contradictions within your own life – I am always fearful, for example, to tell my colleagues that I am flying to go on holiday (something that will be explored in chapter 7). However, these personal fears feel insignificant to the broader, collective fear that has gripped the community

As I write this, the UK and indeed Nottingham as a city has fallen victim to several racist, nationalist right-wing attacks, standing in stark contrast to the messages of love and solidarity discussed in chapter 5.

These events have left many residents vulnerable and afraid, highlighting a glaring division within the city. This fear is visceral and unsettling, tied to safety, community and the right to live without threat of violence or discrimination. This type of fear is deeply embodied, spatial and political.

Given the city's (largely) loving nature explored in my work, I am unsurprised that there were large mobilisations of anti-fascists protestors against the far-right the city centre. These mobilisations were considerably bigger than the so called 'vigils' held by hate groups, reflecting most of the community's rejection

of hate and intolerance. These movements, reflecting an attempt to reclaim the city as a space of inclusivity, serve as an example of the power collective action can hold in the face of fear. Through solidarity and support, communities can resist the division that hate and fear fuel, and instead foster environments of inclusivity and care.

Even within these reflections, we can see how different fear can manifest across different scales, from the intimate and personal to the collective which may arise in moments of community tension and unrest. Within the following sections, multifaceted expressions of fear within the city are explored, considering the emotions impact on transformative change.

#### 6.4 Fear and insecurity

Previous chapters have made it evident that Nottingham is facing increasing socio-economic challenges. Such challenges produce widespread fear and uncertainty for residents, organisations and the local authority. Due to their effective bankruptcy and ongoing scrutiny of financial auditors, the city council have had to make tough decisions regarding the allocation of their resources, the results of which often impact the most vulnerable in society to a greater extent. These budget constraints have had devastating consequences for community provisions, including community centres, youth providers, care facilities and libraries – spaces that often act as lifelines for many residents. Grassroots organisations and charities working towards social and environmental justice, often plugging state gaps (Barford and Gray, 2022), are also increasingly fearful of their ability to continue providing services in the face of rising

rent prices, lack of funding opportunities exacerbated by the short-term nature of funding. The residents they serve share these fears, worrying about losing integral community services that offer practical support, but also places to come together.

The atmosphere of fear is especially pronounced in communities that have already experienced significant hardship and ongoing insecurity. In interviews and workshops with communities in St Ann's, residents reflected on the legacies and socio-economic policies such as urban clearances and the 'Right to Buy Act'. Past injustices are still impacting residents in the current day, with Courtney reflect on their long-term fear associated with housing insecurity

'It was the biggest mistake of that witch, Margaret Thatcher... We've got hardly any social houses in St Ann's, hardly any left because they're nearly all private and who can afford 700, 800 if you're on a minimum wage or if you're on benefits? It's a disgrace, biggest mistake ever... before it was like it was your home for life, so now it's, it's not your home for life... the house that I grew up in since I was eight years old, and I'm 61. Sorry. That's my family home... I'm attached to it. All my memories are there...But they're saying now, no, that's not true.'

The fear of not being able to access housing within their own communities is compounded here by the potential loss of their family homes, places that hold deep personal significance. These policies, while implemented in the 1980s, are evidently having enduring impacts on personal and community stability, with uncertainty and fear of displacement being a reality for many. Such policies, as we can see, deeply

disrupt residents' senses of place, security and feelings of belonging, as they are deeply emotional, tied to nostalgia and personal context (Creswell, 2009). In St Ann's, the change of housing stock previously acting as a home for life to more precarious and market driven reveals how attachments to home and place can be destabilised within broader systems of inequality. Courtney's reflection highlights that these processes of historical injustice have enduring impacts, highlighting the need to consider contextual and restorative justice elements within transformations to a greater extent (Keddie et al., forthcoming).

#### 6.4.1 Plugging the gaps

Outside of housing, these pressures are felt in other areas of daily life, meaning residents are needing increasing levels of support. Third-sector organisations and community groups 'are often heralded as a solution or a substitute for a torn and tattered welfare state' (Barford and Gray, 2022 p.122). Sam, who works for an active travel charity across the city and county describes the increasing pressure and strain on third sector organisations due to greater demand

'we're seeing a bigger division in people that are suffering, struggling financially and experiencing physical and mental wellbeing issues. So the divide seems to us to be far, far greater right now.'

They go on to describe a recent interaction with a resident in the city, reflecting on affordability of green transport options in the city and the impact that this has on the wellbeing

'he said that he was really struggling....could he possibly borrow a bicycle...he just started a new job...he couldn't get back to pick his kids from school in time and he couldn't afford [public transport], he's on minimum wage... we agreed to loan him a bike and at the very end of the conversation he said 'I can't tell you how relieved I am because this 9 miles each way is killing me'. Right, so this chap is getting up every single morning and he's not taking his own kids to school or picking them up cause he's walking nine miles each way cause he can't afford the bus travel...I mean that has a massive impact on someone's life. He's walking for hours on each side of every shift, it's not that exceptional for us to hear things like that...overlapping issues of deprivation and mental and physical wellbeing are huge and you know for some people £20 a week to get a bus ticket is not achievable.'

This case highlights how fear is often explicitly linked to poverty, mobility and everyday insecurity. Here, we see that the work of charities at the intersection of environmental and social sustainability become more than just green initiatives, they act as a lifeline to many residents addressing immediate financial and logistical needs, helping them to overcome structural barriers<sup>58</sup>. The resident speaks of feeling relief at the organisation being able to help them, overcoming the fear and anxiety that they had been feeling over some weeks. Sam reflects on affordability of public transport as a significant barrier, which will be an important consideration for the council in terms

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<sup>58</sup> Similar sentiments were expressed by people running community gardens such as STAA, where 'green initiatives' like growing food contribute to daily needs of residents using their services (e.g. through communal free hot meals).

of their environmental goals. This moving insight acts as a stark reminder that environmental policies and initiatives, including public transport provision, must be inclusive and address the socio-economic realities of many communities in the city to meet the needs of the most vulnerable. Martiskainen et al (2023) show how without such consideration, residents must make difficult and deeply emotional trade-offs between essential needs like 'eating, heating or taking the bus'.

Within these precarious contexts, local organisations become lifelines for communities, providing necessities like food and warmth, as well as vital social and emotional support. Parts of this study were conducted within the UK's 2021 cost of living crisis, where prices for essential goods began increasing at a much faster rate than household incomes. These challenges substantially impacted low-income households, leading to hugely increased demands on community services and provisions. Alli, reflecting on the role of The Chase Centre during this time, notes how these rising living costs have significantly impacted the mental health and wellbeing of residents

'People were coming in just after Christmas... electric is going to cost this. I can't afford this. This is going up. And you know it was really people were starting to worry. So we knew then it was impacting people's mental health and their well-being. So we sort of what we've done in response to that we extended the support for the food bank. So the criteria, we sort of made it more flexible for people'

Organisations like these have expanded and provided more flexibility in their services in response to more people in the community needing support, highlighting how crucial they are to residents' daily survival. They don't just provide essential goods, but offer space for the community to come together, Alli continues

'We are sort of the only building apart from the GP surgery on The Chase which is sort of the heart of St. Ann's. So it is the go-to place if anyone's got a problem and so if they want to use the computer we have an IT suite. If they need to make phone call, we have phones available. If they want a cup of tea and they've got no money, they can come and get a free cup of tea. We have subsidised cafe, very, very low prices anyway, But you know, we do have, you know, remit to support people who might be waiting six weeks for Universal Credit to come and have at least a hot meal a day'

This mirrors broader national trends where local infrastructure made up of large and small, informal and formal actors increasingly provide care for communities. Barford and Gray (2022) found that in Great Yarmouth a community centre ran by a community trust was a pillar of support for many residents, providing essential services but also offering community spaces, and resources such as 'Wi-Fi for students who find it difficult to work at home, warm spaces for those suffering from fuel poverty, and centres that help migrants and unemployed workers with job applications and interview practice' (p.120). The Chase Centre similarly houses St



Ann's Advice Centre, where residents can get support with debt, benefits, energy advice and employment.

For people like Alli, running such essential services comes with a high level of pressure, a pressure that intensifies under increasing running costs and fewer funding opportunities. In these situations, personal sacrifices often occur. When speaking to Stevie, who runs a community interest company (CIC), the reality of trying to maintain provision for its users became evident. They guided me through all of the activities and support they provide, including skill building workshops, creating period products to reduce period poverty, creating innovative slow cookers to tackle fuel poverty, providing warm days where the community can come and spend the day inside in the warm, providing meeting spaces for environmental activists to come together and create banners, running a community café and shop among many other things. Yet, due to increasing rent prices in the city centre, a location chosen due to increased accessibility and reach, they are struggling to make ends meet – Stevie, while talking to a volunteer during our interview, reflects 'we're just gonna work really hard the next couple of months so we don't close [name]. Its very tight'. Similar sentiments are seen on their website, under a blog post named 'Use Us or Lose Us' they state

'As a city centre space it is very expensive to be here. We are a non-profit organisation so are self-funding, including for a lot of our activities. However, we do love being in the city centre as it means we are accessible to the wider

Nottinghamshire community who we have worked very hard with over our 10 years'.

The financial pressures, including increasing energy costs for providing 'warm days' brought the organisation to breaking point, where they underwent personal salary sacrifices to ensure the doors can stay open for the community

'I'm trying to deal with all of that whilst not knowing if there's gonna be any money to pay me this week, because my focus has to be paying the rent.

Because as soon as we don't pay the rent, then we are on a months notice. So, you've sort of hit us right at a crisis point at the moment, really.'

They go on to explain the uncertain future of the company

'obviously we've still got the crowdfunder running, but also in the meantime, our energy costs skyrocketed. So we're really struggling at the moment because, you know, that was almost a step too far'

Since this interview, the physical space has unfortunately shut down due to the inability to keep up with rent costs – this means that not only has the city lost a vital community resource, but also the sense of stability for the people who were reliant on their services and the volunteers who treated the space like a second home. Courtney reflects on similar struggles at The Chase Centre, where there is a constant fight for funding to keep essential services running

'that money should always be there for those people. I don't think you should have to fight for it or go for funding...It should be there for those people, those people that are doing stuff... people like for example, [name] got to fight for funding. That's wrong. It should be automatic. You're doing something, you've proven it, people are benefiting from it. People are coming in...and so therefore that needs to be consistent.'

These firsthand observations highlight a wider problem of community organisations not having access to reliable, consistent and long-term funding. Such organisations are providing key services, yet are forced to navigate in constant uncertainty, stretching their resource and making personal sacrifices to support the people who rely on them. Without consistency, the survival of these vital community spaces will remain precarious, something that will be unpacked further in Chapter 7. Such precarity fosters a shared and relational fear that circulates between service providers and those who depend on them. People using the services live in fear that they will cease to exist, and those delivering them fear being unable to meet the needs of those already living in fear.

Perhaps due to such uncertainty, organisations and the city council themselves also increasingly rely on volunteer labour as resources become diminished. Jody, who works at a community garden in the city, highlights the limitations of this approach

'Policy locally is very, it seems very much about getting volunteers to do what was previously public sector work and I understand all the rationale behind that. You know and all these green guardians and you know the local authority

seems to be putting resources into building volunteer groups to look after their spaces. And it's great and absolutely I would encourage anybody to volunteer. But...volunteer led initiatives are often not incredibly sustainable. It tends to be dependent on a very core group of very committed individuals whose circumstances change and therefore it's very easy for initiatives like that to fizzle out.'

Volunteer driven initiatives, while providing short term financial gains, may impact sustainability of projects and support in the long term. Reliance on the goodwill of a small number of committed individuals leaves volunteers vulnerable to burnout, depression and other negative health outcomes from prolonged involvement in these efforts (Lakanen, 2019). Baines, Cunningham and Shields (2017) link these risks to the pressure created by neoliberal ideologies where individuals assume responsibilities once covered by state services, which intensifies the demands on the 'caring citizens' who step in to fill these gaps. Barford and Gray (2022) call this a 'shifting of care within the state' and highlight the inherent instability within this approach. Here we see several manifestations of fear on multiple levels – a fear that community projects might not last, a fear of unmet needs and gaps in services as well as a more personal fear of burn out and negative health outcomes. For these very reasons, scholars like Harvey (2005) describe NGOs as 'trojan horses' for neoliberalism, normalising withdrawal of social welfare and a decline in forms of political representation. Without structural changes, long term investment and wider systemic support, environmental

action risks becoming fragmented and short lived, reliant on those already overburdened, therefore addressing symptoms rather than root causes.

Further concerns arise within such organisations relating to engagement and inclusion, as Jody, who works at a community garden, reflects on the physical barriers in engaging with volunteering in green space

'there's lots of documented evidence about people from deprived communities not engaging in volunteering, not engaging with green spaces... some of them [barriers] are dead practical...the people don't have waterproof boots and clothes. You know, we look at some of our play provision and the kids are anxious about getting their clothes dirty because mum's going to go mad because she can't afford to put the washer on more than. And you know, and these are real kind of practical things. And you know, so increasingly we're talking about what we can do to provide footwear and clothing for people'

Adding to these practical limitations, there are also cultural and social barriers

'Volunteering appeals to a certain section of our community and it's the word does not appeal to vast numbers of people living in deprived communities. And you know, I go as far as to say it's such a white middle-class construct is the whole notion of volunteering'

#### 6.4.2 Centring community need

This point mirrors a broader issue of access and engagement within the environmental sector, where there is often a lack of alignment with the experiences and needs of communities. The concept of volunteering as it exists currently may not resonate with people from different backgrounds (e.g. Bell, 2020), and highlights the way in which large portions of society may be excluded from this type of action. Within this context, Alli argues that community led models, which better align with community needs, could help with engagement while also helping the sustainability agenda within the city, suggesting

‘things like space to grow where they can grow like say their own products and then turn into food. They could cook and you know, they could have subsidised meals. They need all those resources to be on their doorstep...it’s getting projects to be more community led than organisationally led. That’s been a massive thing. So organisations go in and do these big projects and like they say they move on or their funding ends and that’s the end of it. So it’s about, I think I’d like to see more community led things...It creates sustainability because they’re still going to be living here’

Alli emphasises how important embedding initiatives within the communities they serve is, rather than relying on generalised, short-term interventions. Without active participation, as well as feelings of ownership within communities, sustainability projects may risk becoming detached from the reality on the ground in different areas.

This section has shown how financial pressures and ongoing instability facing communities and organisations within the city reflect wider issues within the UK and many other nations globally, which is the expectation for places and organisations to 'do more with less' (Dixon and Wilson, 2013). Offering an array of services linked to the wellbeing of community members, such as tackling fuel and food poverty, many community hubs are stretched to their limits and are heavily reliant on volunteers and personal sacrifice to stay afloat. Yet as Chatterton (2023) highlights, 'reduced time and space for everyday activism is part of a broader shift in the economy. When people are struggling to make ends meet, you do not have the time to think or act on the bigger picture' (p.112) due to the overwhelming fear of financial ruin. This has direct implications for sustainability, as under-resourced communities are often unable to engage meaningfully with climate action – without addressing these underlying inequalities, work towards environmental goals risk becoming exclusionary. Within this context, ensuring that sustainability strategies align with realities of communities is essential, with Thomas et al (2022) expressing the need for a clearer focus on experiences and relationships embedded in places to ensure that strategies meet the desires of local communities. The city's commitment to environmental progress and sustainability cannot be separated from the social realities faced by its most vulnerable communities, and without long term support for grassroots and third sector organisations, many of whom are working towards goals aligning with those of CN28, the ability to meet both social and environmental objectives becomes

increasingly precarious, and may exacerbate the anxiety and fear felt throughout the city.

### 6.5 Fear as motivation

Fear additionally shapes how individuals and communities engage with issues of climate change and sustainability. The fear of irreversible damage to the planet and anxieties about the future has motivated activists and community groups in Nottingham to take action, echoing existing literature (Kleres and Wettergren, 2017; Ogunbode et al., 2023; Ainscough, Lewis and Farrow, 2024).

Willow reflects on how fear pushed them into activism, eventually starting their own campaigning group, because they were 'very aware of...the scary statistics and everything'. This sentiment is echoed by Tommy, who reflects on the necessity of taking action within this landscape of fear

'we've got to do it and the future is increasingly scary and doing this work kind of helps me to keep the balance I suppose, I think well, I'm doing my bit, you know. It may not be enough, yeah, but it's better than doing nothing. And I'd like to sort of tell the world that, you know, you gotta do something.'

Tommy reflects here on fear as motivation to act but also the action itself as a way of mitigating their own fear helping them to 'keep the balance' against eco-anxiety. By focusing on tangible contributions and 'doing their bit' they can better manage the emotional distress caused by an uncertain future due to climate change. Langford (2022), highlights how environmental activists tend to have higher happiness levels



than non-activist counterparts, stating that 'taking action together often produced stronger feelings of love and community' (p.178). For many activists, engaging with others in a shared cause and acting collectively helps them to transform their fear into a positive force, creating a sense of community as discussed in Chapter 5. Finding hope in such action will be expanded upon further in chapter 7.

#### 6.5.1 Bearing the emotional burden of action

Despite the empowerment that comes from taking action, fear continues to manifest in various ways, even among those engaged in activism. Charlie, an activist in a local climate change group, reflects on the temporal impacts of climate change, outlining the sadness and fear they feel for younger generations and their futures – 'I feel a bit gloomy really... it's not going to affect me really personally, but it'll affect future generations'. Charlie's viewpoint, which focuses on intergenerational justice, reveals the anxiety surrounding the legacy of climate change, with their fear stemming from its impact on future generations. Charlie takes part in environmental action largely because of this fear, yet they still feel 'gloomy'. This suggests a sense of helplessness regarding the damage that has already been done, as well as the future impacts of the changing climate, and further highlights the nuanced impact that action can have on personal emotions. Ahmed's (2014) work on fear highlights how it often exists outside of the present, functioning as a response to what is approaching rather than what is already here. For Charlie, this temporal displacement of fear becomes central – there is an acute awareness of a future that is not yet realised but that carries potential harm. Fear, in this sense, operates not only as a reaction to an immediate threat but as

an emotional engagement with an uncertain and potentially dangerous future, highlighting the emotional labour required to act in spite of such insecurity.

Billy also adds another layer of complexity that goes beyond carbon emissions and climate impacts, highlighting how many solutions suffer from carbon tunnel vision

‘one of my biggest fears, that the kind of waking up at 3:00 o'clock in the morning fear, which is perfectly rational in a way, somebody could theoretically solve the climate crisis tomorrow by finding a way of absorbing carbon cheaply or whatever. But it would leave everything else screwed.’

Billy's notes that even if the immediate climate crisis is addressed, deeper structural and social inequalities could be left to persist without resolution. This complexity generates its own form of anxiety and uncertainty, leaving activists feeling as if their efforts may only be addressing part of a wider problem. This, as Billy alludes to when ‘waking up at 3.00 o'clock in the morning’, can have significant impacts on mental and physical health. Jude, a resident previously engaged in environmental and trade union activism, similarly describes the mental strain that comes from confronting these fears on a daily basis

‘You wake up and maybe having a nightmare about something...and then you think a lot of this stuff is going on, and then you've got to kind of open your mind to, you know, you've got to get through your day...I think we are living in quite a difficult world in terms of sustaining a psyche.’

Jude reflects here on the challenges of sustaining personal mental health while remaining engaged in the climate and social activism. Many activists interviewed reflected upon the difficulties in their involvement with several groups and causes, often leading to burn out, a phenomenon widely explored in literature on activism and mental health (Chen and Gorski, 2015; Danquah et al., 2021). Indeed, I noted during fieldwork that a small core group of individuals were present at nearly all of the events I attended. This constant participation highlights the pressures often placed on a dedicated few, shouldering much of the work in Nottingham's activist community. This continuous engagement can lead to exhaustion and difficulty in balancing wellbeing with their desire to create meaningful change. So while, as noted in Langford (2022), activists may have higher happiness levels, they may too be at greater risk of 'undesirable' affective states too. For Jude, this has led to their withdrawal from activist spaces. When asked if they are still involved in action currently, they stated 'not so much. So I kind of, I think I probably burnt out... I ended up involved in lots of stuff, too many things'. While the fear they outlined above sparked involvement in groups, this experience highlights the need for activists to ensure their engagement is sustainable to maintain longevity in these spaces. Indeed, Brown and Pickerill (2009) state that burnout should be treated as a collective failure of activist situations, rather than being understood as an individual's problem. This experience is not limited to activists alone – Flynn reflects on the challenges of enacting climate policy, describing the heightened stress around implementation of the 2008 Climate Change Act as part of the city council. As public awareness and

worry about climate change grew, so too did the pressure on policy makers to take action

'how are we going to deal with this 2008 climate change Act? You know, the transition. It was quite a fraught time. There's a lot of stress about climate change because people are suddenly waking up to how serious it was.'

In addition to those directly involved in activism, Flynn's reflection highlights that the policy makers are also exposed to emotional strain surrounding climate change, grappling with its impacts alongside other social and political pressures in order to deliver for communities.

From these insights, we can see that fear serves as both a motivator and a challenge for environmental action. Fear of planetary damage, future uncertainty and climate injustice have driven individuals into activism, providing motivation to 'do their bit' in addressing the crisis. However as also illustrated, the same fear can cause eco-anxiety, producing feelings of helplessness and exacerbating the emotional strain placed on those involved in activism. Ian also describes experiencing burn-out from being too heavily involved in too many groups, which hinders involvement in action in the long-term. This mirrors Blais (2023), who shows that the effects of fear are not unidimensional. Whether fear will be a mobilising or demobilising factor depends on contextual, temporal and relational entanglements with other emotions. These emotions are also felt within the local authority context, as decision makers take on the significant burden associated with trying to address climate change. These insights highlight how fear must be considered within transformation research, to

safeguard the health and wellbeing of those involved in the fight for environmental sustainability, whether grassroots activists or policy makers. Indeed, Verlie (2024), using distress rather than fear<sup>59</sup>, states

‘failure to explicitly analyse climate distress as a political issue, as one of injustice, fails to hold perpetrators of this emotional violence responsible. It also fails to account for the intersectional differences and the inequalities regarding who experiences climate distress, to what extent, and in what ways’  
(p.1603)

Paying attention to fear, then, becomes paramount when considering just transformations.

## 6.6 Fear of change

While fear can serve as a motivator for climate action, it can also act as a powerful barrier. For many individuals and communities, fear of change can create resistance to transformation efforts. This fear emerges in various ways, linking to place-based, cultural attachments and convenience within everyday life. Understanding these fears are therefore central in developing effective strategies that are supported by communities.

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<sup>59</sup> While these are different emotions, they are linked and related to one another according to scholars like Clark (2006).

One source of this resistance was highlighted by Ash, a Nottingham City Council member. They describe how some residents in the Park area of Nottingham<sup>60</sup> have a deep attachment to place and to the heritage of the area, which can sometimes cause opposition to newer, 'greener' alternatives

'there's gas light lighting there at the moment and there's this massive debate about whether we should upgrade because it's like not safe people tripping over all the time. It's really dark. There are tree roots and, it is hazardous so half the people it feels like are like we need to update this as soon as possible for climate reasons but also safety reasons then the other half are like no way the only reason I moved here is because of the Victorian lights...they really love the lighting so it's a bit of a thorny one for the people in charge...the other one is electric vehicles...they've had these big discussions about like could we have like off road charging and how is charging gonna work and again, yeah, that, that's tricky I think with the architecture'

Such situations demonstrate how fear of change can contribute to conflict and division within communities, as well as between the council and residents. Within the same neighbourhood there exist residents that are advocating for change for both sustainability and safety purposes, alongside residents that hold strong ties and attachments to the heritage and character and therefore contest change. These tensions highlight the complexity of employing climate action, even at the

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<sup>60</sup> The Park Estate is an affluent private residential housing estate to the west of Nottingham city centre known for its Victorian Housing and its gas street lighting, which is thought to be one of the largest networks in Europe.

neighbourhood level and point to the need for increased dialogue within such situations. Understanding and addressing this resistance requires a nuanced approach from policymakers, as well as consideration of the power dynamics at play when considering who gets to protect their heritage, something often deeply linked to class identity (Price, 2021).

#### 6.6.1 Fear, inconvenience and disruption to everyday life

Beyond this cultural and place attachment, fear of inconvenience also presents another barrier to implementing environmental actions that threaten often deeply ingrained behaviours such as car use. Here, change may be resisted due to the perceived disruption of their normal routines, as explored in films such as the *Inconvenient Truth*. Elliot reflects on the importance of honesty, and overcoming the fear of being honest, within these environmental transformations that impact many parts of daily life

'It will be inconvenient. It will be. And we just gotta be honest about it...what's the first thing that XR wants us to do? The very first thing tell the truth. Ok. That's their number one demand. Tell the truth. And there's no point in hiding behind it... bills will probably go up...Air source heat pumps...Is it a cheap alternative? No...Is it going to be more expensive to travel? Are your carrots going to be more expensive? Yes, it's gonna be more difficult. And I know that doesn't sell... It's going to mean that I have to think about things which I don't like doing and I don't want to do. I just want it to be easy. I just want to be able

to walk out of the house get in my car and go to work. I don't wanna have to get the bike out, get to the train station, get on a train, go to the other end, walk from the other end. I don't want that. And that's very difficult'

The fear of inconvenience is compounded by the uncertainty that comes with new technologies and processes, and fear of rising costs. As highlighted in the previous section, many people in Nottingham communities would be unable to cope with rising costs of energy and public transport, also raising questions about the justice implications of transformative action. Elliot notes that community engagement is integral in overcoming struggles and conflicts such as the one outlined by Ash, particularly in the context of 'inconvenient' car free zones and active travel methods

'That actual, direct experience of listening to people who don't agree with you that's what I love about Community street engagement...You have to listen....And a lot of the time I will go...I agree with you. It is gonna make your life less convenient...But when you take it in the whole and you look at the wider benefits you know, for people, for clean air, it will be quieter. It won't be as noisy.'

This honest approach to engaging communities acknowledges their concerns and accepts that inconvenience is likely to accompany change. By signposting towards help and support as well as the broader benefits of having cleaner air or quieter streets, such an approach may help to ease transitions towards sustainability.

Addressing both the practical and emotional obstacles and barriers to change requires a commitment to communication, transparency and a greater level of co-creation so



that solutions are suitable for the communities they are embedded in. Though Elliot here suggests that such community engagement is essential, they also feel there are times where decisive action must be taken, highlighting the importance of sometimes 'just doing it' despite potential backlash

'I'm in favour of community engagement. But I'm also in favour of JFDI, you know. If you just get on and do it, yeah, and put the stuff in and you'll get massive reaction. People will be really angry. And then six months later you hope you go back to people and say, do you want us to say, do you want us to take it away? God no, its way quieter now. But it's the unknown.'

They reflect on fear of the unknown causing people to resist change initially, while in reality they appreciate the benefits later. Dale reflects on the temporal and spatial disconnect which may be fuelling the anger and fear associated with change, stating

'I think we think we're OK because we are not having wildfires in Wollaton Park or floods in the Meadows that it's not going to touch us. I mean A that's wrong because we shouldn't just be concerned about Nottingham and B. Well, who knows what might happen.'

#### 6.6.2 Unequal landscapes of fear

Quinn further unpacks the deeply unequal yet universal impacts on climate change, as well as systemic unpreparedness for such impacts

'I think it's to say, you know, yeah, we can definitely talk about the inequalities of climate impacts, but I think we should also talk about in a universal sense of

like basically nobody is prepared to deal with them...obviously like them happening and off themselves is bad but there's also like a question adaptation in there not only have we like are we allowing these impacts to occur, but there's also been a failure to adapt to them, and so we don't have the infrastructure prepared. You know you mentioned the drought that you know we've had, the water infrastructure in this country is not prepared for erratic weather that will come with climate change. And it it's really scary I think that this is affecting like basic utilities like water and energy and food. Yeah, I think we're not far away from the situation where, very like very not far at all from a situation in which those things won't be available to a lot of people, and so I think...in terms of what's pressing the fact that those basic needs will not be met for a lot of people very quickly, I think it's like incredibly concerning'

Quinn's insights reflect Sultana (2011), who explores the suffering and emotional entanglements of resource scarcity, illustrating that such insecurity may exacerbate fear, revealing how emotional responses to climate precarity are inseparable from structural inequalities.

Fear of change also poses a significant challenge to the environmental sustainability agenda, with deep attachments to place, fear of inconvenience and concerns about the unknown preventing individuals and communities from embracing change. Fears are closely related to how place is perceived – a relational understanding may see change as part of a wider evolution, whereas more bounded and fixed views may carry

a sense of loss or melancholy when confronted with change. Fear is also experienced in a broader and collective sense, relating to systemic issues including who bears the burdens of environmental transformations, as well as disparities in the distribution of risk associated with climate change. While cities like Nottingham continue to grapple with the challenges that climate change presents while also addressing several societal issues, addressing these fears becomes paramount, to ensure that transformative action is just, inclusive and responsive to lived realities of communities.

### 6.7 Fear in action

In section 6.4 we explored how fear can drive individuals to take climate action yet, it can also play a significant role in shaping how activists act, as well as the response from the public, state and figures of authority. The UK government's response to environmental protests has raised concerns, particularly through increased criminalisation and policing of movements. Amendments to both the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act (PCSCA) as well as the Public Order Act were passed in 2022 and 2023, directly targeting environmental activists such as those involved in XR, Insulate Britain and Just Stop Oil. Alberro (2021), even before new amendments, discussed how policing changes were worrying, building upon an already 'draconian' policing bill, with many activists concerned about their ability to engage in protest without facing harsh penalties<sup>61</sup>. Nadia Whittome, MP for Nottingham East, in their

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<sup>61</sup> Non-violent climate protestors for example have been jailed for attending a zoom call (Whittome, 2024), and one of the founders of XR Roger Hallam has received the longest sentence for environmental activism of 5 years (since successfully appealed and reduced to 4 years). In contrast, far-right rioters typically received sentences ranging from one to three years.

2024 article for LeftLion states that this culture of fear actively stops participation in protest, with a recent survey finding 94% of activists in the UK agree that there were threats to the freedom to organise, contribute to public debate, influence political decisions or protest. Jeri, an activist focused on air quality in the city, states

'We know many have been arrested...which could be construed as a tactic to deter further protest'

Dylan also reflects on this, sharing their concerns about the silencing of activist voices within court systems at a national level, sharing 'I think it's outrageous that the Just Stop Oil people have been stopped from talking about why they're doing it. I mean, really, what? Where are we living now?', highlighting how anger too emerges alongside activist fear.

Local environmental justice activist Tyler also expressed their concerns about the new measures

'it does worry me and I have been on a march against it, when it first was announced and so on...I mean, we've taken banners or banner along on the May Day trade union rally...I think it's very terrible. Very scary.'

Dylan, another activist in the city echoes this, stating

'with protest laws coming in. I mean, you know, the whole thing is like, we are heading for such a totalitarian, dystopian kind of regime in this country'

These activists point to the chilling effect that tougher policing and legal repercussions can have on protest movements (Storbeck et al., 2025), especially within smaller, local groups that may feel more vulnerable to repression. This repression is not a hypothetical concern, as it has historically occurred within the city, with a significant high-level case of activist surveillance centring around the Sumac Centre. Mark Kennedy, an undercover police officer working for the National Public Order Intelligence Unit infiltrated activist groups in Nottingham from 2003 to 2010 using the alias 'Mark Stone'<sup>62</sup>. The Sumac Centre, a community hub for activists, became the focal point for the operation, with the intention of monitoring and disrupting local environmental groups due to 'national security concerns' (Harper, 2024). According to the BBC (2021) the infiltration was part of a broader operation targeting those involved in 'extremism relating to animal rights, environmentalism, anarchy, anti-weapons and war issues, and anti-globalisation' while in truth, the Sumac Centre is 'a community space with a vegan cafe used by a wide range of people and groups' rather than a centre for extremism (BBC, 2021).

Harper (2024) argues that this type of surveillance relied on 'weaponising empathy' – Stone embedded himself in the activist community and gained trust by helping with campaigns all while reporting back to police handlers. Such tactics help to create an atmosphere of fear, where activists have to reconsider who can be trusted within their networks. Harper (2024) notes that these tactics reflect a broader issue of state paranoia: 'the state's paranoia about activist groups, coupled with poor oversight and

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<sup>62</sup> For an in-depth evaluation of this case see Lewis and Evans (2013).

institutionalised sexism led to both an apparent reckless disregard for human rights and a failure to assess the proportionality of such deployments' (np).

#### 6.7.1 Dialectical fears between activism and authority

The fear generated by such operations, however, also reflects the broader fears and anxieties within the state. As the government and police crackdown on environmental movements, their increasingly heavy-handed approach could be seen as a reflection of the fear that these movements generate within political circles (e.g. Murray, 2024), or of potential ambivalence towards transitions and transformations generally due to what may be at stake for the 'powerful' within these changes.

Interestingly, Taylor, who works for an environmental think tank, highlights the duality of the fear present in the increasing sanctions on environmental and social movements. Heightened repression on activists creates increasing fear within activist communities but also reflects the fear among the state and politicians of the power and influence that these movements yield. Taylor notes

'Politicians and policymakers shit their pants at XR and Fridays for future, a bunch of children not going to school on a Friday, it genuinely changed the minds of previously untouchable right or centre right politicians around the world because it had a direct effect on the electorate and on their mandate to stay in power.'

This demonstrates how environmental movements have become a significant political force, generating a sense of urgency and fear in those in positions of authority as a

result of climate issues being pushed into the mainstream. Politicians have therefore needed to take them seriously out of fear of losing voter support. Fear works in a dialectical way between actors, encouraging activists to push harder, yet causing the state to clamp down more aggressively. As Ahmed (2014) argues, fear works to establish boundaries and maintain the status quo, often by marking certain groups as dangerous. In this case, environmental movements are framed as a threat not just because of their demands, but because they disrupt the political and social order that the state seeks to preserve. Here we see fear operating spatially – used to re-territorialise boundaries of acceptable political behaviour by casting activists as dangerous, while at the same time the actions of activists that occupy spaces and engage in protest de-territorialising these same boundaries.

#### 6.7.2 The role of fear in shaping activism

Fear also plays an important role in the strategies that activists choose to use, as Jessie, a local activist points out 'I don't necessarily think that everybody has to do that really radical stuff, because I think that's a bit scarier for some people'. Jessie's reflection acknowledges that not everyone within environmental movements is comfortable with more radical forms of protest such as civil disobedience or direct action. While groups like XR have popularised disruptive tactics that lead to mass arrest, these strategies come with inherent risks that are not equally distributed. Research has highlighted how policing and the criminal justice system intersect with racial and economic inequality, pointing out that marginalized groups are more likely to face harsher punishments and greater levels of violence (Kaba, 2021; Bell and

Bevan, 2021), highlighting the added risk and fear that individuals may face when participating in environmental movements such as XR. Here, it becomes integral for a plural understanding of what constitutes activism, as already explored in chapter 5 and expanded upon later in chapter 7.

This section has shown how fear plays a complex role in environmental action, motivating individuals to act in the face of uncertainty, but also shaping the forms of activism they are willing (and able) to engage in. The states repose, including increasing levels of criminalisation and policing of movements, only intensifies this fear. Yet, as Taylor notes, this fear is not one sided. The mounting influence of environmental movements have instilled fear into leaders, who are increasingly forced to confront the reality of public demands for climate action, highlighting the dialectical tensions between activists and institutions.

### 6.8 Fear of the 'other'

Fear of difference, often amplified by media and political landscapes, has become a significant barrier to the effectiveness of community-based initiatives, particularly within the context of social and environmental justice. As Pickerill (2021) notes, the rise of the far right as well as reactionary and identarian politics poses a significant threat to the promotion of social justice and ecological sustainability. This fear of 'the other' aligns with Tuan (1974), who states that while people can be our greatest source of security, they too can be the most common cause of our fear, with some 'who haunt our landscapes, transforming the countryside, the city streets, and the schoolyard—themselves designed to nurture the human enterprise— into places of dread' (p.8).



England and Simon (2010) similarly highlight how 'absence of feelings of safety can be rooted in fear of difference' which can result in the exclusion of those seem as threatening from public spaces (p.203). This fear of difference, or 'othering' is tied to deeper issues of territory and power, with Sibley (2002) stating that feelings of insecurity 'encourage boundary erection and the rejection of threatening difference' (p.69). As such, fear becomes a powerful force that shapes social and spatial dynamics, including through processes of redevelopment and gentrification under that are closely linked to 'remaking' and 'reclaiming' the city from perceptions of disorder and fear.

#### 6.8.1 Fear and media amplification

Ellis, the chairperson of a community garden in the city, sheds light on how these dynamics of exclusion play out, even in spaces designed to foster community

'So we're trying to change...trying to make more community aspect of it because I when I arrived there was no community aspect, what's the point? The amount of trouble I'm getting from gardeners who are in the community garden but don't wanna grow food for other people. And I'm saying, well, we can grow for ourselves, but we can have plots where we work on, but then we give to soup kitchens, we give to and share with, you know, why wouldn't you want to do it? And then you uncover some sort of deep-seated racism and xenophobia, and you think 'Oh my God'. This is...it's quite shocking, right? When you think all I'm trying to do [is do] good, just trying to share...we're not

asking you to do the extra work. Its not going to cost you any... really it goes down to deep seated fear of 'the other', you know, the unknown. But that comes from, you know, our media.'

Ellis' experience reveals that even spaces designed for collective and community-driven goals can become sites of exclusion and conflict. While community gardens are often seen as spaces where individuals can come together and work for mutual benefit (Hanmer, 2025), Ellis notes that underlying prejudices can create divisions, and may exacerbate the already unequal access to green space in cities. What could serve as a space for mutual aid instead faces resistance from individuals unwilling to support others, revealing that the act of simply sharing food becomes contentious when fear of others enters the mix. They go on to reflect on how much of this fear can be attributed to media narratives

'My dad lives in Cumbria and he talks about 'them' coming over here and nicking our jobs. Well, what have you ever experienced at that, dad? None of it. You live in Kendall. It's majority white. You had work, you've never suffered in your life. So why are you saying that? Oh because you read it in the Daily Express...so that's where it comes from, and the fear...I'm depressing aren't I, but it's just what you come up against if you're trying to change, isn't it? That's the reality of change.'

Even when individuals have no direct experience of harm, as Ellis notes, the media can play a powerful role in shaping perceptions of 'the other'. Despite living in an affluent area in stable conditions, we see here fears about immigration and job security. This is

consistent with Cohen's (1972) theory of moral panic, where narratives of fear and insecurity are exaggerated to shift focus away from the real causes of societal problems, including economic inequality or austerity policies, towards more convenient scapegoats. As Ellis reflects, this manufactured fear presents a significant barrier to building more inclusive spaces.

### 6.8.2 'Othering' in green spaces

Similar expressions of fear have been seen in other gardens in Nottingham where discriminatory evictions of plot holders have occurred at St Ann's allotments (Hartley and O'Hare, 2023) with one resident interviewed by NottinghamLive stating 'It is mentally draining. I shared my allotment with my friends and family, it was an area of positivity. They are trying to get rid of the West Indian community, who kept this allotment alive for decades, and a lot are older people – to bring in the '£100 welly' people. There are double standards on what people can do on their plots as well', Additionally, Nottingham Nourishment Network<sup>63</sup> recently shared on Facebook their concerns around inequality and injustice within the site, stating 'I can tell you at Ann's allotments have previously (and probably still) treated the Black residents badly, taking allotments away from Black elders and participating in land gentrification and erasure of the Black history'. Jody, who works for a charity based within the site, also mirrors these concerns 'there's always that risk as well, particularly with St. Ann's

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<sup>63</sup> Nottingham Nourishment Network CIC is Black run community food project, community garden and mobile library that challenges cultural food deserts, aims to provide access to land and growing for all, as well as sharing a range of radical and Afrikan books on land, food and education (<https://nottmnourishmentnetwork.uk/>).

allotments because the plot rents are so much higher than other allotments that it could become very gentrified'. Darcy, an interviewee who works for a third sector organisation in London, notes similar processes in the capital, commenting on processes of 'green gentrification' that threatens action towards environmental and social justice.

### 8.8.3 Othering, hostility and aggression

Freddie, who works for a local refugee support charity, also provides a first-hand reflection of how this fear of the other has escalated into hostility and aggression towards vulnerable groups. They describe an increased incidence of hate, both online in person, creating fear for those who are supported by their services, as well as the team themselves

'there's been increased incidence of hate. And we've had the odd comment on our Google page and on our Facebook...we just had heaps and heaps of comments of racial abuse...there's all these comments and it was quite upsetting for the whole team...We had one we had one guy turn up to something for refugee week who was there shouting abuse and stuff and we just we just got him out... there's been concern around that we've had to think about what would we do if things got very escalated and yeah so but we've not needed to which is which is good. I mean I think some of the worst of it has been seen in some of the accommodation, whether it's been that Liverpool or Mansfield and Long Eaton where there were very deliberate attacks and things

like that. So it's affected you know...we knew people in the accommodation that witnessed the events'

This highlights how fear can, alongside prejudiced thoughts or exclusion, develop into direct and violent action, impacting the mental and physical safety of refugees both within the city and throughout the UK, as well as having impacts on their support teams. The fear felt around future escalation draws attention to the complexity of this work within the current political and societal context. This may have detrimental impacts for justice within the city due to the importance of feelings of belonging and community for creating grassroots transformative change. Despite such fear, the organisation Refugee Roots have started to get involved in community sustainability events such as Green Hustle as a way of engaging with more residents in the city, as well as holding their own open events. These actions reflect the importance of inclusive participation in achieving just transformations, where a sense of belonging is essential to overcoming division and building strong communities.

#### 8.8.4 Fear as a barrier to 'civic duty'

Courtney provides further insight into how fear operates in everyday life, linking to historic high crime rates in the city. They note that fear of confrontation or violent retaliation prevents people from addressing issues like littering in public spaces.

'if you break a rule, no matter what it is, bog standard littering, there is a consequence to it. So you're littering. Somebody's gonna tell you up and say, pick it up, right? But they don't do that...I think a lot of them have got the

mindset of its none my business, they don't wanna get involved. What happens if, you know? Everybody's got that bit of scare factor in now what happens if they hit you, knife you, shoot you... So that blocks you from doing what your, I would say called my civic duty... we've been instilled with [the idea that] everybody wants to hurt everybody. Which is not true, of course. Right? I mean, terrible things happen, but terrible things happen everywhere and terrible things happen in the most unlikely place, right? And I don't let that stop me. I'm not letting that mindset stop me from telling you pick that piece of paper up, sorry'

Here we see how, for many, fear infiltrates into the smallest of actions, preventing communities from engaging with each other in what Courtney calls their 'civic duty', caring for the space they live. While simply commenting on littering, this example highlights how fear may also undermine collective senses of agency to act on wider climate or justice issues. Fear within this context also threatens the strong community bonds discussed in chapter 5, where trust and responsibility help communities come together around shared goals such as environmental sustainability as well as helping to build a sense of belonging.

Despite these challenges, important work is being done to combat the effects of fear to promote community trust. Jody emphasises the importance of outreach and engagement to build bridges, much like Elliot reflected on earlier

'We do a lot of partnership working and a lot of outreach with other partners and try to build bridges... We need to be seen outside out in the local

community so we become trusted faces, trusted individuals. And we also need to work with the people that are already engaged with them so that we can support groups of people to come to site in the pre-existing groups. And you know, because that's a lot less scary, but also that we can that we become a safe, safe individuals that they trust to then come and have a look at what ultimately they will identify as a safe space, if that makes sense.'

Jody suggests that overcoming fear requires consistency and visibility – by being present in communities as action is being taken, as well as working with established groups, they aim to create an environment where people feel safe and welcome, reducing the fear of 'the other' through familiarity and trust building. This long term, relational place-making approach may help cultivate understanding and break down barriers within communities, diminishing fear-based divisions. Davidson (2025), speaking to findings in chapter 5 that suggest love may be an important force in overcoming fear, states

'while we remain divided, the only means of engagement is conflict...it must not be this way if we are to confront the climate emergency. We can honour our unique identities while also expanding our empathy maps to meet other on level ground, in safe spaces, among whom we practice reciprocity... Conflict is... inevitable... however addressing the climate emergency requires that we move beyond conflict towards cooperation, and cooperation can only happen in the presence of empathy; it requires that alongside our difference we forefront our commonalties' (p.159)

Fear, often amplified by media, political narratives and social anxieties acts as a powerful barrier to transformative action towards social and environmental sustainability. Experiences shared by participants reveal how fear operates at multiple levels, shaping behaviour, influencing social interactions and impacting how communities navigate difference. Fear in this context, if left unaddressed, may perpetuate exclusion and division, making it harder for communities to work collectively towards common goals. There is however hope in the important work being done to counteract these divisions and provide safe spaces for collaboration, cooperation and solidarity.

### 6.9 Conclusion

From this section, we can see that fear is multidimensional and produces varying impacts on work towards environmental and social justice within the city. On one hand, fear of planetary collapse, uncertainty and injustice can act as a powerful motivator for action, as people feel encouraged to 'do their bit' in addressing the crisis (RQ1). However, the same fear can cause eco-anxiety, produce feelings of helplessness and exacerbate the emotional strain placed on those involved in activism. Jude also describes experiencing burn-out from being too heavily involved in too many groups, which hinders involvement in action in the long-term. The accounts here resonate with Blais (2023) concept of a 'fear continuum', the position on which may impact the outcome of fear.

Fear, while holding the power to bring people together in action, also holds significant power in fuelling division and undermining work towards justice. In the previous



chapter, we saw how love can foster solidarity and motivate care for people and place, yet this often exists alongside fear (and other emotions like anger), which can promote action, or lead to protective and exclusionary responses which was seen to be especially prevalent in community green spaces in the city (RQ1, RQ2).

Personal accounts highlight the complex ways in which fear shapes everyday life for residents, activists and community leaders. Building on England and Simon (2010) and Koskela (2010), we see here how fear can therefore manifest spatially and socially, shaping everyday geographies and determining what forms of action are possible, as well as the emotional response to action (Trogisch, 2021).

Understanding and addressing fear will be crucial in fostering caring, collaborative communities, and will be integral in promoting a just future environmentally and socially (RQ3). By situating fear within everyday spaces in Nottingham, we see both its generative and destructive potential, demonstrating how it is tangled within insecurity, action, place, belonging and power. As such, fear within this context is a powerful political force that shapes action towards environmental and social justice.

## Chapter 7: Anger



Figure 34 Illustration by Jenny Mure in LeftLion, November 2024

*'We must be careful to give rage the credit it deserves. It has a special power that is mighty enough to combat some of the strongest forces and systems at work in the world'*

*Cherry, 2021 (p.5)*

## 7.1 Introduction

Present throughout many of my interactions with community members and activists throughout this research was a palpable feeling of anger at varying levels with varying targets, which form the basis of this chapter. This chapter begins with a brief overview of the literature on anger relating to environment and social justice issues. Following this, there is a short personal reflection about how my own anger has emerged and evolved throughout the process of undertaking this research. Then, using outputs from community mapping exercises, the spatiality of anger and neglect in the city are explored, highlighting places that residents feel need improvement.

A scalar exploration of anger is then conducted tracing how it manifests at local, regional, national and systemic levels, before turning to a more demographic lens including a focus on young people, activist identity and inequality, using various forms of injustice as an anchoring structure.

## 7.2 Literature on anger

Within many contexts, anger is often dismissed as a negative and unproductive emotion and is thus underexplored when compared with 'positive' emotions like hope, especially when coming from certain groups in society<sup>64</sup>, meaning that the power of

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<sup>64</sup> Myisha Cherry in 'The Case for Rage' (2021) discusses the difference in connotations of anger and rage when coming from people of colour, stemming from the harmful and unfair stereotype of 'the angry black person' that has roots in systemic racism and prejudice. Aadnesgaard (2020) also discusses gendered connotations of anger, discussing the 'Angry Feminist' archetype when women have been historically expected to conform to 'feminine' behaviours (kindness, gentleness etc).

anger to act as a catalyst for change is sometimes overlooked (González-Hidalgo and Sografos, 2019).

Amid mounting social and environmental crises, anger can often drive individuals and communities to action, challenging injustices and mobilising efforts towards transformation (Kleres and Wettergren, 2017). Research indicates that while a wide array of emotions like fear, sadness and guilt<sup>65</sup> play a role in responses to climate change, it is anger that most often leads to direct action and engagement (Gregersen et al., 2023; Stanley et al., 2021). Political theorist Thomas (2006) sums up the importance of anger in the struggle for justice using two stands, 'the first idea is mobilization; here the implication is that anger is the emotion which is capable of motivating people to engage in political action. The other idea is injustice; here it is implied that the reason why people mobilise is to overcome such perceived injustice. These two ideas in conjunction suggest that close attention to the emotion of anger can help us to understand the political world' (p 123).

In response to climate inaction, alongside social justice issues, anger can become a sustained driver of collective action. As Jasper (1998) highlighted, social movement organisers have long worked to channel 'inchoate anxieties and fears' into 'moral indignation and outrage' (p.409) which can be directed towards concrete targets such as government policy or corporate actors (Brown and Pickerill, 2009). Dory et al (2017) indeed discuss how communities in New Jersey became increasingly frustrated and

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<sup>65</sup> Among other emotions, as outlined in Pihkala (2020).

enraged due to being 'unheard' and 'ignored' by the community leaders or local government around issues of pollution, therefore transforming their generalised anxieties into focused forms of anger, helping motivate individuals and communities to act. North et al (2020) argue that generative anger about what is wrong, and antagonism towards those who perpetuate it can lead to the creation of alternative economies and social structures, arguing that 'anger about injustice, exploitation, and the climate crisis and antagonism toward discourses and practices of domination can be a generative, positive force for change' (p.4) . Rather than seeing antagonism as divisive, they suggest that is it essential to challenging systems of power and domination. Focusing on a case study in Liverpool, the study shows how anger about exploitative labour practices has driven grassroots efforts to reclaim work and resources through initiatives like community land trusts, aiming to create more equitable systems. This 'antagonistic economy' exemplifies a proactive step toward constructing alternative, more sustainable systems.

However, anger is not always directed towards appropriate targets, and its power can be misused. Bray et al. (2024) noting that in contexts marked by austerity and economic precarity, anger about hardship and declining public services can sometimes be misdirected in the form of rage towards individuals perceived as 'foreign' or different, rather than addressing the root causes of injustice and inequality. Here we often see where anger, populism and nationalism collide, with people in positions of power often exploiting or manipulating emotions to divert attention away from systemic failures, using marginalised groups as scapegoats as touched on in chapter 6.

Mishra (2017) suggests that we are living in an 'age of anger' where populist movements and politicians effectively harness public resentment, hostility and rage to mobilise support (Kay and Banet-Weisser, 2019). The increase in populist right-wing leaders and movements in contemporary Europe is connected to the resentment and anger within populations, and anger over governments adoption of austerity measures and neoliberal reforms have driven the rise of left-wing social movements (Fominaya, 2019). Anger may therefore fuel increasing polarisation, driving both progressive and regressive movements that shape public discourse and action (Askins, 2019; Davies, 2020).

Perhaps because of this duality, Kleres and Wettergen (2017) state that anger is often viewed with suspicion, with social movement activists tending to avoid expressions of anger at least when they are trying to mobilise public support. In their work examining XR protests Johnston and Bonnett (2023) state 'despite a uniting anger, they tend to be well behaved, to the point of self-conscious politeness' (p.317), suggesting a strategic restraint in how the movement's anger is expressed<sup>66</sup>. Kleres and Wettergren note that these activists often instead focus on emotions like hope, while also highlighting that conditions for hope are limited and unevenly distributed. Differing lived experience of crisis, and proximity to impacts shape the emotional tools available within mobilisations, with Thomas (2022) reflecting, 'we may be in the same storm, but we are not all in the same boat' (p.58).

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<sup>66</sup> Interestingly, despite, or maybe because of this, XR have elicited huge amounts of anger from others outside of the movement.

These contextual differences highlight the importance of the interplay of different emotions (Kleres and Wettergren, 2017), as anger is often accompanied by other emotional expressions which can impact their effect. Cherry (2021) suggests that 'anti-racist anger' or 'Lordean Rage'<sup>67</sup>, aimed at radical change, is deeply connected with emotions like care, compassion, empathy and love. Such anger is productive and inclusive, remaining rooted in a collective commitment to justice and transformation. Similarly, Ahmed (2014) frames anger as belonging with hope, arguing that 'hope is what allows us to feel that what angers us is not inevitable, even if transformation can sometimes feel impossible' (p.184) – here these emotions operate together as part of an emotional landscape, rather than as singular components. While anger provides the charge needed to challenge systems of injustice, hope offers a pathway for envisioning the changes that anger demands. Hamilton (2022) also highlights the connection between grief, fear, love and anger, observing that 'grief appeared as a referent emotion. Love was enfolded within it; fear of loss or experiencing grief derived from it; and anger was one outward expression of it' (p.10). This again reinforces the idea that emotions do not act in isolation, but are deeply interconnected, and that anger may be an outward expression of a more complex emotional landscape. Grau (2025) also show how what they term 'constructive' anger can be a factor in moving through apathy, fear, and depression and mobilizing toward

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<sup>67</sup> Referring to poet, writer and activist Audre Lorde, as much of their work focused on harnessing anger as a tool against racism.



collective climate action, which can then cultivate resistant, active, constructive forms of hope.

When harnessed constructively, anger, as highlighted within the literature, has the potential to be a powerful force for social and environmental justice. While carrying the risk of being misdirected or leading to violence or burn out, it also holds the potential to drive mobilisation and activism. As environmental and societal crisis worsen, acknowledging and channelling anger towards addressing the root causes of such injustices offers a powerful tool for working towards lasting transformation.

### 7.3 Placing my own anger

As mentioned in section 5.2, I feel like this research was first and foremost born out of a place of love – for the city and the people I have met (and maybe even the possibility of a better future). Yet, as the research has developed, I have found myself increasingly angry (which is not something I am usually good at, with my personal brand of anger often presenting itself as sadness).

As a resident of the city, I am angered by years of austerity and chronic underfunding. My local library has never opened. Youth clubs and community centres are shutting. The very spaces that allow people to gather and organise, are being erased. It's difficult not to feel angry when decision-making processes appear disconnected from people's lives or worse, when they seem to actively worsen them. Such anger has too been compounded by my conversations with residents and activists, the very people doing the hard every day work of trying to challenge these injustices.

On a personal note, as I am fast approaching the end of my PhD journey, I am increasingly carrying anger (and fear) about what might lie beyond this relatively protected position. Trying to enter an academic system deeply marked by precarity, competition and often individualism feels somewhat uneasy having spent the last three years trying to lean into values of care and collaboration. This personal anger somewhat mirrors the frustrations voiced by many of the participants in this research, which is unpacked in the following exploration of how anger takes shape across different scales and identities.

#### 7.4 Mapping anger in Nottingham

For many residents, anger is not an abstract emotion, but one deeply rooted in place. The community mapping exercise outlined in previous chapters revealed how much of resident's frustrations arise from neglect of areas, lack of green space as well as loss of community spaces.

Several locations were highlighted as requiring improvement in the city (figure 36), Sneinton, Radford and St Ann's in particular were referenced as areas struggling with many compounding factors such as housing issues, high unemployment and lack of provision with some residents calling them 'rough' (table 6). These sentiments reflect the deep anger that residents hold due to long-standing disinvestment in their areas. The visualisations in figure 36 and table 6 highlight the key areas and themes raised during mapping workshops.

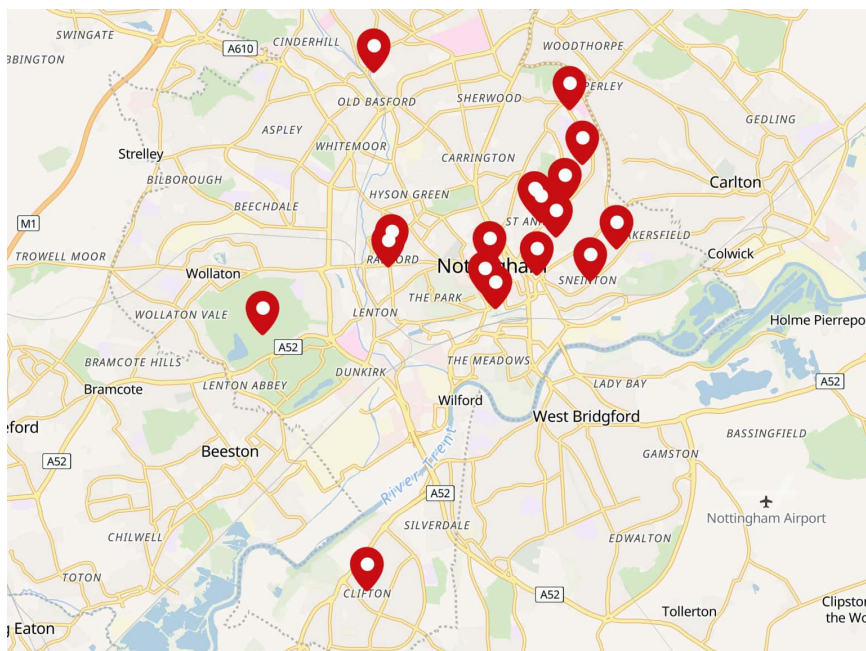


Figure 35 Mapping points for places communities felt needed improvement during participatory mapping (OpenFreeMap © OpenMapTiles Data from OpenStreetMap)

Table 6 Breakdown of mapped places that need improvement supported by key quotes

Theme	Count	Key quote
<b>Public Spaces, Green Space and Environment</b>	8	'Radford because it is very deprived and needs more green', 'Our green places need improving', 'Overgrown paths, no view of nature', 'Housing, high unemployment, dog dirt'
<b>Economy and Local Business</b>	5	'Too many closed shops on Sneinton Market', 'Food shops – much needed as the cost of living goes up', 'Too much fast food and too many bookies'
<b>Community Services</b>	5	'Improve youth provisions', 'More groups, activities in the evening', 'Bring back life to Marcus Garvey'
<b>Safety</b>	3	'Rough'

## 7.5 Anger at local in action – procedural injustice

A major source of anger for residents and activists in Nottingham stems not only from the material neglect shown in section 7.4, but also from a perceived failure of local democratic processes, particularly around how decisions are made and whose voices are heard. While the city council has established frameworks such as the CN28 Action Plan to deliver their carbon neutrality policy, many feel that the promises made within this plan do not align with reality on the ground. This is compounded by frustration around promises of meaningful engagement, with the CN28 Action Plan pledging to 'put citizens at its heart' (p.10) and claims that 'engagement is fundamental to its success' (p.10), promising to 'harness the city's ideas, knowledge and collective intelligence (p.10) yet many express frustrations at the implementation of this plan which has fallen short of this promise.

One activist Chris, involved in planning and beginning to organise the first city-wide climate assembly in Nottingham, shared their anger with the communication gaps between the city and local communities

'I mean that's one reason why I want to do the Climate Assembly, isn't it? You know...the city are clearly hopeless at communicating with the communities around them... the ways they try and get feedback... the consultations they do...they're absolutely dreadful... it's sort of multiple-choice kind of fixed answers...so you can't really say what you think... they're very short and pithy, hopeless I think and when they do serious ones...they did a serious one,

supposedly, about the advice they were giving to developers about buildings...Which we all spent a lot of time answering and criticising what they've done so far. They took no notice whatsoever, you know and carried on with this really ridiculously simplistic approach which is not going to get them anywhere.'

This disconnect mirrors broader concerns about the mismatch between policy discourses and real-life processes, building on Pickerill (2021) who noted that discourses of social justice (such as procedural justice in this case) often do not match their actual manifestations, resulting in a disjuncture between imagined projects and their realisation. The promise of meaningful engagement often falls short, leaving residents feeling that consultations are superficial and tokenistic, with their feedback often being ignored (Henn and Arya, 2021; Williams, Martin and Stirling, 2022).

Such a sense of exclusion can sometimes lead to tension, confrontation and anger (Maguire, Lowrey-Kinberg and Johnson, 2023), as experienced in an online meeting regard the consultation of Nottingham City Centre's Eastside development plans<sup>68</sup> in 2021. The meeting, which was two and a half hours long, only reserved a total of twenty minutes at the end for questions and feedback from audience members in the call. One resident, representing a tenants' association located within the development zone, was outraged by this limited opportunity for input from the community. During the meeting, they consequently unmuted themselves mid-presentation to voice their

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<sup>68</sup> Area covered and details of the plan shared for the consultation can be found here <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/7abe3b1d90b54430b6acd90731515896>

frustration directly to the councillors, reflecting the depth of anger they felt at not being listened to within the city's consultation processes.

This growing frustration extends beyond consultations, creating a broader critique of how city councillors interact with their constituents. In several interviews, residents reflect on a disconnect between councillors and the issues faced within the communities they serve, with Courtney stating

'It's the same old, same old with the city councillors, unfortunately, you know, when people get too comfortable with a chair, they think that the chair actually belongs to them when it doesn't. And I think that is the mindset, unfortunately of the Labour Party... and do you see them hardly ever hardly ever, one of them in particular comes around just for the photo shoot...you should come and see the chase. I remember what the chase used to look like...you can't even sit on the benches because there are nettles everywhere. That needs to be sorted. We're not a photo op.'

Such tensions reveal the anger that communities feel around tokenistic treatment from political leadership in the city, where engagement in performative action rather than addressing issues like maintaining public space is a key source of anger for residents. Courtney suggests that elected officials feel the 'chair belongs to them' echoing the potential complacency of local authorities in strong hold areas discussed in chapter 3 (Fazekas, 2015). These superficial engagements add to the eroding trust between the council and community, deepening the sense of disillusionment felt by residents.

### 7.5.1 Taking matters into their own hands

Disillusionment and anger can however empower residents to challenge incumbent political figures, create grassroots mobilisations and foster alternative forms of political participation. Feeling increasingly alienated from the political figures operating in their constituency, Courtney decided to run against the current Labour councillor as a Nottingham independent, aiming to challenge the status quo

'I ran as Nottingham independent with two other people because we just got fed up. We didn't win, but we took 750 votes from them because we all just came together in a matter of four weeks...we were asked, we said, hell yeah, because you know something, even if it's just...putting a bit of fire under them, just make them think, oh, crikey, you know, worry them a little bit. But in four weeks we all came together, the three of us, and we were able to take 750 votes for them. So I think if we've had a bit more time, we probably would've taken at least one seat from them.'

Such examples highlight the lengths to which some residents are willing to go to enact change and challenge what they see as an ineffective and unresponsive system. This is an example of the 'generative anger' expressed by North et al (2020), where communities feeling unheard and ignored utilise their anger to mobilise action. Although Courtney ended up not winning a seat, the number of votes they gained after just a few weeks suggests points to a significant appetite, at least within their

locale, for alternative voices to enter the political landscape in the hopes that they may better represent the community.

Similar expressions of generative anger can also be seen within the context of the city's environmental targets. As interest from within the council is perceived to be waning, particularly following the departure of key figures<sup>69</sup>, grassroots groups like Nottingham Climate Assembly have taken matters into their own hands. Chris describes their experience of diminishing support for environmental action from the local authority

'the city have done a lot of stuff...in terms of their own estate you know, that was mostly down to [NAME], their interest is waning off at the moment now that [NAME] has left. And [NAME] in particular is pretty depressed about where it's going... we're not getting that much support from them for the for the climate assembly. So we've just sort of said well sod you, we're just going to get on with it and do it. And once you see it successful, you'll want to own it because that's the way they work.'

Ryan, an ex-Labour MP, also comments on the notion of 'ownership' over projects, highlighting the council's tendency to distance itself from projects unless it can claim ownership, noting that, apart from some exceptions, their culture is 'self-focussed'. These examples highlight that political institutions in the city may be reluctant to

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<sup>69</sup> This trend has continued since these interviews took place, with numerous changes in leadership in the city council including environmental portfolio holders as well as the head of carbon reduction and CN28.



support grassroots initiatives unless they can claim credit or maintain control. In the case of Nottingham Climate Assembly, members have decided to proceed without strong council backing, aligning with a form of 'Do-it-Ourselves' politics (Pickard, 2019) – typically arising 'from sentiments that politicians are not doing enough or not doing the right thing' (p.2). However, Chris anticipates that once the project gains visibility and success, the council may attempt to take credit for it<sup>70</sup>. This reflects a tension between movements that prioritise action and the local government structures that may prioritise control and visibility, mirroring findings from Henn and Arya (2023)<sup>71</sup> in which one participant stated

'There are loads and loads of things that we could be doing, but historically, as a city, as a local authority, we've got a history of being patronising and centralising [...] And one of the legacies of shortcomings in Nottingham, is that as a local authority, it doesn't do partnerships at all well. It invites us to do our own things, so to reduce our own footprint, but if we want to do it collectively, and in partnership with them, things disappear very quickly into direct control.'

(p.19)

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<sup>70</sup> It is important to note here that there are some very dedicated members of the council who do back such an initiative.

<sup>71</sup> This research is part of an ongoing examination of citizen engagement with CN28, with authors stating there were far greater concerns expressed by residents in 2023 compared to the 2021 phase 1 research

Chris adds to this, stating that the council are unlikely to meet their CN28 targets due to a reluctance to collaborate with stakeholders and experts, despite this being a key factor noted within the CN28 action plan

'they're underfunded, but they're also not putting enough effort in by any means. And they're not accepting help from people who are prepared to help them, you know, which is terrible. So no, they won't meet the targets. There's no way they're going to make the target. And at the moment they're, you know, they're boasting about 55% reductions, but that's from 1990.'

Chris' reflection highlights frustration felt by community members who are eager to contribute their expertise and be part of a more collaborative and collective governance approach, only to feel dismissed. While the city council faces real constraints including significant underfunding, they may also be adding additional barriers to their already difficult goal by not harnessing expertise and support from willing residents and community groups.

#### 7.5.2 Doing the best they can?

Perceived inefficiencies of the city council are certainly a source of anger for many throughout the city, yet others, like Riley take a more sympathetic stance. They reflect on the significant challenges posed by austerity measures for the council

'I think Nottingham City Council are great and do great work considering how deep and ruthless the cuts have been... the council is 1/5 the size of it was as it was 12 years ago. And I think that's a big challenge, but I think they're

approaching like enabling people to do their own litter picking through clean champions and the green guardians like mobilising communities to sort of fill in the gaps.'

Riley recognises the systemic limitations that may have hampered the council's capacity to meet its ambitious climate goals – severe financial constraints have significantly reduced the council's ability to take on larger projects (discussed in the next section), with no funding pot specifically for their CN28 ambitions. They also illustrate how these cuts reshape societal expectations, with the community being called upon to help bridge gaps in service provision.

Other residents echo this view, while also expressing some reservations, with Billy stating

'I'm sure the City Council is working with the resources that it can to do this, yet we also know that its resources are being massively starved and strangled by central government. I think also it's fair to say not all of the things it's doing, I would totally you know, think totally compatible with it.'

Despite these acknowledgements, some residents and activists believe the council must push beyond these constraints to make bolder and more decisive actions. Sam, for example, calls for 'brave decisions' to be made. This critique points to the feeling that the council may be limiting its own potential within the CN28 plan. By underutilising the diversity of opinions and perspectives within the city, opportunities for more creative, bold and radical solutions remain underexplored. Here we see the

tensions that exist between the council's financial limitations and the desire of some residents for more ambitious action for people and the environment.

These internal challenges are not the only barrier to decisive action, with employees within the council expressing frustration about the difficulties in working across scales and political boundaries. The disconnect between city and county level governance often creates a fractured approach to environmental and social justice policies, with Sugar (2020) highlighting how piecemeal approaches to policies across governance scales can impede progress. This fragmentation is felt acutely in Nottingham with Flynn, who used to work with the city council, stating

'I suppose with the county of many boroughs, it's always a bit harder to get a traction when everybody's pulling in their own directions. There's all political differences and tensions. So I think Nottingham being a unitary authority has been able to sort of get its head down and just get on with things straight away. So that creates a bit of tension. In some cases...Conservative, Labour. You know, don't have to say much about that, really.'

This disconnect becomes evident in infrastructure projects such as the introduction of bike lanes, which span boundaries, meaning that collaboration beyond the city limits is essential. Cameron, a member of the CN28 team, highlighted this issue expressing the complexities involved within environmental action at the local authority level when there is a need to operate across jurisdictions. Avery, an ex-member of the council, expands on this, reflecting on differences between the city and county in key

economic areas such as divestment, investments and pensions. They express their frustration at the seemingly antiquated approach taken at the county level

'they control the pension fund, the County Council. Of course, that's conservative led and they make all the decisions about investment direction and that sort of thing. And I went the other week, and there was some geezer there talking about tackling the fuel crisis by fracking and drilling for more gas and I'm like, God, it's like dealing with dinosaurs. I can't be doing with it.'

The continued investment in fossil fuels reflects a deeper ideological and political divide between the city and county, as while the city seeks to advance its CN28 agenda with policy around decarbonisation, the county's pension fund remains invested in industries that directly contribute to carbon emissions. Such examples not only demonstrate a scalar disconnect, but an ideological one too, which poses barriers to meaningful environmental progress, as while efforts can be coordinated at the local scale, issues of carbon and climate span these disconnected boundaries.

Importantly, anger was not only directed upwards at regional or national government, but at times was also expressed towards residents and businesses. Jean, a member of the city council, reflects on their frustration at others framing of CN28 stating

'the frustrating thing is a lot of people look to us and think, 'oh, it's a council thing... it's for you to do'... for me it's about how do we engage everybody across the city to make them realise that this is their responsibility and not somebody else's responsibility and get everybody to act'

Insights within this section have uncovered cycles of anger and blame directed at different levels – from communities to the city council as well as the city council to the county council up to national government and down towards residents, producing tensions around responsibility, and highlighting the contested nature of participation. As Schrage and Haarstad (2024) argue, aligning processes both 'outside' and 'inside' the city administration is essential for the feasibility of local climate policy and action. Yet, the political and structural disconnects across these levels continue to hinder progress. Representing another scalar level, one of the missions of the new East Midlands Combined Authority is to encourage collaboration between authorities that are dedicated to working together, which may help to address some of this misalignment. This section has also highlighted the importance of meaningful engagement with communities to prevent increasing anger and disillusionment, however, also shows the power of this anger as a motivator for grassroots action when governance systems are disconnected from the people, and the places in which they operate.

## 7.6 Anger and the state – distributional injustice

While frustrations at the local levels were often rooted in procedural and structural issues within the city council, there was also a strong acknowledgement that the continued failure of the government to provide sufficient leadership, funding and legislative support for environmental and social policy initiatives impedes the possibility for local action. As national policy often shapes the capacity of local

government to act and provide support for their communities, barriers imposed as this level create significant tension (Pike and Shaw, 2024).

Noah, a prominent activist within local and national XR circles, critiques the structural issues created by the government, emphasising the troubling and deeply embedded relationships between the state and corporate interests

'So the government is completely, you know it's falling far short of what it should be doing for its citizens. I think that the fault lies primarily with our political system, that it is incapable of delivering these changes. But also our government is corrupt, manifestly too close to the to... the vested interest of business as usual, fossil fuel industries and other high carbon industries who pay you know hugely to keep their business models viable...it should concern every single person, I think how far shortchanged they're being taken'

The government's failure to prioritise citizens needs over the interests of high carbon industries, and their overriding concern to continue with 'business as usual' (Somerville, 2021), leaving residents 'shortchanged', is the main source of Noah's anger. Chris expresses a similar sentiment, focusing specifically on the government's protection of oil and gas companies while simultaneously restricting climate activism

'how come the government's doing all these things to support the oil and gas companies and making it almost illegal to demonstrate now you know it's exactly the wrong way around...you know what the hell's going on here you know? They're trying to, they're so frightened their grip on power is so tenuous

now as conservatives<sup>72</sup> that that you know they're reacting exactly the wrong kind of way to what the needs of the of the country are'

This again highlights a failure at the national level, prioritising business as usual over the needs of 'the country'. Sugar (2021) note that our

'current fossil-fuel based system that powers the world at large is at present economically, technically, socially, and geographically embedded (or 'locked-in') within society and its practices...has resulted in an entanglement of corporate power with climate change which has been driven by free market-based logics within neoliberal ideology and policy' (p.5).

Chris' anger is therefore directed towards substantial systemic hurdles and powerful forces that activists face when trying to fight for a more sustainable future. Such struggles become even more difficult when undermined at the national level due to expressions of power within short-term political cycles. Taylor also comments on the discrepancies between government rhetoric and action, stating

'as far as the UK is concerned, there are no fossil fuel subsidies. They basically flatly refuse that what they provide, which is tax breaks and direct cash injections, they basically say we under our definition this is not a subsidy. Even the IMF, one of the most neo-conservative organisations in the world, says that the UK's got loads of subsidies. So the politics are such that Governments

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<sup>72</sup> Interview undertaken before 2024 General Election.



won't intervene, intervene in the right way, but they're continuing to intervene in the market in in the wrong way.'

#### 7.6.1 The limits of local ambition and delivery

In such unequal conditions, initiatives at the local authority level also become more difficult due to lack of access to national funding, causing frustration among local government representatives. As Avery states, the lack of funding from national government stifles the ambition of local projects, particularly those that require large scale infrastructural changes and therefore require significant capital investment

'in an ideal world we'd be doing more tram expansion....it's like a dream at the moment....one day maybe. But on the eastern side of Nottingham, where you look at what all the development works going off around Gedling. Massive new developments. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we had a tram line going there? But you just, you just cannot, you cannot do it, you cannot get the money together. It's obviously hugely expensive, but the [positive] impacts on quality of life, the amount of reduction of air pollution and congestion and all that stuff. And yet there's just no way you can access that money.'

While local authority actors may have aspirations to implement more green travel options alongside existing developments, citing their numerous positive co-benefits this could create, they are unable to due lack of national support restricting the scope of what is possible at the local level (Dixon and Wilson, 2013). Despite widespread recognition of significant social and environmental impact these projects could have,

resource becomes a huge barrier in realising such ambitious initiatives. Such disconnect between local ambition and national support creates frustration for local authority members in Nottingham, who feel their ability to take meaningful action on climate goals is reduced. Avery also goes on to reflect on governmental priorities and how funding that is accessible to local authorities is often changeable and volatile

'I mean central government can change all sorts of things as they wish and their priorities for funding can change. So at the moment we're doing really well out of BEIS funding for retrofitting, improving homes. So we've been involved in you know lots of solar panel installations on low income, home owning households, social housing, decarbonisation with insulation and deep retrofitting...Jacob Rees Mogg could decide tomorrow to not fund those things, you know? And then that would really put the skids under the under our plans because... if he made that into legislation then we'd be stuffed, frankly. Because nobody else is going to come up with the money'

Shifting priorities, as well as short term funding schemes pose significant challenges to successful long-term planning, meaning local authorities often feel at the mercy of national government, Garvey et al (2025) indeed note that 'current governance arrangements tend to reinforce patterns of inequality in capability' (p.41) Avery mirrors this sentiment, explaining

'we've received quite a lot of money funding from various pots for biodiversity and that sort of thing. Again...if the government priorities changed. Who knows? I mean we're very much we are in their hands to some extent. We can,

we can work within the system and do what we can but...there's talk, isn't there that Liz Truss is going to go back on the commitment to net zero and if she does, well, all the priorities of all the government departments will change.'

Avery's concerns highlight how precarious the funding landscape can be, with the sustainability of funding is an ongoing concern for local government practice more widely in England (Muldoon-Smith and Sandford, 2023). Environmental and planning services, as well as provisions more generally, provided by local government in the UK have been cut dramatically over the last decade (figure 13; LGA, 2020), with clear geographical inequalities (Fahy et al., 2023). Local areas that have been impacted to a greater extent are those with a higher baseline level of deprivation as well as those operating with a unitary authority local government structure, both of which Nottingham possesses. The inequalities in cuts to these services risk widening geographical inequalities in community wellbeing (Fahy et al., 2023). Garvey et al (2025) note that 'without further, active central government support [local authority action] will remain incremental, and perhaps, inequitable' (p.94)

Ash, a council employee, paints a worrying picture of the structural pressures facing local government

'It's very drastic, yeah. And then because of the cuts have been made in so many places, that's caused way more issues like adult and children social care, that's the main kind of statutory duty that we have, which is invisible to most citizens. But obviously as the budget continues to decrease, that big important increasing invisible thing takes up a higher and higher proportion of what we're

able to do. Which means all the other stuff which we don't technically have to do, libraries, leisure centres, community centres... so much that we do that we don't have to do... it's just...impossible. And then the only thing that we can do is put council tax up. So over the years they've residents have seen their services decline, their lives got worse in a lot of ways and they're paying more. And so it's just, it's dysfunctional'

Such spaces, including libraries and community hubs, often play a key role within communities, especially for more vulnerable residents. Ash's insight of such a constrained city council sheds light on the difficulty in achieving large-scale transformative goals like CN28 without more support from national government. Given these limitations, Flynn expresses concern about such an ambitious local climate goal, stating 'without national infrastructure investment, you know, wholesale change... I think that sounds to me to be quite ambitious, I don't think I would have set a target of 2028 for a whole city.' This sentiment is echoed by certain members of the council, who during interviews, stated that they have advocated to move the goal further into the future due to the unlikelihood of achieving the aims within the current timeframe. Garvey et al (2025) too states that it is 'questionable whether LAs are able to deliver these plans and targets whilst they are subject to significant operational pressures' (p.81).

The frustration and anger expressed by residents, activists and local government employees towards the state reflects many of the barriers and structural issues embedded within the political system. By prioritising corporate interests, particularly

regarding the fossil fuel industry, and its failure in provide adequate funding and legislative support for local authorities, the central government often hampers effective local action on environmental and social sustainability.

The disconnect between national priorities and local ambition not only continues to fuel anger, but serves as yet another reminder about the importance that the local and urban scale in fostering meaningful, grassroots-driven solutions, with Riley summarising

'I think trying to empower people to take climate action and not you know just wait for governments to come along and do things. I think there's a lot of that. But how we can grow equity in a sort of market capitalist dominated environment? I think it's by finding those little areas where we can boost people's wellbeing, boost people's resilience through...community gardens or going out and planting trees or kind of, you know, decolonising these spaces and...handing it back to the people.'

Riley also highlights an important point here, the desire for local action is not just about resisting governmental inertia, but also confronting the larger deeply imbedded systems that prioritises profit over people with negative impacts on both the environment and equity. The next section will explore this broader frustration, as interviewees question the underlying structures that perpetuate inequality and environmental degradation, and consider how such harmful systems may be dismantled.

### 7.7 Anger and 'the system' – structural injustice

In the previous sections we have seen how anger around climate and justice issues is produced at local and national scales, yet many interviewees across actor groups also expressed a more profound sense of injustice tied to our societal and economic systems. Many interviewees highlighted that the harmful structures embedded within neoliberal capitalism, including prioritising profit over people and the planet, are fundamentally incompatible with goals of social justice and environmental sustainability. For many, there seemed to be growing recognition that addressing climate change and social justice issues within the same neoliberal confines that created it is insufficient and counterproductive.

Jessie, a sustainability professional within healthcare, reflects, 'I think capitalism caused the climate emergency and therefore capitalism can't be the solution to the climate emergency.' For Jessie, and others, the idea that market-driven mechanisms could solve a problem rooted in the very logic of endless economic growth is fundamentally flawed. They critique the assumption that increasing consumption and promoting economic growth can be reconciled with the goals of sustainability, stating

'there is absolutely a need to raise standards of living for a large proportion of the population. I don't disagree with that. What I do disagree with is the solution to that is making everything bigger, doing more of everything and consuming more...that fundamental tenet of capitalism of endless growth is the cause of the problem, so how could it be the solution at the same time? Or

how can you use the problem that capitalism has created to justify more capitalism? It blows my brain'

This points to a larger critique of the system itself, with many activists and scholars interested in degrowth and other alternative systems (Kallis et al., 2012; Hickel and Kallis, 2019; Jackson, 2019) arguing that sustainability within a capitalist framework is inherently contradictory, a tension that fuels anger linked to power imbalances. Quinn reflects on this asking

'what is the injustice of, you know, climate change or environmental breakdown? I think the injustice fundamentally is that... there is a very small number of people and corporations... and the capitalist system as a whole that is like producing these harms, these negative outcomes.'

Here, Quinn's critique highlights how the actions of a few powerful people have widespread impacts for environmental and social justice. In discussing responsibility for climate change and the harms it produces, Chris too emphasises the disproportionate contribution of the wealthiest individuals and corporations, highlighting the systemic and power laden nature of the issue

'[I'm] absolutely bloody furious... The top 1% have this huge carbon footprint, but then the next 40%, so the middle classes, have still got a massive carbon footprint... part of the emphasis on personal responsibility has been pushed as a way of getting out of their responsibility.'

Chris' fury highlights how inequality and injustice activates anger in many activists. Similarly, Taylor, who works for an environmental think tank, raises frustration that the answers are there already, with no more technology needed to 'solve' the climate crisis and many of the associated social issues, yet, these solutions are not incentivised by those with decision making power

'So renewable energy is considerably cheaper to produce than coal. It's obviously much cleaner, much less damaging to local communities and people and to the planet and so on paper the solutions are there...but the global economic system, like straight up neoliberal capitalism, does not incentivise this... there's this perfect storm between politics and a broken economic system and social and environmental crises, that means that there's inertia and there's no incentive for anybody to try to fix any of it. So I think the biggest obstacle is that neoliberal capitalism is unfit to solve the problems that it's created.'

This contradiction is also explored by Christophers (2024), who reflects on such a 'renewable energy paradox'

'There has been a long-standing consensus that the economic key to renewables winning out is being cheaper than fossil-fuel-based electricity; renewables successfully crossed this apparent Rubicon in the late 2010s, prompting delight that the chief obstacle had been dislodged.' (p.8)



Despite this, adoption and decarbonisation efforts are still slow, which they go on to state is because 'the capitalist production of clean electricity – is ordinarily not a very good business at all' (p.18), perhaps also linked to the fact that powerful incumbents are able to exert control over, and therefore manipulate, the market.

#### 7.7.1 Acting local, thinking global

Taylor here also draws attention to the broader injustices embedded in global supply chains in the context of green transitions, and more specifically rare earth materials which are often sourced under exploitative conditions. As they reflect 'there are serious, serious imbalances still...you'd hoped the sustainability world would actually be able to balance those things out, but at the end of the day, you know business interests prevail'. Their critique resonates with scholarship highlighting neocolonial patterns of resource extraction and exploitation (Hickel, 2020; Sovacool et al, 2021; Ajl, 2021; Fitz-Henry and Klein, 2024). Ajl (2021) for instance, argues that initiatives such as Green New Deals often fail to challenge the deeper colonial logics that shape the global economy, noting that many sustainability proposals rely on the continuation of harmful systems of extraction.

Taylor's frustration also extends to Northern civil society, noting how some NGOs are perceived as patronising and obstructive by actors in the Global South

'fuck off, all of you, including to northern civil society. They're saying to European NGOs like you are not helping us here, you're under you're undermining us. You're being patronising by telling us how to go about doing

things and telling us that we can't develop the way we want, but you're also completely undermining it by backing your governments who are who are supporting more fossil fuel production'

This highlights a critical tension in global sustainability efforts, where global north actors promote sustainable practices while continuing to back fossil fuel production domestically, highlighting an inherent hypocrisy. For Ryan, this inconsistency reflects a profound justice issue, arguing that 'the West asserting a right to not consume is an essential act of solidarity for those who are forced to produce for our consumption'.

This sentiment suggests that true sustainability must involve not only shifts in consumption, but also a commitment to reduce exploitation of resources and labour in vulnerable regions.

Noah powerfully reinforces this global perspective

'trying to bring those voices of people from other parts of the world who are suffering right now at least trying to acknowledge...What we can do here, but people out there in other parts of the world are suffering right now, are resisting right now, and that resistance is extremely costly, extremely difficult, can be absolutely brutal and violent. And I think this aspect of a kind of global network, global community...I think that we do try to have an eye on this and try to think about it because it is really important...There's people dying right now in the Amazon, you know, at the state sponsored and corporate violence as people you know whose water is poisoned and. You know, unable to grow crops and dying because there's been no, there's been no rain. You know it's.

It's worth being really, you know, trying to hold some space for that in what we're doing as well.'

These wider perspectives highlight the deep sense of injustice that many local activists feel toward a societal and economic system that prioritises profit over people. In reflecting on these issues, they highlight that such a system perpetuates inequalities and therefore may not be suitable to tackle pressing crises. Theo, a trade union activist sums this up, stating 'a system that's run on the basis of putting profit before the needs of people and the needs of the planet is going to lead to disaster sooner or later because it's based on selfishness and not selflessness.'

While remaining aware of urgent need for place-based transformation that responds to local realities, participants highlight that we must too remain firmly connected to the broader struggle for planetary justice, holding space to link local action with global responsibility and solidarity. Such reflections link back to the popular notion of 'thinking globally, act locally'. As Massey (2009) reminds us, it is easy for the local scale to become the 'innocent victim' yet, as they state 'very few places aren't in any way at all implicated in wider processes that you may or may not wish to contest' (p. 412).

### 7.8 Anger for and from young people – intergenerational justice

Young people's futures are disproportionally shaped by climate inaction (Wilson et al., 2024), with a recent study finding that 60% of young people globally today are already very or extremely worried about climate change, and 65% also believing that governments have failed them on this issue (Hickman et al., 2021). Climate change is a

very real threat for young people, with Thiery et al (2021) finding that children born in 2020 are expected to experience up to seven times more climate disasters than their grandparents and are therefore often more concerned (see 2021 People's Climate Vote). These impacts are unevenly distributed, with Verlie (2024) showing that poorer communities are generally more affected, exacerbating inequality further. In a study I was involved with – Wilson et al (2024) – these concerns are echoed, noting that young people who will disproportionately experience the effects of the climate crisis are often sidelined and marginalised within climate decision making processes.

Intergenerational justice has indeed been considered within Nottingham policy, with the CN28 action plan stating 'we are continuing our work to create a prosperous, fair and resilient city for this and future generations'. Yet, young people in the city are continually excluded by those in power, fuelling their anger. The Nottingham Youth Climate Assembly (NYCA) Manifesto (2021), written by the group of young people at the assembly, captures this anger vividly. It emphasised young people's determination to play an active role in addressing climate change rather than being relegated into a passive 'next generation' role, stating

'we do not want to be thought of as the next generation, as future leaders, as those who will inherit the mess that is left behind (although we are all of those things). We are people who share this city with you and who have, like we all have, our own understandings and experiences of the world around us. It is true that many of us are angry, frustrated, overwhelmed and anxious. But we are also ready - to listen, to argue, and to collaborate. To get to work.' (p.1)

Frustrated with the system's failure to listen and an understanding of the relational power systems they must negotiate to make change (Wilson et al., 2024), they continue

'We're not sure how to talk to you so that you will really listen. We don't want to have to shout, even though many of us are angry, because that doesn't seem to have worked. Perhaps we should act politely, even though we are furious, but that doesn't seem to have worked either.' (p.1)

This sentiment of speaking but not being listened to perpetuates the feeling that people in power don't care, something that adult activists too are angered by. Noah expresses their frustration for 'young people especially, you know, it's outrageous. It's simply outrageous, their futures being stolen. You know, not even just the people who are young, voting age, but the people who are too young to vote'. Marshall (2022) explores this further in their speech at the COP27 rally in the city centre, which was then published in Leftlion

'I refuse to let my future be destroyed by those in power who simply don't care. I thought we could trust them. I thought they had it sorted. Yet year in, and year out, they have proved themselves incompetent' (np)

They go on to discuss the frustration and burden that this 'incompetence' leaves on them, feeling like they are left to pick up the slack when it comes to acting on climate change

'I shouldn't have to spend my teenage years fighting for a future that I thought I had, but if that is what it takes then what other choice do I have? Every month there is another story of a catastrophe, another scientist warning us of what is to come, another debate of net zero...I am angry, of course I am angry. But those in power don't want anger. They want what they don't expect; answers. They don't want to do the work, so let's do it for them.' (np)

Part of doing this work 'for them' includes being involved in projects like NYCA. While NYCA and associated grassroots group had limited power to implement NYCA's decisions, they provide an important avenue for extra-institutional activism for young people (Wilson et al., 2024). Tommy, who is involved in the group that helped make NYCA a reality, reflects on the importance of projects like this

'[it is] really important that we hear the voices of young people... And through that work we've given some of them...a lot more confidence to lead'

Participants involved in the project have indeed gone on to continue their important work, attending Nottingham Citizens meetings and being involved in their youth manifesto, holding meetings with the city council leaders, as well as restarting Fridays for the Future protests in Nottingham city centre<sup>73</sup>. Such efforts highlight young people's commitment, even while balancing educational pressures and other competing demands. Ellis, who works with young people in an educational setting

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<sup>73</sup> These have since been halted again due to the small group of activists dealing with many competing priorities such as GCSE examinations, highlighting the varied pressures that young people face in their activism.

suggests this commitment from young people is 'the answer to all of everything'. Indeed, Milburn (2019) frames this generational energy as pivotal, arguing 'we sit at a rare crossroads in history. Generation Left has to win and extend its ethic of care to the planetary commons. The future can't afford the defeat of another Left generation'<sup>74</sup> (p.124). Yet, reflecting on such pressure and dedication, Elliot highlights how this can sometimes lead to withdrawal from movements, 'particularly the younger ones are very dedicated and it's desperately sad when you see them disillusioned and leave'.

Scholars are increasingly calling for intergenerational solidarity within activist spaces (Lam and Trott, 2024; Arya, 2022; Pickard, 2024), where young peoples experiences and perspectives are often subordinated. Arya (2022) argues that adults must use their knowledge and experience to bolster young people's self-determination in reimagining the future, highlighting the importance of harnessing intergenerational anger to create collaborative, transformative change, with the NYCA representing a small scale, local example exemplifying just this.

### 7.9 Anger and activist identities – recognitional injustice

Alongside expressions of anger directed at political inaction or climate injustice many activists also expressed anger at how they themselves were perceived by others, often being pigeonholed and judged for being part of activist groups. This phenomenon

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<sup>74</sup> 'Generation Left' as described by Milburn (2019) describes the fact that young people are currently much more likely to vote Left and hold left wing views compared to older generations who are more likely to hold conservative social views and are more likely to vote Right.

reflects widespread societal attitudes towards a range of activism where protestors are frequently delegitimised or dismissed (Bashir et al., 2013; Klas et al., 2019).

Kit, who has a long history of being involved in activist groups, articulated the frustration they feel when activists are stereotyped for their activity

'what was then happening was that battle lines were being drawn and that any future acts of civil disobedience would be cleverly marketed as a bunch of eco zealots...eco trash you know all those things that that can just sideline people that are doing things'

Tommy echoes this, describing the dismissive remarks they have received during action, particularly around the assumption that activists are unemployed or unproductive members of society

'I mean I'm always getting the 'go and get a job thing', you know? As if I haven't worked all my life, and everybody I know in the climate movement is, you know, hard working. Most of us are that are retired are still bloody working, doing things...again, it's a total stereotype of an activist, isn't it? They've got nothing better to do than stand holding a banner, you know, it's really frustrating'

Here we see that both Kit and Tommy both are angered that their work is being delegitimised by negative stereotypes. Chris also touches on the fact that many activists face accusations and assumptions from the public about their personal lifestyles, especially around carbon intensive behaviours like driving and flying



'I mean they come up and they say, I bet you take aeroplanes, don't you? And then you run away before you can say no, I haven't flown for 10 years now or whatever, you know. And I bet you drive a car, don't you? And you, before you can say no, it's electric. You know, they bugger off because they don't dare argue about it. So you always get that kind of negative and you get lots of negativity... there was an anti-lockdown or an anti VAX demonstration [that] came across as and we were standing there with the rickshaw and they were they were really abusive. They were horrible you know nasty, nasty people. But so what? They're all they're all going to learn. It's a bloody mess before long'

Ellis similarly reflects on the emotional toll of being positioned as answerable simply for trying to raise awareness

'my least favourite part of the role is... becoming under the microscope...you trigger them by saying stuff and...it's not accusational you're just trying to sort of did you know and then it's your choice. So for example, if you talk to people about their banking...this bank invest in fossil fuels and then they go, well, they immediately turn it on to you...I've not asked people not to travel... I've just asked people to think... what I don't like is the fact that you're you are sort of answerable for everything... I didn't realise I was going to get flack for trying to do good.'

Such accusations reflect a broader societal expectation that activists should embody an 'ideal activist' identity (Craddock, 2017), upholding a 'perfect standard' to be legitimised (Bobel, 2007). While frustrated by the accusations, Chris ultimately

believes that time will expose the rationality of activist efforts, as the scale of the climate crisis becomes impossible to ignore. Noah too reflects on a similar sentiment, reinforcing that 'these behaviours actually, you know, explaining, communicating that these are really sensible, proportionate things considering you know what we're facing and considering where we are at in history'.

Emerging from these examples is a real sense of frustration, not just about climate inaction and others not being involved in action, but about being misunderstood or misrepresented. It's not just the urgency of the crisis that fuels anger within activists, but also the feeling of being written off while trying to do something about it. In the following section, these themes will be unpacked further, examining the structural inequalities that shape action and its consequences.

### 7.10 Anger and inequality – intersectional injustice

From previous chapters, it is clear that the impacts of climate change, as well as the capacity to respond, are deeply unjust. These inequalities disproportionately impact individuals across intersecting lines of race, gender, class and ability. Those who are most vulnerable often face the greatest obstacles in accessing sustainable solutions, ranging from active travel options to green energy. These disparities extend into climate action itself, where volunteering and activism are similarly constrained by socio-economic and structural inequalities. This leads to uneven participation from and representation of those most affected. Such injustices produce anger, both from communities impacted and those involved in organising for justice (Thomas, 2006; Askins, 2019). This section will explore the role of anger as a response to inequality in

climate action, unpacking how experiences of exclusion and injustice shape the ways that communities engage with climate action, emphasising the importance of taking a climate and social justice lens when addressing these intersecting issues.

Several interviews highlighted structural inequalities in access to both mainstream political action, such as Neighbourhood Plans, support from third sector organisations, as well as involvement in activism. Elliot, working in Nottingham as part of an active travel charity, reflects on the disparities that exist within local processes such as Neighbourhood Plans, which are intended to give communities a voice in local development, remarking

'People who are poor don't have much power. I see it time and time again in Community meetings where the estate which I live on the edge of...Neighbourhood plans are written by communities and they are like a local plan but for their neighbourhood, for their community. And they set out their communities vision and it can be across a whole wide range of things, from energy to housing to transport, you name it...Which communities write neighbourhood plans? Darley Village. Why? Because they've got ex-architects, lawyers, lecturers, you name it. They all live in Darley Village... They say let's give communities a say...but let's also empower communities and individuals in those communities to be able to interact with the system, interact and have a say'

Elliot here reflects on the apparent divide between those living in wealthy neighbourhoods, with professional backgrounds and expertise, and those living in

areas facing a greater level of deprivation in terms of creating change through formalised processes within their communities<sup>75</sup>. They highlight the fact that while many highlight the importance of giving communities a say, they are often not given the practical support needed to ensure equitable participation, impacting who can help in shaping community environments. Lacey-Barnacle, (2022) highlights that 'understanding the spaces and places in which injustice takes place, can then give rise to recognition and procedural justice, which can then assist the realisation of distributional justice' (p.963), suggesting that procedural and recognitional forms of justice are prerequisites for achieving broader distributive justice and emphasising the need for nuanced, inclusive approaches that allow communities to engage with decision making processes.

One such barrier identified from this research is digital poverty, which disproportionately impacts low-income communities<sup>76</sup>. Alli, who works at the Chase Centre, stated that many residents have no data on their phones, no email addresses and no personal IT equipment, meaning they rely heavily on support from the neighbourhood centre. This means it can often be difficult for residents to take part in formalised consultation processes, which often take place online. Engagement with environmental initiatives within the city such as 'Nottingham Green Rewards', an app-based points and discount system, and 'Hello Nottingham', a text-based service

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<sup>75</sup> Similar conversations were had with other interviewees who have witnessed similar power dynamics and resultant injustices within the London context, highlighting the widespread prevalence of the issue.

<sup>76</sup> In the UK, only 47% of people living on a low-income use broadband at home and 20% are not digitally literate (Barford and Gray, 2020).

allowing participants to engage with CN28, also rely on access to technology. Similar barriers exist in many communities in the UK, with Barford and Gray (2022) reflecting on the fact that digitization creates a barrier for many residents due to insufficient computer literacy, compounded by poor access to computers and the internet.

Similar disparities are seen within the transport sector, with Sam who works at an active travel charity involved with the national bike ability scheme discussing the challenges in delivering activities on the ground based on national guidance

'you need to be able to cycle first, right? And that's a national guidance and we're not allowed to do anything about it. So when we go into schools and we get our 20 kids, there will be a group in that 20 that can't currently cycle and that overlaps very heavily with disabilities and deprivation. Kids that have never had access to a bike and that kids that need adapted equipment and they don't have it at home and literally we have to send them back to their classroom which is just awful...so we're aware that there are hundreds of kids...that we see every year and that can't take part in this state funded activity'

Sam expresses frustration at the barriers created at national level, meaning that they are 'not allowed to do anything about it' during place-based interventions. Later, Sam went on to discuss how their organisation works to gain extra funding to ensure more inclusive access within the region, highlighting how essential charities and community groups are for repairing the disconnect between national guidance and the needs of local communities. We see this too in community spaces like The Chase Centre, where

during my workshops, residents expressed frustration at the lack of youth provisions and park areas when compared with places like West Bridgford. The spaces that have been provided with St Ann's, including a multiuse gaming area (MUGA), were seen to be unfit for use due to them being too dark, raising safety concerns. Additionally, residents reflected on the fact that having a MUGA is all well and good, but many residents could not afford the equipment (e.g. basketballs) for their children to be able to play in the area. As such, The Chase Centre has implemented a scheme where a variety of sporting equipment can be checked out for free.

#### 7.10.1 Exclusion from action

These inequalities extend to activist communities, with many people highlighting the divisive nature of many actions. Jessie, an activist working for the NHS, reflects on the contested 2022 action in London where XR activists blocked four bridges<sup>77</sup>

'that particular direct action probably wasn't great because it didn't hit the people that it needed to hit...what you did was piss off a wide range of people, some of whom would probably be people who are not well off and couldn't get into work and lost their livelihoods, or there were kind of really direct consequences on their day-to-day lives...they're not the people who are making the decisions that are causing that harm, and XR are terrible at doing those sorts of actions'

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<sup>77</sup> It is important to note here that most of these interviews took place before XR's change in tactic away from non-violent direct action and therefore may not speak to the current position of XR groups

Jessie's concerns highlight how direct action tactics can sometimes impact members of the public to a greater extent while failing to exert sufficient pressure on decision makers and as such 'piss off a wide range of people'. This sentiment was echoed by Dale, who suggested that 'most council leaders regard them [XR] as a bane of their life'. This highlights the tension between activists raising awareness through disruption and maintaining public support – direct action helps to spotlight the urgency of the climate crisis, yet their broader impact is sometimes contested. Conversely, some activists think the anger directed towards direct action is not warranted or actually felt, especially as Johnson and Bonnett (2023) note that such activists are typically 'well-behaved', as Tommy expresses

'yes, they annoy people. But So what? You know, I do feel like it's too late to be worried about. I mean, that's often highly distorted. The annoyance is highly distorted. I've never seen a protest not let an ambulance through ever and they're all completely committed to doing that.'

Another point of contestation in direct forms of climate action, are the issues associated with a tactic of mass arrest, with Noah commenting how they may alienate specific groups in society

'A tactic of arrest...we know that that doesn't necessarily feel comfortable for certain groups and that they will have different history and probably a different story than people who look like me might have... It is very easy to be in a position of financial security and protest in ways that have repercussions as opposed to those who have very little and for whom the consequences could

be dire that you end up disconnected and in debt and in prison...I've often talked about privilege...And it's about using that...in my position, I didn't think the consequences of taking peaceful disobedience actions would be that significant in my life compared to the consequences of inaction'

These reflections bring to light the uneven risks that different individuals face when participating in civil disobedience, emphasising how privilege – including financial security, racial identity and class – can often shape a person's ability to engage in certain forms of activism. These perspectives reveal the complex interplay between urgency, disruption and inclusivity in climate movements, and demonstrates how inequality continues to shape both the strategies employed and their reception. Pickerill (2021) summarises this complexity, stating that 'questions remain in work on community initiatives about troubling exclusions and, at times, for example, the prioritisation of environmental goals over concerns for social justice...there are tensions about belonging and identity in many community social change projects' (p.251). These dynamics can also foster anger within movements themselves, as activists confront unequal risks and exclusions in participation, inviting us to reflect on how movements can adopt more inclusive strategies that foster intersectional and justice centred approaches.



### 7.10.2 Spatiality and exclusion

Such inequalities also manifest spatially. Dale describes how for residents in more deprived neighbourhoods, access to public green space carries heightened significance

'So there's a couple of really big parks in my ward and people are very protective of those...Because people...haven't got a garden...The green space is almost more important than Wollaton Park is to the people that live in Wollaton because they've all got gardens'

In their recent 'Greener, Happier, Healthier' policy the City Council acknowledge the 'lack of quality greenspace in our most deprived communities' (p.5), with the policy outlining a target to increase accessibility within the city's green space, stating that they will 'welcoming people from across our communities to play, socialise, participate & partner in looking after, improving & enjoying our city' (p.8), but this work is ongoing. Access to green space is therefore felt differently depending on community context. Drew, who works for the Wildlife Trust echoes this, emphasising the barriers some communities face in connecting with nature

'I'm trying to work with people who maybe never had anything to do with the wildlife trust and people who have maybe not ever done anything with nature...there's quite large groups of people who are kind of excluded from the conversation... I'd love for everyone, everyone to have access to green space...and feel like safe and like they're able to go'

Here we see that exclusion from green spaces is not just spatial, but also emotional, shaped by whether individuals feel like they belong in such spaces. Concerns around safety were also raised by Elliot, who highlighted the gendered dimension in inequality in access to green spaces

'Men have that freedom. That is it, and it just never occurs to people that other people might not enjoy the same level of comfort and freedom about walking around'

These experiences highlight that inequality is not just material or procedural, but profoundly intersectional. Noah unpacks this complexity, highlighting how the climate crisis is not only an environment issue, touching on human rights, gender and ability, noting

'I guess like when I started I just thought well we need to save the planet. Then you start to realise about all the other issues that are linked and you know, when we use that word, intersectionality, that doesn't even mean anything to most people. But the fact that all of these issues are linked, you know, climate emergency is a justice issue, it's a human rights issue, it's an equality issue. It's brings in, you know, people who are affected most by it are the people in the global majority world, then other marginalised groups, women being, you know, probably amongst the first to bear the brunt of the, you know, the effects of these extreme events. And of course you know, people with different levels of ability, you know ability will really struggle in this.'

Noah reminds us that the climate emergency is a holistic issue. As it is deeply entwined with broader social justice issues, the need to approach climate action with both an environmental and social justice lens becomes clearer. Participants highlight that solutions must not only aim to mitigate climate change but should aim to dismantle systems of oppression and exclusion that perpetuate continued inequality.

### 7.11 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the nuanced expressions of anger articulated by research participants. It reveals how anger around climate issues is not one dimensional or uniform. Instead, anger is shaped in a deeply situational and relational way, emerging from people's experiences, identities and their positions within broader social, political and geographical contexts (RQ2).

Anger was regularly directed at multiple, interconnected levels of governance and power. At the local level, anger was frequently directed at council inaction and planning decisions that felt disconnected from community needs (RQ1). Nationally, frustrations exist around government policies that are short-term, inconsistent and often ineffective. Moving to a systemic scale, participants shared a deep sense of disenchantment with the current capitalist system. Many actors identified the economic system as a root cause for environmental degradation and social injustice, therefore suggesting the need for far more radical approaches. These layers of anger were not experienced in isolation, often overlapping and reinforcing one another. This

scalar and multi-directional circulation of anger highlights its non-uniformity, offering a broad understanding of the emergence and impact of the emotion.

Accounts within the chapter also reveal how anger is felt due to delegitimisation - young people excluded from decision-making despite their stake in the future and present (RQ3), or as activists who felt stereotyped as 'eco-zealots' and are therefore personally attacked for everyday decisions. This highlights that personal identity has a significant impact on the distribution of feelings of anger.

Finally, the chapter has highlighted how inequality intersects with feelings of anger, especially around power, structural obstacles and ability to take part in mainstream environmental action. These varied expressions of anger again reflect the complexity of the emotional landscape surrounding climate issues and social justice. By examining anger at different scales, ranging from personal to systemic, the chapter demonstrates how emotional responses to environmental issues are rooted in both individual and collective experiences. Anger is not only a catalyst for action but also a powerful lens through which people navigate barriers, articulate inequalities and oppose power dynamics. While often seen as a negative emotion within literature and sometimes downplayed in activist settings in favour of 'positive' emotions like hope (Kleres and Wettergren, 2017), we can see that anger is a generative tool for understanding and overcoming challenges faced by communities.

## Chapter 8: Hope?



Figure 36 A hopeful note in my favourite bar (Jam Café, Nottingham, 2024, author's own)

*'Hope is not a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. It is an axe you break down doors with in an emergency'*

Rebecca Solnit, 2016 (p.4)

## 8.1 Introduction

Arising in a 'bad present', hope can be defined as the emotion of future possibility (Wettergren, 2024), and it is certainly present within the Nottingham context, as will be explored in the coming chapter. I first reflect on the literature associated with hope, with a focus on action for environmental and social justice. As with previous chapters, we then turn to a short reflection that examines my personal feelings on hope before discussing spatial and place-based elements of hope as explored within community workshops.

Different facets of hope are then explored in the context of Nottingham, considering how hope can motivate and sustain grassroots action and how, although contested, some find hope within bold institutional goals, before considering the challenges posed to hope. The chapter ends by presenting plural, co-created visions of a more equitable and environmentally sustainable Nottingham, offering multiple pathways for urban change.

## 8.2 Literature on hope

As 'worldly troubles loom large', Back (2020) notes that political forces often seem to stand against hope. In this context, hope emerges as both a contested and essential concept (Lowe, 2019; Stuart, 2020). Scholars are increasingly debating whether hope sustains action or fosters complacency. Clarke, Roglay and Senker (2024) ask 'Is it foolish to talk or write about hope in the face of widespread existential crises?',

highlighting the complexity of discussing hope in trying times. They do however conclude that hope becomes more necessary the bleaker things become, contrasting with scholars like Žižek (2017), who foreground the importance of hopelessness, stating that only when we admit that our situation is completely hopeless can we bring about radical change. This dichotomy is also acknowledged by Askins (2019) who states that 'critical thinking without hope is cynicism, while hope without critical thinking is naivete' (p.110), highlighting both the dangers and potential of hope.

Dystopian visions commonly dominate popular culture, often framing the future as predetermined (Thomas, 2019). In this context, hope and imagination emerge as acts of resistance against this inevitability, with geographers like Roelvink, Gibson and Graham (2009) arguing that it is more critical than ever to envision how our worlds might be different and more just given the increasing environmental and societal pressures communities are facing. This is not a new sentiment, Harvey (2000) argued that we must devise 'utopias' so that we have a point to work towards, cultivating hope about future possibilities, even as it remains rooted in critical analysis of systemic inequalities. Here hope is not 'utopian' in the wishful sense, but guides concrete action (Dinerstein and Deneulin, 2012).

This hopeful work exists on a spectrum, one end that is concerned with 'everyday utopias' (Cooper, 2013) which are grounded in already existing practices of care, mutual aid and community collective action (Pickerill, 2021) such as redistribution of food or advocating for welfare rights. These small-scale collective actions can prefigure broader systemic change (Bennett et al., 2016). At the other end, Thomas



(2019) discusses the type of imagination that 'remakes things entirely and goes beyond what we currently know...the kind of imagination where social relations are entirely remade, and the world is fantastically different' (p.155). They conclude that across this spectrum, the act of imagining utopias has radical potential where dominant narratives are confronted, and other possibilities are uncovered. This cultivation of hope according to Anderson (2006) is an 'ethical obligation for geographers' and helps in some way to counter the 'eminently rational dread' (Mann, 2019) that accompanies widespread recognition of systemic failures. Such hopeful imagination can also be seen in sustainability science literature through processes including future visioning and scenario building, including the 'Seeds of Good Anthropocenes' project (e.g. Bennett et al., 2016; Raudsepp-Hearne et al., 2020) and in the 2025 IPBES report (O'Brien et al., 2025).

Hope is often a deeply collective emotion, and across the globe (and focused mainly in Latin America) 'hope movements' (Dinerstein and Deneulin, 2012) have emerged as an important way of thinking about social movements, challenging systemic inequalities and envisioning alternative futures by rejecting the inevitability of current conditions, embodying the notion that 'another world is indeed possible' (Dinerstein and Deneulin, 2012, p.599). These movements have been instrumental in prefiguring common alternatives, for instance Argentine piqueteros collectively manage welfare payments to create community-owned cooperatives, schools, and kitchens (North, 2020); in Mexico, Zapatistas seek to pursue *buen vivir* within autonomous communities; while in the UK religious movements such as 'LiveSimply' seek to

transform society to engage people to live with dignity by rejecting capitalism, emphasising solidarity and respecting the environment over individualism (Dinerstein and Deneulin, 2012). The Transition Town movement also draws on similar sentiments (Escobar, 2015).

Despite its transformative potential, hope is not without its challenges. Hehir (2024) notes that while raising hope may lead to an increase in positivity about the future, it can also be dangerous because if raised hopes are not realised, feelings of despair can be intensified. Developing a hopeful understanding of the world without the ability to 'take in and live with the trouble, the damage and the wreckage' (Back, 2020, p.16) resonates with Berlant's (2011) concept of 'cruel optimism'. This concept describes the paradoxical relationship where people continue to be attached to dreams or aspirations that prevent them from thriving or living a better life. This optimism is not 'false', as it is often grounded in real possibilities or desires, but the pursuit of these goals keeps people tied to systems or structures that are harmful or unattainable. Gramsci's famous quote is instructive in this context, as it highlights the need for pessimism of the intellect but optimism of the will, in other words, recognising realities while remaining committed to action (the quote is featured in *Letters from Prison*, 1994 based on a letter written in 1929). Without such a commitment to action, hope-based complacency (Stuart, 2020) or forms of passive hope<sup>78</sup> can arise. These

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<sup>78</sup> Passive hope is a contested concept, with Cook and Cuervo (2019) refute the notion of 'passive' hope. arguing that 'all hope...involves some sense of agency. In other words, passivity refers to the actor's choice to not take observable action in relation to the hope object, which does not exclude the possibility that actors actively fantasise'.

forms of hope can demotivate action by fostering a passive reliance on external solutions. Similarly, Thaler (2024, p.326) argues, an eco-miserabilist approach<sup>79</sup> (or postapocalyptic environmentalism), helps to counter 'the cruel optimism of those who trust that either science and technology, or ordinary representative politics will somehow succeed in 'solving' the ecological crisis, adding that 'putting faith in a solution that comprises within it the very causes of the problem ultimately represents a form of self-harming cruelty.' Cassegård and Thörn (2018) also state that 'accepting loss as a fact may free the imagination to find new ways of adapting to the world' (p.575), and as such practicing non-hope provides relief from anxiety produced by 'hope-fear-pendulation' (Malmqvist, 2024). Activists like Greta Thunberg (2019) also reject the notion of hope, famously stating 'I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic... and act as if the house is on fire. Because it is', highlighting the necessity of other emotional responses, such as fear, in creating urgency and catalysing action.

Contrasting the harms associated with passive forms of hope, scholars have highlighted the transformative potential of radical and active hope. Macy and Johnstone (2012) explain that becoming active participants in bringing about what we hope for helps in overcoming the inertia associated with passive hope or simply feeling hopeful. Active hope grapples with uncertainty and ambiguity, recognising the importance of being willing to act despite outcomes remaining unknown. Kleres and

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<sup>79</sup> The thought that it is already too late to avert the collapse of human civilization, as described by Thaler (2024) as an approach that rejects mainstream activism but remains invested in a specific kind of radical hope, aligning with groups such as the Dark Mountain Project.

Wettergren (2017) highlight the importance of leaning into the future, not with blind optimism, but with a commitment to participate in shaping it. Hamilton (2020) suggests that from action, hope itself can grow as engaging in such activities increases senses of agency even in the face of adversity, serving as both a means and an end. Similarly, Stuart (2020) highlight that radical hope can emerge from despair. Hope in this sense does not ignore the severity of intersecting crises, and the emotions that come with them, but succeeds in their midst by imagining possibilities for transformation beyond the bleak present. Likewise, in movements including Extinction Rebellion, radical hope has been cited as a catalyst for their success.

Foundational to both radical and active expressions of hope is a willingness to confront uncertainty – remaining aware of the challenges the present holds while upholding that new paths can be created through continued action. The distinction between hope as passive optimism and hope as active and deliberate, allows us to understand how hope might serve as a catalyst for transformative change. Such thinking, linked to active hope in the midst of uncertainty, also resonates with an absurdist perspective particularly as articulated by Albert Camus. Camus (1960) argued for rebellion in the face of meaninglessness, famously stating 'we have nothing to lose except everything...so lets go ahead'. Hope here is framed as an act of rebellion, a mindful decision to care, to act, and to imagine, despite (or because of) the bleakness of the moment (Fox, 2022).

In addition to different means of expression, hope is also experienced in an unequal manner globally, often marked by its presence or absence. Coombes, Johnson and

Harris (2013) argue that 'geographies of hope promised by postcolonial scholarship are in constant tension with persistent geographies of marginalization, disadvantage and desperation' (p.694). Cassegård and Thorn (2018) add that many nations globally are 'neither nourished by a strong sense of hope, nor of a future disaster, but a sense that the catastrophe is already ongoing'. This resonates with Hearn and Banet-Weiser (2020) who argue that access to the future is a privilege, 'one that is differentially meted out to classes, races and genders of people around the globe' (p.1054). As imagining a better future plays an important part for many in having hope, Askins (2019) reminds us of the need to interrogate 'who is doing the imagining and to what effect' (p.156), highlighting questions of power, representation and inclusivity within hopeful narratives. Here it becomes vital to reflect on whose voices are amplified in envisioning futures, and whose may be marginalised. Nevertheless, MacLeavy (2023) shows that 'glimpses of hope can be found globally in collective action and imaginative practices that help to challenge such exclusionary systems' (p.1).

Hope remains a multifaceted, unequal and contested emotion. Wettergren (2024) notes, 'recent literature is seeking to 'contribute to changing the common perception of hope as a given, good or bad, often routinely associated with religion or utopias, by expanding hope as a social construct that can take many different forms, which in turn have different consequences affecting future outcomes' (p.3). Yet, its potential to inspire transformative change is evident throughout the literature, even if framed as a lack of hope (Žižek, 2017; Malmqvist, 2024). As Ahmed (2014) argues, hope is crucial for the act of protest, challenging the inevitability of the status quo and fuelling the

belief that change, however improbable, is possible. This capacity to sustain resistance against injustice is mirrored in Pickerill's (2021), where numerous community led initiatives demonstrate the power of collective action and creativity in reshaping the present and future, even amidst compounding crises. Hope does not presume certainty; however Lowe (2019) argues that even the smallest possibility of achieving one's desired outcomes provides ground for hope, mirroring Solnit's (2016) assertion that 'hope is not a door, but a sense that there might be a door at some point' (p.22). This framing highlights the importance of the process of hope – the seeking, imagining and working towards alternatives.

### 8.3 Placing my own hope

During the first day of my MSc in 'Environmental Leadership and Management', Chris (now one of my PhD supervisors) asked us to line up across the room in order of how hopeful and optimistic we were about the future of the planet. While there was a pretty equal spread, I positioned myself firmly within the pessimist category towards the back of the room. Having studied zoology and marine conservation at undergraduate level, having recently come back from an area in Australia that had yet to recover from disastrous bushfires almost 10 years prior, and working for a charity with a focus on educational inequality, I didn't see much to be hopeful about.

However, as I got deeper into my research, my perspective started to shift. While I remain cognisant of the challenges we face – the climate crisis, structural inequalities and environmental degradation – I have also seen 'glimmers of hope', grounded in the stories and actions of the individuals, groups and communities I have encountered

throughout this research. As Wettergren (2024) says 'fear is a companion emotion of hope, and that a reasonable balance between hope and fear can make hope more in tune with real circumstances' (p.133).

While still fearful and angry, the commitment and the passion that grassroots groups and activists have for improving the environment, and their commitment to social justice, within the city we all love, despite their limited resources fuels my hope. I am also hopeful in the care and compassion that I have witnessed in communities around the city, people coming together, helping each other and creating spaces of solidarity and support. The willingness and openness of so many to engage with me in this research, sharing their stories, their struggles and crucially, their own hopes for the future also fuels my own.

These glimpses of hope do not erase the challenges we face – my hope is not naïve and I completely understand why some (most?) feel overwhelmed and hopeless. Yet, as one participant told me, 'doing something is always better than doing nothing'. The hope cultivated through action, connection, and the recognition of the possibility for change by community members in Nottingham has certainly begun to revitalise my personal sense of hope.

#### 8.4 Mapping hope in Nottingham

During collaborative workshops, community members were asked to pin places of hope onto a map of the city and surrounding areas. These spaces, ranging from green spaces to cultural hubs, reveal the multifaceted ways in which people engage with their city and find hope amidst challenges (figure 38, table 7).

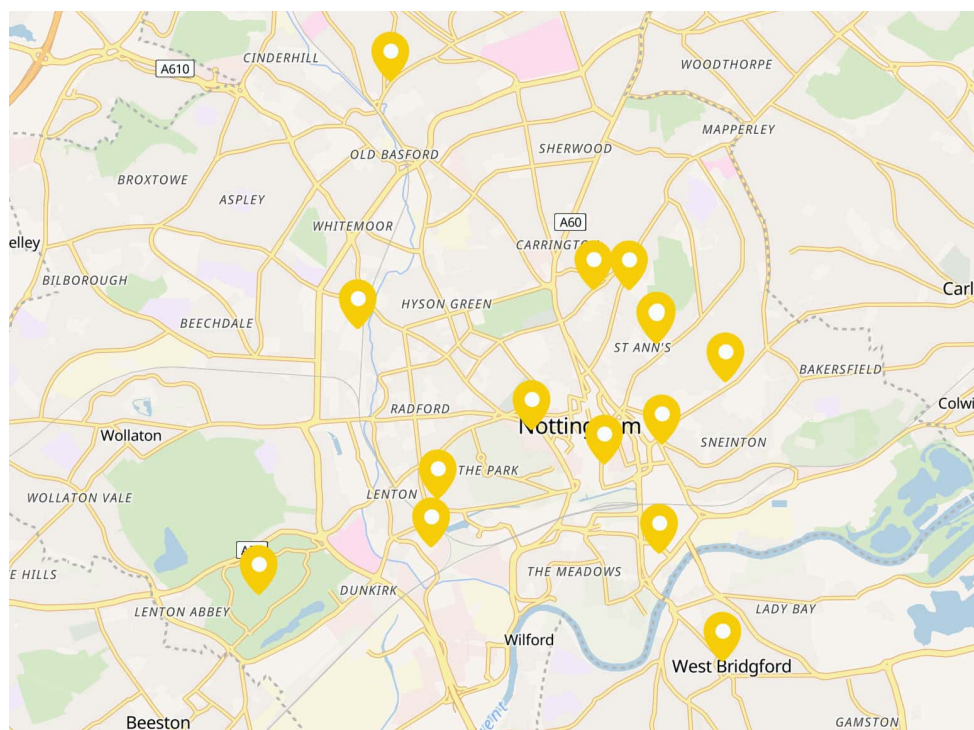


Figure 37 Mapping points relating to places of hope from collaborative mapping exercise (OpenFreeMap © OpenMapTiles Data from OpenStreetMap)

Table 7 Breakdown of mapped places of hope supported by key quotes

Type of Place	Count	Key quotes
Nature and green space	2	'My garden - important for rewilding and mental health' 'Windmill Community Gardens welcomes anyone and everyone and helps people find community and nourishment. Is a garden of sanctuary.'
Educational Establishment	1	n/a
Sport Facility	2	'The county ground - successful team is great for the city'
Religious building	4	'loving our city and serving all in need'
Independent shopping and food district	1	n/a
Hospitality	1	'friends, community, good times and good people'
Cultural provision	1	n/a



Charity (refugee support)	1	n/a
Community Centre	1	'Advice centre, support, advice, community connections, food, help'
		'bringing communities together'
		St Ann's advice centre - people come here hoping we can help them with their problems'

Religious buildings, community centres and other communal gathering places were deeply valued in terms of offering hope. Religious spaces were recognised as not only sites of worship, but as places of care and compassion to the wider community, linking with recent research that also highlights their potential for contributing to urban sustainability (Ives and Baker, 2024). One participant for example, highlighted their local church as a place contributing to 'loving our city and serving all in need'.

Similarly, community centres such as St Ann's Advice Centre, were praised for 'bringing communities together' and offering practical support for those who need it. Hope within these spaces is often built through tangible acts of care, connection and collective action, tied deeply to the places and contexts in which they are situated.

Green spaces also emerged as sources of hope. One participant described their garden as 'important for rewilding and mental health' while another highlighted Windmill Community Gardens as a 'garden of sanctuary open to all and offering nourishment in every sense of the word' providing advice about growing food in a changing climate, open days, yoga classes and community meals among several other activities. These spaces emphasise the intersection between environmental and social factors, and highlight the power of green space in communities. Other participants pointed to

social and cultural spaces such as sports facilities, independent food districts and hospitality in fostering hope. The County Football Ground was described as a source of city pride, where a 'successful team is great for the city' while local cafes and pubs were linked to 'friends, community, good times and good people'. By drawing people together, whether in green space, a community centre or to cheer on a local team, these places are sites where hope can be imagined and enacted. This activity served as a reminder that hope is often rooted in the local and everyday, and within the very fabric of the city.

In the following sections, I explore how hope is embodied and enacted by actors across the city, where it moves beyond passive optimism to take a more active role. The potential pitfalls of hope are also considered, recognising that while it can inspire action, it can also pose challenges and risks for transformative efforts.

### 8.5 Hope in action

Hope emerged as an important theme across a variety of actors – activists, grassroots groups and political actors working across the city champion hope in countering the despair and frustration often associated with climate work as covered in previous chapters. For many participants, hope was not framed as passive optimism, but rather as an active, deliberate response to the challenges they face, with some acting because of hope, and others acting to create and maintain hope. Taking action, even in small, localised ways, was seen as both a coping mechanism and a pathway to broader societal change – Kapoor and Rishbeth (2024) for example highlight, in the context of youth activism, how 'agency is practiced through care and hope through

the achievement of small actions' (p.2). One such example, as reflected on by Alex who runs a nature focused community organisation, is taking a street-by-street approach to urban wildlife and education, to create a widespread movement and create more interconnected landscapes.

#### 8.5.1 Hope without optimism

Tommy, an activist with several groups in the city, explained how this approach helped them maintain a sense of purpose in the face of climate anxiety

'Think the future is looking very, very bleak. But doing nothing and just getting depressed is hopeless, you know, that's not going to make me happy... I'm an older person now. I've got limited amount of life left. I want to enjoy it. I don't want to feel just depressed and regretful for the rest of my life'

Activist Tyler similarly adds 'I think it makes me feel like at least I'm doing something and even if the world explodes, I will be like at least I have tried'. Both activists are candid about the challenges climate change creates, being honest about the fact the future looks 'bleak', yet find that action itself helps to generate hope. For Tommy and Tyler, a better future becomes the object of their hope (Wettergren, 2024). Hope is also found in the personal satisfaction they gain from feeling that they are doing something to tackle the issues society is faced with. Stuart's (2020) notion of 'hope without optimism' emphasises that an understanding of the realities of the climate crisis does not preclude acting, showing that hope can coexist with a deep awareness of adversity and with other emotions like anger or fear, as described by Tommy and

Tyler. In the face of slow systemic progress, activists find hope in contributing to tangible change at the local level.

A similar notion of hope without optimism can also be seen within youth activism. As discussed in chapter 7, many young activists feel immense anger with regard to their exclusion from conversations about their futures, but their action also generates hope for themselves and for others – as previously highlighted, Ellis feels that young people ‘hold the answer to all of everything’. Their hope does not erase the anger they feel, instead young hopes are precarious (Bowman and Starzak, 2024; Nunn et al., 2021). Bowman and Starzak (2024) state that ‘young hopes are often found pushing through the cracks, and rupturing the structures and systems of the dystopian future they live in’ (p.1). Such framing highlights the fragile and determined nature of working to carve out possibilities in the face of uncertainty and exclusion.

### 8.5.2 Collective hope

As shown by Tommy and Tyler, hope can often be deeply personal, rooted in the desire to find meaning and purpose through action. Elliot’s reflections also highlight the importance of the collective elements of being involved in activism, providing community and connection

‘activism has also been for a long time a really great way for me to fill my time which doesn't involve sitting in pub. Well, it does sometimes involve sitting in pubs...But activism is one way...it's just feeling part of something. Just making

a difference...it's a kind of a thing I can't stop doing really, and I'll be doing it until I can't physically do it anymore.'

Hope then is not only a personal response, but relational and spatial. The act of participating in activism provides a sense of collective belonging and a way of contributing to something greater. These factors provide the motivation that many activists need to continue their struggle in the face of mounting adversity. Geographer Wright (2023) understands this expression of hope as a way of 'being and becoming', stating that

'I find hope to be a way of being and becoming *now* that insists on contingency and openness in ways often radically different from a simple optimism. Hope helped those involved remain in the struggle, bound the participants to each other and to land, nurtured their belief in their organizing efforts, and encouraged them to understand themselves, and their lives, differently. Hope became a way of being, relationally, in the world' (p.1501)

For activists like Elliot, 'feeling part of something' and the collective bonds that are formed in these groups forms the foundation of their continued hope. Activism for Elliot is not just a means of creating environmental and social change, but also a process of forming connections with others and finding solidarity over shared goals. This bonding, as Wright explains, allows for activists to continue in their organising efforts even in uncertain or challenging circumstances. For Elliot, the relational aspects of hope provide a sense of purpose and belonging in continuing to strive towards a better future.

This sense of relational hope extends to larger collective initiatives that bring together diverse communities and inspire action on a broader scale. Speaking about Green Hustle festival, Riley explained the importance of treating it as a 'epic party of positivity', to create a space where the focus is on empowering people through action and celebration rather than dwelling on fear and despair, which as shown can sometimes have a negative impact on climate movements. While the festival does provide stark environmental information, the emphasis remains on taking positive action. They explain

'It's about tackling climate change and related environment issues positively. Not focusing on the sort of big broad fear sort of side of it and we're doomed, but focusing on positive local actions'

The festival's ethos aligns with the idea of finding hope in action expressed by activists like Tommy, Tyler and Elliot. They channel the same message around the importance of 'doing something', however small, to foster a sense of possibility in contexts marked by fear. It acts as celebration of the local – the people, projects, and organisations driving change within the city, in this way celebrating hope, while creating more.

Billy from the Nottingham Open Spaces forum also emphasised how the diversity of action showcased at Green Hustle contributes to a sense of hope

'we kind of like to think as an organisation, we know lots of what's going on, but the number of new things I discovered that people were doing was also

really invigorating. So that's another special thing about Nottingham, I think...lots of cities have that kind of thing, but it does seem particularly prevalent here, which does...give hope'

The emphasis on diversity within grassroots innovation underscores how hope is not solely dependent on large scale, top-down action but is also made and sustained through local creativity and empowerment. In this context, we see hope acting as both the driver towards action, and the result of action. Hope motivates individuals and communities to act in the creation of the festival, the outcome of which leads to a greater sense of hope rooted in collectivism, plurality and innovation. Jordan, a local activist, highlights the importance of this collectivism, emphasising the importance of place within such changes 'I think that's the root of everything it all comes down to place...the idea of building from the bottom up and locally, I just see that as the fundamental thing'. Nottingham MP Nadia Whittome reinforces this sentiment, writing in the 2022 Leftlion article

'there's not enough pages in this magazine to list every project, group or individual who makes our city great. Reading the news, it can be hard to feel optimistic. But then I meet people who remind me that a better future is possible. With every picket line, every campaign for justice, every local initiative to support those the Government has failed - you are building it. Thank you'

Nadia builds on Solnit's (2016) assertion that 'our acts count...we are making history all the time' (p.53), emphasising that small, collective efforts can accumulate to create

meaningful change. Chatterton and Pikerill (2010) also argue that 'change is possible through an accumulation of small changes, providing much-needed hope against a feeling of powerlessness' (p.738).

### 8.6 Institutional hope?

Despite the eroding trust and faith in institutions explored in Chapters 6 and 7, Nottingham's ambition to become carbon neutral by 2028 (CN28), and their commitment to improving access to green space through implementation of projects such as 'The Green Heart' and their 'Greener, Heathier, Happier Nottingham' policy (2024) has become a focal point for hope among activists, residents and policy makers. So while, for many, grassroots and community based action form the basis of their hope, institutional actors and top-down action also play a role in fostering optimism and demonstrating that large-scale change is underway.

Indeed, activist Dylan reflects on how initiatives like CN28 can help to foster hope

'there's a lot of really positive stuff going on there and I find that really uplifting and inspiring and hope inducing. Because the worst thing is, and this is why a CN28 is good, the worst thing we do is lose hope, because then we're fucked, really fucked'

Dylan's blunt statement emphasises the role that institutions have in creating and sustaining hope, even when many residents and activists do not always agree with their actions. By implementing large-scale and long-term initiatives and policy changes at the local level such as CN28, local institutions have signalled their



commitment to addressing the climate crisis in meaningful ways. The CN28 goal itself is said to be overly optimistic by interviewees, including those in local government, suggesting that the initiative itself may fundamentally be about creating hope rather than achieving targets. Regardless of measurable outcomes, the sense of progress and leadership may help in 'uplifting' and 'inspiring' residents who may otherwise feel hopeless in the face of local and global challenges. This does however raise important questions around when hope tips into naïve optimism or wishful thinking, which as discussed can have detrimental impacts on its transformative potential.

#### 8.6.1 A rebellious local authority?

The rebellious identity discussed in chapter 4 may also act as a unique source of hope, driving the local authority to challenge the status quo and implement progressive policies, including CN28. Scout, a previous member of Nottingham City Council, now working in the County Council, discusses how many of the changes implemented in the wider county are due to this rebellious nature, and places it well to be a frontrunner in terms of environmental sustainability

'I used to love Robin Hood. Well, still do. So I have big affinity with the county and the place. I think the one thing that sets it apart and people often say it, but it's genuine, I think there is a kind of rebellious history isn't there of Nottingham and Nottinghamshire and I think the innovation that's been borne out of that, and the changes that's been borne out of that is powerful. And I

think that could lend itself to Nottingham, Nottinghamshire being at the fore of delivering that kind of sustainable low carbon future.'

Scout, mirroring the activist accounts explored in chapter 5, suggests that the history of the city impacts current day action and may help in delivering a low carbon future. Avery, an ex-MP, also revels in how the hope inspired by ambitious initiatives is not abstract, tying deeply to social justice and tangible improvements in residents' lives. They explain how the CN28 action plan is central to creating a greener and more just city, reflecting how environmental initiatives intersect with broader issues of social justice

'Using carbon neutrality to improve the transport system for people from deprived neighbourhoods... tackling fuel poverty through retrofitting and insulation projects... and there are...clearly huge benefits for the population of having good green spaces and investing in the in the wild, the environmental biodiversity and the environmental quality of the of the area and reducing car ownership and helping to switch cleaner vehicles and those sorts of things...as far as I'm concerned, the benefits of the work we're doing under the carbon neutral umbrella are just part of what you would want to do ...to create a more civilised and sociable city where people feel well and healthy...It will pay dividends in the long term because we do have high levels of deprivation in the city...we've got a very high percentage of our population living in difficult circumstances. We've had poor quality housing and health and all those sorts of things and what we're doing gives us a way into tackling all those sorts of

things, so I think...a just transition to a cleaner environment is just a no brainer really'

Avery's perspective illustrates the multidimensional hope that institutional actors hold in enacting holistic policy measures. They emphasise long-term co-benefits of sustainability efforts, stating their potential positive impact on levels of deprivation, poor quality housing and health inequalities while contributing to cleaner, more equitable environments. However, as discussed in the previous chapters, questions remain around meaningful engagement and effective implementation of such ideas, revealing tensions between hopeful visions created by institutions and the lived realities of those in the city. Max reflects on this, stating 'I think at the moment sustainability gets very stuck in the science aspect' rather than considering environmental challenges in an intersectional way. Despite such challenges, Ash, a Nottingham City Councillor, highlights how the council's ambition helps to sustain hope, and cultivates a source of pride

'I think the fact that we've gone so far and been quite ambitious already and piloted things and has maybe given us a bit of a confidence boost and I think people are very proud of that'

This pride can serve as a powerful motivator, as seen in chapter 5, encouraging individuals and communities to remain engaged with institutional efforts. When residents can see tangible outcomes, such as improved transportation or greener neighbourhoods, it gives confidence that change is possible. Rowan, an academic,

suggests that effective communication from the council about their efforts and successes may help people in the city overcome climate anxiety

'through a little bit of hope – it's pretty doom and gloom – if we can show that this is what's being done in the city right here and this is how much it's actually working maybe that can ease a bit of climate anxiety and things like that'

Rowan highlights the importance of institutional transparency in sharing successes and impacts, while being honest about challenges and failures, as they may have a role to play in addressing climate anxiety and can help in inspiring further action and buy-in from communities. However, it is also clear that this sense of institutional hope sits in tension, contrasted by the anger expressed towards the council in chapter 7, and fear created by austerity measures in chapter 6. Such contestation again points to the dynamic emotional atmosphere present throughout the city.

Eli, who works for a national government organisation, reflects on this tension, highlighting the fragility of hope, but the importance of holding on to it regardless

'people going off track or getting disheartened or something happening that causes an increase of emissions... that can just put a bit of a negative spin or deflate people's ambitions because it feels like we're working really hard, but we're not getting anywhere...but you've got to dare to dream, right? And if you're going to do it, then be ambitious and from my perspective run at it.'

Yet, further attesting to hopes fragile nature, such ambition may lead to further disillusionment, as reflected on by Eddie and expanded upon within the next section

'I actually think the reason why people don't participate in this climate change thing a lot of the time, it's not because they don't know about it, because they don't, it's because they don't have any faith that these organisations can do much about it'

Yet, as Harper, who works as a councillor just outside of the city boundary, shows when there is a will there *may* be a way. Reflecting on the organisation of Broxtowe Green Festival, they explain

'I said, it would be really nice if we had a festival then. So everybody could come together and do that. So without any money. And very, very naively, we had a green fest around the bowling green in Chilwell. And, you know, that was a real learning thing then because I didn't know you had to be insured and all that crap, you know that you can't do anything without permission, without money'

Harper's recollection highlights both the fragility and persistence of institutional hope. While bureaucracy persists, and with it comes constraints, boundaries and limited resources, determination of key actors can create spaces for environmental action and community building.

### 8.7 Challenges to hope

While hope seems to play a critical role in sustaining engagement and action for activists and institutions in Nottingham, it is not without its challenges. Activists and community members in Nottingham expressed several tensions that complicate the

relationship between hope and action, pointing to important considerations for the transformative potential of hope.

One significant challenge, mirroring existing literature (Stuart, 2020), is the risk of hope fostering complacency. Willow, reflecting on climate action in Nottingham, highlights how the perception of progress and inadvertently undermine the sense of urgency associated with the climate crisis, having impacts on engagement and action

‘if you are in Nottingham and you decide to get involved with climate action, your first reaction would be to realise actually the Council and your local MPs are doing quite a lot, and so it's quite easy to go ‘Ohh, climate action isn't super needed in this area, we're fine’ and so I think, yeah, a risk will be kind of settling with what we have’

#### 8.7.1 The perils of false hope

While Nottingham's institutional efforts, including its carbon neutrality goal, have inspired pride and optimism, it may also help in fostering a false sense of security. Similarly, activists have critiqued some council initiatives, such as the Green Rewards app, for creating ‘false hope’. Charlie argues that the app, designed to incentivise pro-environmental behaviours, promotes superficial engagement with environmental action, and does not go far enough in addressing the structural and systemic changes needed for meaningful change, stating

'it's distracting because it's selling something to people that isn't going to give the outcome they want...it's pretending. 'If you do this, it'll be fine'. No it won't.

Total greenwashing<sup>80</sup>,

Charlie's critique aligns with Hertz et al (2020) who argue that 'glimmers of hope' distributed in a top-down manner may be tool of governance that hinders social change. These glimmers create the illusion of progress by aligning hope with compliance with existing power structures, limiting the potential for transformative action. Similarly, Elrick-Barr et al (2024) distinguish between 'hope that helps' (accompanied by actions for resilient social and ecological communities) and 'hope that hinders' (hope without action that limits proactive responses, wastes time and weakens systems) in the governance of complex systems, emphasising the potential for hope to misdirect energy and dilute urgency. Taylor, who works for a climate think tank, adds 'it's dangerous and misleading to pretend to people that if they you know, they recycle their plastic water bottles, then then that will change everything. It's not helpful.' Such sentiments speak to much of the transformation literature that calls for more urgent and radical approaches to change over incremental transition processes.

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<sup>80</sup> During my member checks, where I sent interviewees their transcripts, Charlie seemed to have a renewed sense of positivity, 'We had a Climate Convention in October 2023 at the Council's Civic Centre in Arnot Hall Park. 94 people came and it was positive that the council gave us the centre for the event. Though we were speaking to the converted on the whole! Still, it was a good effort' though they told me they still remain pessimistic!

### 8.7.2 Over promising, under delivering

The emotional toll of unmet expectation also acts as a challenge for sustaining hope. Some activists like Charlie express frustration at the lack of tangible process they see despite their hard efforts

'I don't feel proud. We haven't achieved anything. Despite a lot of effort, we haven't achieved anything. So that's very frustrating'

This frustration is shared by Chris, who reflects on the difficulty of dealing with systemic inactivity

'I think people can feel almost frustrated and just kind of switch off because it's the only way of coping. You know, if you look at anything, divestment so that you know moving away from investment in fossil fuels seems so obvious, but it is literally like banging head against a brick wall where if you look at what people in power are saying and some people just really struggle with that, I know I struggle with that. When you're looking at it, it can just feel like hopeless. So I think in general people do just feel like 'I have to step away because I'm really struggling''

This frustration can lead to disillusionment, which can lead to challenges for engagement in environmental initiatives. When asked about barriers to participation in environmental action, Riley reflects on how cynicism and climate 'doomism' can inhibit action



'Challenges for engagement? Cynicism, general like climate doom-ism...We're all fucked anyway, so what's the point?'

The accounts shared by actors note the fragility of hope in the face of systemic barriers and how it can come into tension with other emotions. Hope has the power to inspire action and sustain momentum, while risking being undermined by lack of tangible process (Elrick-Barr et al., 2024; Hehir, 2024) and the emotional burden of the enduring nature of social and environmental issues – both naïve hope (Stuart, 2020) and fatalistic doomism can lead to complacency due to a reduced sense of agency. Without addressing these tensions, hope in the Nottingham context risks being overshadowed by cynicism or apathy, which unlike scholars who point to the transformative power of doomism (Žižek, 2017), may have detrimental impacts on transformative action in the city.

### 8.8 Visions of a just and sustainable Nottingham

As evidenced throughout this thesis, interconnected and varying emotions exist within Nottingham, so while there are deep feelings of anger and fear, participants also reflected on overwhelming feelings of love and hope. When asked about their desired future, there were no shortage of ideas, rooted in the hope that things can be better. As Segal (2017) reminds us, 'love offers us the potential to think about different worlds, communities or, more recently, spaces, of hope and resistance imagined or created for promoting greater social harmony, justice, political education and enjoyment of life' (p.111). This sense of hopeful imagination reflects how generative

the process of envisioning alternative futures can be in the face of ongoing crisis and uncertainty (Moore and Milkoreit, 2020; Bina et al., 2024).

In this spirit, the following section explores the plural visions for Nottingham's future as imagined by activists, residents, and policymakers in the city (as described in section 4.4.3). The section acts almost as a pre-conclusion, bringing together presenting themes from actors' visions, and pointing towards collective imagining as a practice of hope in action. Drawing on data from interviews, workshops, visioning exercises and collaborative mapping, these perspectives reflect a desire to challenge inequalities and build more equitable and green futures in Nottingham and beyond. Despite ongoing and profound challenges facing the city, these visions help in prefiguring an alternative future. As Wahl (2019) states 'we cannot predict the future, but we can co-create a healthier future...informed by the integral wisdom of multiple perspectives' (np). Similarly, MacLeavy (2023) identifies 'Glimpses of hope...in collective action and imaginative practices that challenge exclusionary systems' (p.1). These reflections highlight the importance and power of visioning exercises as tools that inspire action towards alternative futures. Such strategies have long been utilised in sustainability studies with tools such as 'Three Horizons' (Curry and Hodgson, 2008; Sharpe et al., 2016; López-Rodríguez et al., 2024).

The following section offers insights into how Nottingham's communities are imagining transformative change within the city. Willow (2020) highlights how focusing on how people envision the future can catalyse sound policy decisions, also noting that 'how we think about the future has significant consequences for the

realities that ultimately ensue' (p.56). The visions show an aspiration for a fairer, greener and more democratic city, though achieved through different actions. In this way too, the section reveals what people identify as the root cause of environmental and social crises in the city, offering insights into how these could be overcome. The presented visions are not uniform, some converged around key themes of justice and sustainability while others revealed tensions – existing together are calls for decentralisation and local control but also nationalisation; between bottom-up community action and draconian top-down measures. These tensions highlight the diversity of ways in which different actors imagine a just and sustainable future for Nottingham.

#### 8.8.1 Local power and participatory democracy

Across visions, there were calls for changes in governance, with participants emphasising the need for more democratic and decentralised systems that empower communities. One participant highlighted calls for shift away from centralisation of power in London and a greater focus on the local: 'we need a complete overhaul off of the way democracy is done...you know, much more localism, so much more devolution of power'.

They also champion the idea of citizens assemblies and direct democracy, stating 'I would start to make all the decisions in assemblies' which was also echoed by other residents 'we do need to have some citizens assemblies all over the place to help decide priorities. So they should have references to changes that are happening. You

know, we should be able to say we in Bulwell really don't like this. It's not gonna work for us.' Here we see an appetite for communities to have more say about what is happening in the city, especially at the neighbourhood level. As they assert, certain changes may not be suitable within their neighbourhoods, and residents feel they should have more authority in decision making. The importance of context is evident, highlighting the need for place-based and place-specific measures.

Other participants discussed the importance of local action in conjunction with global knowledge, aligning with concepts such as cosmolocalism

'So I think more kind of there's a, there's a term that David Bollier who's a kind of leading thinker in the Commons users called 'Cosmolocalism'. And it's basically the kind of relocalising of like the means of production and the democratising the means of production. And so things like Hackspace where you've got like you know spaces and stuff like that where people can get access to tools and then the Cosmolocalism bit comes from like in the kind of Information like the Intellectual Commons like having more kind of commonly open resources and things like that. Open designs and software and things like that that people can use to make their own things. I think we need more of that.'

Others also add

'You don't have to own your land. I don't think anyone should ...how could somebody own a river? This is for everybody or nobody, isn't it? Everyone

should be able to use some land or a little bit of land...I think the parks and green space and the waterways as well'

Here we see a call for democratisation of political power as well as resources like technology, forging mutually supportive and reciprocal communities to create more just outcomes. A desire for greater local agency and power also emerged in a more radical suggestion from one community member: 'maybe we'd just be better off if, you know, Nottinghamshire maybe just became, you know, more self-sufficient than and just left the UK'. While expressed in a bold way, this idea captures the desire for greater control over local processes.

Another recurring theme around power was the need for nationalisation of resources, providing an alternate perspective to the localism described above. Several participants expressed frustration around privatisation of essential services like water and energy, pointing to the failures of utility companies as evidence that national control is essential for greater levels of sustainability and equity and a push against neoliberal capitalism more generally

'I'm a believer in nationalisation, nationalising all essential equities, for example, the whole water companies is a massive evidence for that. Should never have been privatised. The fact that every single one of them has gone wrong is a good argument that it wasn't just like the bad management. Or, you know, if it had only been two out of 10 companies have done that, you'd say, well, they just managed badly, but every single one'

These sentiments express a collective desire for a more participatory, equitable and locally grounded democratic system. Pickerill and Chatterton (2006) echo this sentiment emphasising that 'working through and evolving the use of direct democracy and horizontality, offers the hope of creating the future in the present' (p.741).

### 8.8.2 Collective responsibility

Another recurring theme was the importance of fostering shared responsibility for improving social and environmental standards within neighbourhoods. Participants envisioned moving beyond individual acts to promote shared action, communal care and pride within communities. One resident articulated

'I would definitely put in place that when people get a property, especially city council property, I would make sure that someone knocks on the door and says to them, it is your responsibility to keep your garden clean. It's your responsibility [to keep] your garden clean, your road. This is your street... We [the council] will come round, we will do the big things, but you are responsible for this.'

They capture the broader desire residents expressed about taking ownership of their environments and helping to foster pride in the places they live, tied to their place attachments. One participant stated that 'people need pride in where they live', while another articulated that we need a 'less individualist mindset' which can be achieved through 'work as a community or a team' and 'better partnership working'. Others

noted the impressive collective work that is underway, including murals, planting, resilience training and knowledge banks, highlighting what can be achieved when people work together and wanted to see such initiatives expanded. Others suggested that initiatives such as food banks<sup>81</sup> and community meals, groups and opportunities for community get togethers in public buildings such as churches or village halls as well as eco committees in schools would form an important part of more collectivism within neighbourhoods.

While local initiatives were central here, some participants also envisioned collective responsibility extending beyond the immediate communities in Nottingham. They reflected on the potential of high-profile figures using their platforms to inspire change

'So we need those people who can talk, you know, the icons, the heroes...  
imagine if David Beckham, instead of going and representing Qatar, actually  
turned around and went 'no, fuck you Qatar', and you know stood for it'

Here we see a desire for everyone – leaders, public figures and citizens – to understand the role they have in enacting change, challenging harmful systems and addressing inequalities. This sentiment reflects an understanding that the problems facing Nottingham are interconnected with wider societal and global challenges, highlighting

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<sup>81</sup> While interviewees typically mentioned food banks in a positive light in terms of building community, it is also important to consider their contexts as they can also be a sign of a failed state/ society.

a fluid and open sense of place (Massey, 1991). In this way, individualism is posed as a threat to achieving a just future, and collectivism a vehicle to achieve one.

### 8.8.3 Alternative economies

A widely shared belief was that Nottingham's future must involve a shift towards alternative economic models that prioritise social and environmental sustainability and community wellbeing over profit, as discussed in chapter 7. One participant, reflecting on greed and growth, critiqued the relentless pursuit of economic expansion

'this system that we live in where 'you need, you need, you have to have, you have to have'. And we what we lose is actually who we are and what we are and what we're about. And you know what actually the pleasures of life are and it becomes about driving on and on and on...you know it's growth. Growth is nonsense. I mean growth is really important in some areas but not everything has to grow. It's not actually possible.'

Tied to this was broader critique of existing economic structures, with one participant remarking 'what's happening to the climate is the nature of our society and particularly the capitalist system. So...I think the capitalism has to go eventually'.

Indeed Sultana (2021) highlights that 'alternative visions, arising out of critiques of interlocking systems of colonialism, capitalism, imperialism, financialization, and techno-managerialism, can offer radical alternatives to the capitalocentric present and subvert the 'new normal' (p.1726). Along the same trajectory, but positioned at the



local scale, the idea of local currencies and community wealth building emerged, building on work currently being undertaken in other parts of the UK 'I'd love to see Nottingham Pound, like that's worked really well in Preston and I think Totnes as well' with one councillor expressing that 'I've like floated the idea of like us having our own local currency the Nottingham quid'. Building on this, completely localised economies were also envisioned, with greater levels of circularity and independence 'chuck all the chains out... just be completely like local only. So it's completely unique and there's a kind of like nice ecosystem where all the local businesses are supplying each other. That would be cool'.

On a broader scale, residents also highlighted the importance of job creation that aligns with the city's environmental goals, as well as collaboration with trade unions to help promote climate justice

'We have to fight for justice, even if it seems painful. And that's not to ignore the fact that someone with the possibility of losing their job is a bad thing. But we need to counteract that problem by saying there will be other jobs and you will get another job on the same level of remuneration with the same holidays or whatever. So there is no conflict between protecting the climate and people's living standards. In fact, people's living standards will clearly improve dramatically as a result of taking climate change seriously. And that. And, and basically at the moment I think climate change is just something that's a tag on in unions and not central to unions and it needs to be central to what we're doing in the trade union movement.'

These reflections collectively point to a reimagining of economic and social systems, rooted in justice at the local scale. While critiquing extractive models of capitalism, participants offered hopeful alternatives. Such ideas echo literature on post-capitalist societies (Kothari et al., 2015 ; Escobar, 2017; Feola, Vincent and Moore, 2021), as well as traditional transition literature that emphasises the importance of secure employment for those in fields impacted by such sustainability transitions.

#### 8.8.4 Equitable green space

Green spaces were also often at the heart of visions for a more sustainable Nottingham. One participant shared their hopes for everyone in the city to have access to safe green areas, highlighting the importance of having access to the physical space, but also the importance of addressing barriers safety, accessibility and inclusivity.

'I'd love for everyone, everyone to have access to green space and like be like and feel like safe and like they're able to...people might have access to green space, but if they don't feel safe going to that green space or like people with, like disabilities, if they don't know the terrain...they're doing some things now with like showing what the layout somewhere will look like before you go. So that if you have...mobility needs...Or if you're anxious about that, it helps you to see it first. So yeah, so everyone has access and feels like they can go to green space...and communities like working together to...improve spaces for wildlife and for people...just to see everything a lot more like green'

Ideas were also put forward about reimagining green spaces to serve multiple purposes and provide multiple environmental benefits, including local food growing, carbon sequestration and reduction of air miles

'making green spaces multi-functional ...I'm a big proponent for big supporter of like urban agriculture so I think there needs to be a transition to utilising those green spaces for producing food for the city which you know again offsets a lot of air miles and food sequesters carbon while managing these green spaces and increases biodiversity if done in an organic way'

In addition to these benefits, others imagined co-benefits of green spaces being tied to social wellbeing and equality

'boost people's wellbeing, boost people's resilience through, you know, whether it's community gardens or going out and planting trees or kind of decolonising these spaces and making it like handing it back to the people.'

The desired future of Nottingham's green spaces is one of inclusivity, increased access, sustainability and multifunctionality, ultimately functioning as spaces where communities and nature can thrive together.

#### 8.8.5 Sustainable policy

Participants expressed the need for a reorientation of political and policy priorities, suggesting that climate impact assessments should be championed for all initiatives in the city. One resident argued

'I'd stop all construction projects you know, that were about to start and I would assess them for their climate impact and like you said, every single plan, every single plan would have to be assessed for its climate impact'

Echoing this, another participant called for the focus of debate to change from economic priorities to environmental ones, considering 'how does this reduce carbon emissions by 10% per year?'

Others focused on more technical and practical solutions to reduce carbon emissions, with a greater focus on technology and innovation

'you'd have solar panels on every single roof and you would heavily subsidise that to encourage. To make it happen and you put in huge amount into wind power. And then then obviously you would carry on investing in the technology'

Localised smart energy systems were also highlighted as a potential technological solution that also links back to decentralisation and community co-operation

'solar storage and heat pumps, because that simply makes sense and cars as smart as possible with EV charge so that you've got a kind of solution that works whether it's in the office, the factory, or the home. You've got a system that go is clever enough to go right, the sun is shining, will store the energy, or we'll use it for the processes, for the home, etcetera. When your car comes and you've then got a supply of energy that can feed the home or the business until the point you need to charge it back up before it goes out this journey and so

on. Or you can help out your neighbours. You can sell the power to your neighbour in business, your neighbouring home or whatever. So it's that smart local system that works in the house'

In addition to these, one participant envisioned a future with more 'Draconian' policy recommendations to enforce sustainability within the city

'Things like cutting down electricity use and saying Woodthorpe, you're only gonna have electricity up to 7:00 o'clock tonight, sorry, you know, and so on. And I would have programmes where you can only drive your car on Mondays and Wednesdays or whatever it is, and you can only have 1 long haul flight and just all kinds of measures... So yeah, so I put in loads of Draconian measures, really, but bring people with me so that they can understand why you're doing it.'

Technical and policy-driven aspects of change are highlighted as integral by participants here, ranging from simply assessing climate impacts to more radical and restrictive measures such as changing access to transportation and energy across the city. Ranging from drastic and authoritarian to infrastructural and technical, participants called for a greater alignment of policy with carbon reduction and sustainability.

#### 8.8.6 Education

Education was regularly cited as an important tool for transforming Nottingham. Participants noted its necessity not only for raising awareness but in empowering

communities to make informed decisions and take collective action. One participant suggested that expert knowledge should be integrated into community dialogue and decision making processes through initiatives like climate assemblies to counter misinformation, stating

'before they made that decision, they'd have some expert input into why. So it wouldn't just be the social media telling them that this isn't gonna work. Or is going to work. How do they know which is true? I think bringing back experts [is important, there] is a terrible scourge of anti-expert.'

Another resident added 'what I would do would be to get together everybody that knows something about us and actually take advice.' These perspectives highlight the need for credible, reliable and accessible knowledge to guide action, and potentially help in overcoming much of the populist rhetoric associated with environmental initiatives.

Participants also advocated for embedding climate education into local government and community spaces

'I would start a whole programme of educating people through local councils, giving information at schools and community groups that have meetings'

This suggestion reflects a desire for more grassroots learning opportunities that foster collaboration, helping to empower communities. Beyond factual knowledge, participants expressed a desire for education that is emotionally aware and embedded in everyday spaces aligning with emergent concepts in the literature (e.g. Ojala, 2023;

Herrick; Lawson and Matewos, 2025) that call for 'shared learning and education' around the societal benefits of sustainability

'I think it's important to communicate to people how a transition to sustainable, you know, safe path for our society is actually in the interests of ordinary people. It just isn't in the interests of the filthy, the, you know, outrageously rich people who right now who are making the most out of business as usual. But it is in the interests of people who are, you know, who stand to have better, happier, healthier lives, you know. Cleaner air, better public services. Better health you know better physical and mental health as a result.'

Others recognised the importance of starting this education young, despite many young activists in the city being very switched on when it comes to climate change (Wilson et al., 2024) remarking

'I think that we should get on early starting to kind of really start educating the children on these things that are really important.'

The visions articulated in this section from varied actors highlight a desire for a greener, more equitable and connected city, as well as a move beyond thinking about the climate crisis as a siloed issue. From calls for more participatory forms of governance and democracy to imagining alternate economies and improving green space, participants aspirations reflect a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of our social, economic and environmental systems. While some advocated for deeply

restrictive top-down measures for pragmatic reasons, most residents call for more collaborative approaches focusing on shared responsibility, grassroots action and education to drive environmental and social transformations. The coexistence of differing perspectives, sometimes in tension and sometimes complimentary, should not be viewed as a problem to be flattened or solved, rather understood as generative. Community visioning in this context becomes a space for radical possibility, something which Springer (2011) terms 'public space as emancipation' – a site for negotiating transformations towards alternate futures.

### 8.9 Conclusion – hope, and beyond it

As shown throughout this chapter, there is no shortage of hope within Nottingham. Hope serves as a necessary remedy to despair and doom for many residents, activists and institutional actors. Hope in the Nottingham context can be seen as a relational force rooted in place that helps motivate and sustain action, while enabling people to imagine futures beyond present crises (RQ3). Yet, it is also fragile. In contexts marked by austerity, political inertia and inequality, remaining hopeful can be challenging. Hope was shown to be easily undermined by unmet expectations, inaction and superficial solutions that mask deeper issues (RQ1).

Even so, the emergent visions shared here offer messy, contested yet meaningful blueprints for urban transformation in Nottingham. They do not provide a singular roadmap, but reflect plural pathways towards a more equitable and sustainable future, a future that is built within communities, in green spaces, in classrooms and within



council buildings (RQ1, RQ3) demonstrating that urban transformation is a collective, place-based process. Importantly, this research highlights that hope is not just an abstract feeling, but a relational and political force embedded in everyday actions. These visions gesture towards a reality where a just future is no longer a distant hope, but embedded in daily life, getting us closer to a place where hope is no longer needed in quite the same way, in part urging us to 'live the future worth fighting for in the present' (Hamilton, 2022 p.3).

As Hearn and Banet-Weiser (2020) remind us, 'Recovering, repairing, healing and creating with new sets of logics and cultural understandings can open minds and open worlds' (p.1057). Such work seems to be underway, or at least imagined in Nottingham, grounded in the hope that things can be different.

## Chapter 9: Conclusion

In this thesis, I have examined place-based, justice-centred urban transformations, through the lens of emotional geographies. Throughout the empirical chapters, I have explored the ways in which emotions – love, fear, anger, and hope – shape experiences of and responses to urban change. Despite each chapter focusing on a singular emotion, the lived experience of research participants revealed that they do not exist in isolation, instead they are interwoven and collectively influence transformation processes.

This chapter starts by synthesising the findings of empirical chapters, drawing together common themes and insights, revealing the influence of emotions on transformation in the Nottingham context. The second section revisits my research questions, reflecting how findings address them, and what they reveal about processes of justice-centred environmental change. Lastly, I consider the broader implications of the research for theory and policy, before outlining potential avenues for future research to expand on the arguments developed in the thesis.

### 9.1 Bridging the chapters

This thesis advocates for a more central role of emotion within just transformations, as they help us grapple with complex concepts of place and justice, supporting more grounded transformation policies. Emotion, then, is not an 'add-on' to transformation,

but it is the terrain through which it is navigated. As Rohse (2025) argues 'adopting an emotional lens shifts the focus away from convincing communities to accept new technologies or persuading individuals to take up prescribed behaviours, and towards collaboratively managing a low-carbon transition' (p.305).

While previous chapters have, for the most part, been organised around individual emotions, they do not exist in silos. Emotions are inherently relational and entangled, shaped by context and by one another. Their interactions with processes of urban transformation are dependent on how they are managed and combined (Kleres and Wettegren, 2017). As such, this section synthesises insights from across the empirical chapters, reflecting on what they collectively reveal about place-based, justice-centred urban transformations.

Transformations are messy and intertwined, between histories and futures and people and institutions, often with convergent and competing priorities. In this context, this thesis makes the case that place and justice considerations are not peripheral to transformation but central to how it is experienced, resisted, imagined and enacted, highlighting the dialectical relationship between emotions and place. It also shows that emotions are deeply entwined, not supplementary, within such processes. While technical transitions, and the policies associated with them, play an important part in a sustainable future, they will often fall short in terms of public support and acceptability unless emotional elements are attended to – rather than viewing emotion as a tool to facilitate transformation, they are understood here as central to how transformation is interpreted and navigated. Using emotion as a lens disrupts the idea of linear

narratives and progress often associated with sustainability (Köhler et al., 2019), instead surfacing the reality of executing change and highlighting the complex pathways to ambitious goals like CN28. It shows that such transformations are not just about setting targets and following predetermined trajectories but involve navigating the multifaceted contexts in which they are situated (Ahmed, 2014; Blythe, 2018; Monaco, 2025) – something that becomes even more integral when justice considerations are made a key component of transformation projects.

Throughout the previous chapters, we have seen how emotions converge and co-exist in dynamic ways. Parents showed how love for their children exists alongside fear for their futures, together motivating everyday action towards a more sustainable and just futures. These actions intersect with the hope that such action will make things better (chapter 5). Residents highlighted how love for place and community can sit with a deep anger at distributional injustices as well as current democratic process (chapters 5 and 7). This combination of emotions encouraged one resident to 'be the change' by challenging incumbent political forces as an independent candidate – again in the hopes of creating positive change within the community (chapter 7). We too see how fear sits with anger, fear of the impacts of climate change in the present and future, and the anger at elite inaction (chapters 6 and 7). Youth activists have highlighted how anger and hope sit side by side, often with an undercurrent of fear about what the future may hold. One such activist plainly stated that they are angry, frustrated, overwhelmed and anxious but also ready to get to work, highlighting the generative nature of this combination of emotions (chapters 7 and 8). Hope here is not

naïve, but a strategic method of dealing and processing other feelings, with anger acting as the emotional spark into action. Taking an emotional lens shows how transformation is a deeply felt and relational process, helping to surface injustices and articulate demands for more just futures.

Throughout the chapters we also see the multiplicities and tensions within emotions and how they impact transformation processes. They are not unidirectional or stable, as personal accounts show how the same emotion can both enable and constrain, include and exclude, generate momentum and create retreat, helping to prevent instrumentalisation in sustainability discourse. Love, for example, emerged as a powerful driver of care and attachment, forging deep bonds, creating social capital and enabling action grounded in community. Yet, we can see that this same love (or at least action in the name of love) can draw boundaries and produce forms of exclusion that are damaging for justice. Fear was seen to motivate urgent action, but can also overwhelm and fuel withdrawal from movements, especially in the face of increasingly harsh penalties. Anger too can be a productive force, supporting the concept of Lorden Rage where anger is used to drive radical change alongside care, compassion and love, or one that leads to exhaustion and burn out, especially when not met with a meaningful response. Hope can be a way to hold onto the possibility for a better future but can lead to complacency or disillusionment when promises are not met. How these emotions are expressed is dependent on personal context – lived experiences, access to resources, relationships with place and access to decision making processes. These factors reflect the deeply human dimensions of navigating just transformations,

dimensions that this thesis argues must not be overlooked (Blythe et al., 2018).

Holding space for such emotional complexity is essential for justice, as it plays a key role in revealing how people experience and make sense of change, but also highlights the emotional costs, risks and burdens that working towards an environmentally and socially just future entails. Such emotional complexity also creates place – if we are to fully realise the kinds of change required to meet goals such as CN28, it is crucial to consider the lived, emotional landscapes in which they are negotiated. We see that emotions shape how people interpret policy, engage with institutions and mobilise for change. This highlights the importance of intentionally engaging with such emotional dimensions to enable just and effective transformations.

Having explored the interwoven emotional dynamics that shape urban transformation processes in Nottingham, the following section revisits the core research questions.

## 9.2 Recapping the thesis

This thesis set out to explore place-based, justice-oriented urban transformations in Nottingham, guided by three central research questions:

1. How do different actors (both institutional and grassroots) shape, contest and collaborate around justice-oriented transformation?
2. How do place-based identities and attachments influence engagement with, and resistance to transformation processes?
3. How do historical legacies and imagined futures of a 'just city' shape present day transformation efforts?

The following section recaps and examines the findings in relation to each of these questions. While the research questions do not explicitly mention emotion, this is intentional and instead the lens through which each and all of them is/are understood.

#### 9.2.1 Collaboration and contestation

In relation to **RQ1**, we see that the transformation landscape in Nottingham is shaped by both the convergence and contestation between institutional actors and grassroots organisations and residents. For example, while collaboration and partnership are central to CN28<sup>82</sup>, with the council stating that the 'Carbon Neutral Action Plan is one that puts citizens at its heart' and that 'engagement is...fundamental to its success', the practical experiences of residents and other actors suggest a more complex and uneven landscape, echoing concerns from urban geographers that participatory mechanisms can mask deeper exclusions (Swyngedouw, 2005; Purcell, 2006).

When speaking to policy and local authority actors, there tended to be a greater focus on the technological delivery of the plan<sup>83</sup> – the solar panels, vehicle to grid technology and heat pumps. These approaches align with elements of more traditional energy transition frameworks (Geels, 2011) and are tied to measurable outcomes such as those embedded in CN28, reflecting a more technocratic approach to enacting change (Genus and Coles, 2008), with notable exceptions from some ex-

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<sup>82</sup> CN28 is a key policy for understanding and implementing the city's environmental goals, but it is important to note that alone it does not necessarily equate to a sustainability transformation, instead being part of a wider landscape of change.

<sup>83</sup> With some notable exceptions, for example in the hope chapter where Avery spoke about the co-benefits of the plan.

council employees. Yet, as scholars argue, the problems the plan seeks to address, namely environmental and social un-sustainability 'cannot be addressed by incremental improvements and technological fixes' (Köhler et al., 2019, p.2). In contrast, grassroots actors emphasised more relational approaches, grounded in care, community and lived experience (Massey, 1994; Ahmed, 2014; Manzo et al., 2023). Their responses are deeply impacted by their lives, cultural histories and contexts (Ahmed, 2014), again highlighting the importance of attending to emotions within these contexts (Hamilton, 2020). Rather than break down issues into separate elements that need to be addressed distinctly in line with a transitions approach (Abson et al., 2016), such movements often acknowledged their interconnectedness and complexity.

Additionally, feelings of tokenism and exclusion, as well as issues around ownership emerged throughout interviews, often with an undertone of anger. Such anger, as highlighted, led some residents to take matters into their own hands when feeling unheard, running against the Labour stronghold to challenge the status quo, or crowdfunding for a climate assembly in the face of perceived council apathy. These examples highlight a resistance to top-down approaches to climate governance that are disconnected from place-specific contexts and needs.

Despite such tensions, there are elements of convergence and collaboration that have helped to shape city-wide action. Grassroots influence on institutional processes has shaped aspects of policy, such as the inclusion of a biodiversity section in the CN28 plan, or the momentum that was built behind the 'Green Heart' initiative that followed



the Broadmarsh Big Conversation that drew over 11,000 local signatures. City festivals like Green Hustle and the Nottingham Green Festival also function as important bridging spaces between grassroots and institutional actors in more creative and inclusive environment. They are also emotionally charged – they are important sites of shared memory, local identity and can help in place-making practices (Duffy, 2019; Stevens and Shin, 2014).

As Sugar (2021) highlighted, the local politics of climate change in Nottingham is contested, influenced by conflicting interests and priorities. These tensions are further shaped by limited resources and unequal power dynamics throughout the city. These asymmetries contribute to the socio-cultural barriers and conflicts, mistrust and disengagement (Sovacool and Brisbois, 2019) discussed within chapter 7. Yet within this landscape, there are also glimpses of collaboration and convergence – examples where residents, grassroots groups and institutions come together to create more inclusive and situated visions of change, as highlighted in chapters 5 and 8. These examples demonstrate the capabilities of relational, creative and emotionally engaged climate action. Key insights, emerging from understanding these issues through emotional lens, included the role of anger as both a catalyst for resistance against exclusionary governance processes, and as a lens for understanding power struggles occurring between actors. At the same time, love and hope, emerging through community solidarity and collaborative spaces, helps in promoting convergence between actors despite lasting tensions.

### 9.2.2 Placing sustainability transformations

Referring to **RQ2**, the thesis has shown how place-based identities and attachments play a significant role in shaping how individuals and communities engage with transformation processes. We see how love for place and community, anger at injustice and lack of action within communities, and hope for a better future all help to form the basis for grassroots action, civic engagement and environmental stewardship. A sense of responsibility, pride and care, often underpin efforts to drive change from the bottom-up.

At the same time, we see how these strong attachments can help create exclusionary practices and impact senses of belonging. Fierce protection of local spaces, such as Sherwood Community Gardens or St Ann's allotments, is sometimes also expressed as fear of 'the other' or discomfort with 'outsiders', creating harmful barriers and limiting broader collaboration. This reflects a tension between relational and bounded understandings of place. Relational understanding sees place as shaped through connections and flows, whereas bounded understandings frame place as fixed, enclosed and tied to ownership. As Massey (1994) argues 'the particularity of any place is... constructed not by placing boundaries around it and defining its identity through counter position to the other which lies beyond, but precisely (in part) through the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections to that 'beyond'. Places viewed this way are open and porous' (p.5). Cresswell (2004) too warns that place can become exclusionary when it is used to 'define one group of people over and against others' (p.90). In chapters 5 and 8, we see how such relational understandings can help

promote love, care and hope within communities, and in chapters 6 and 7 see how bounded representations often create fear and anger. A just transformation then, relies on a more relational framing of place (Crowther et al., 2023; Crowther, Petrova and Evans, 2023) one that emphasises openness and shared belonging rather than enclosure or exclusion. Such approaches build on Massey's work, seeing place as flexible, multi-scalar and always being made and remade, with place meanings being produced via socially and politically interconnected interactions among people, institutions and systems (Pierce, Martin and Murphy, 2011). Throughout the thesis, participants point to the need for mutual care, collective action, collaboration and plurality in understandings of place-based change, resonating with such relational considerations.

The presence of negative place identities also shapes engagement, with reluctance to carry out engagement activities in certain areas in the city, reflecting and reinforcing territorial stigmatisation (Wacquant, 2007). Such stigmatisation, often linked to working-class and racialised areas, has detrimental impacts for inclusive participation and therefore access to political power in so called 'problem neighbourhoods', potentially delegitimising local voices. Additionally, place attachments in more affluent areas like The Park, where residents typically hold more political and financial power, can sometimes undermine transformation efforts, especially when it comes to interventions like energy infrastructure that are seen to disrupt the character or aesthetics of the area. From these examples, we can see how attachment in Nottingham can simultaneously motivate and constrain transformation dependent on

the attachment's context. Class plays a central role here, as affluent communities often have more power to shape and restrain transformative efforts on their own terms, while marginalised communities may be excluded from shaping the agenda entirely (Lacey-Barnacle, 2022). For a just transformation to occur, many interview participants highlighted the need for a broad and inclusive base for climate action, moving beyond the limitations of middle-class environmentalism.

Identity also plays an important role in shaping transformation processes. In chapter 5, we see how shared activist identities act as an important tool in stimulating collective action, yet in chapter 7, we see how negative stereotypes and public perceptions associated with activist action can be detrimental for progress. Nottingham's 'rebel identity' also emerged as a symbol for grassroots and institutional actors. Many interviewees situated Nottingham as a place that understands what a just city should look like, largely based on past and to a lesser extent current rebelliousness – a city making active strides towards justice and environmental transformation. While not universally embraced, this rebellious identity offers a shared narrative for different groups of actors to coalesce around within the current conjuncture.

Throughout the thesis we see how place-based identities and attachments in Nottingham can significantly influence engagement with transformation processes. They can promote grassroots action, while also creating barriers for collaboration or fuel senses of pride and responsibility while underpinning exclusionary practices and reinforcing negative place identities. Nottingham's rebel legacy, if harnessed authentically and inclusively as discussed in the following section, could serve as a

motivating force in future transformation efforts, showing how historical context can shape transformation in the present. Reflections not only highlight the overtly emotional nature of such place-based identities, but also reveal the duality within such emotional ties, further strengthening the argument that they need attending to within transformation processes.

### 9.2.3 The past, the present and the future

This historical context becomes even more evident when considering **RQ3**, where we see the importance of the historical 'rebellious' identity in present day activism and grassroots efforts, consistent with the idea that place-based identities often draw on symbolic histories and memory to sustain imaginaries (Creswell, 2004; Till, 2012). For some, this identity serves as a source of pride, positioning Nottingham as a city confident enough to challenge convention, seen through bold initiatives like Robin Hood Energy and CN28, as well as through grassroots initiatives and activist mobilisations. Yet, the legacy is contested. Some residents and activists doubted that such a historical legacy remains reflected in the city today, especially related to environmental activism. Here, we see a disconnect between the city's symbolic identity and the reality on the ground for several residents and activists.

Historical legacies of change and neglect similarly continue to shape attitudes towards the local authority in the present day. Anger and apathy were shown to be tied to long histories of injustice and inequality within community workshops, especially when basic amenities and youth provisions are being threatened – the very spaces that form the fabric of communities and enable social capital to be built. Residents compared

areas like St Ann's with more affluent areas outside of the city like West Bridgford, observing disparities in public infrastructure and amenities. Within residents' frustrations, they highlighted the importance of social and community infrastructure (Latham and Layton, 2019), pointing to places like the Chase Centre or third sector organisations that have stepped in to deliver place-specific interventions based on community context and feedback.

CN28, meanwhile, emerged in 2019 as a policy-led vehicle for imagining a different future for the city. While this target has no doubt galvanised sustainability efforts, and tangible progress has been made, even those within the city council acknowledged that the target may be out of reach, and perhaps did not give enough attention to the significance of place-based inequalities. Yet the continued presence of the CN28 team, even after the section 114 notice, speaks to a deeper significance of the initiative. Beyond being a policy goal, CN28 represents a strategic commitment to collective action, reflecting a mobilisation of civic energy and offering a source of pride for the city and residents, albeit sometimes contested.

While past legacies impact current action, so too do visions of a different future for the city. Several visions for the future of Nottingham emerged within conversations with participants, some with overlapping themes but often reflecting different priorities with varying scope and ambition. Largely, these imaginaries were not distant or abstract, often firmly rooted in the everyday practices and actions of those working towards change. Many described futures extended directly from the work they were already engaged in – people involved in campaigning and fundraising for a city wide

climate assembly imagined a future where democracy was overhauled and all decisions were made in citizen assemblies, people working on collaborative projects around food and community power imagined a future based on the commons, while proponents of alternative economies were involved in academic research around the topic, where such visions were configured and held collectively rather than individually. Such transformation efforts centre around actively prefiguring alternative futures in a reciprocal manner, where visions of the future shape present day action, and current efforts give form and substance to imagined possibilities (Chatterton, 2016). As such, imaginative policy efforts and future-thinking tools must champion representation and lived experience, recognising that people are already prefiguring alternative futures through grounded, everyday action.

By drawing on histories and futures while staying grounded in the present, we can see how Nottingham's transformation efforts are therefore best understood as part of a wider conjuncture (Hall and Massey, 2010), one shaped by the interplay of inherited legacies, current and past struggles as well as future-oriented imaginaries, which are less commonly dealt within conjunctural analysis (Hearn and Banet-Weiser, 2020). Lajarthe and Laigle (2024) highlight the importance of such conjunctural thinking, 'because the past, the present, and the future are co-defined, more attention should be paid to the way different time frames shape one another' (p.1). The persistence of Nottingham's rebel identity shows how love, hope, fear and anger intertwine with historical pride to inspire visions of a just future, helping to shape both aspiration and contestation in current transformation efforts.

### 9.3 Implications and contributions

While remaining mindful of the humble, modest, gentle approach taken in this research, which often questions notions of impact and 'heroic performances' within research (Horton, 2020), I believe this thesis makes several conceptual, empirical and practical contributions to the fields of just sustainability transformations and emotional geographies (figure 39). Instead of making grand claims, I align with the notion of 'minor theory' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986) – in revisiting the theory, Katz (2017) states

'Major theory may try to explain the political economic and social contours and effects of racial capitalism or patriarchy and offer analyses of how these relations of production and reproduction take their tolls in violence, dispossession, accumulation, and all manner of interconnected uneven developments, but more often than not it is a broad brushstroke analysis that doesn't illuminate much about how these social relations work—let alone how they feel. Indexing the ways these problems are encountered and lived, refused and reimagined in different forms, places and scales might enable the construction of assemblages that work the relays among these forms of exploitation, violence, oppression, and offer new means to respond to them. Minor theory can work these connections' (p.599)

Firstly, this research helps to challenge dominant, though shifting and evolving (see Sahle et al., 2025), frameworks in sustainability science that often prioritise linear, objective and technocratic approaches to transition over that of politics, power and



emotion (Schipper, Maharaj and Pecl, 2024; Shove and Walker, 2007; Smith and Stirling, 2010). By centring emotion, it reveals how change is not only implemented through policy or technology, but is deeply felt, experienced and contested by individuals and communities. As emotions shape how people engage with and resist transformation processes, more relational, nuanced understandings of change are needed – one that accounts for human emotions and their complexities. In particular, the research reveals a deeply relational and dialectical relationship between place and emotion within urban transformations. As highlighted in section 9.1, love, fear, anger and hope do not exist in isolation but relate to each other as part of a dynamic assemblage, one which is also in a recursive relationship with place. Emotions shape place and help to make it meaningful, while place, through its histories, materialities and identities, shape and frame expressions of emotion. In this way, place and emotions are continually shaping and reshaping one other. This perspective offers a more situated and relational understanding of how justice-centred change is enacted in place. In recognising this, the thesis contributes to the growing 'emotional turn' within transformation literature (González-Hidalgo and Zografos, 2020; Wickson, Lambert and Bernstein, 2025), while also highlighting that work on emotion and place can too learn from transformation literatures.

The findings also have broader implications beyond Nottingham, speaking to transformation processes elsewhere. Many urban areas across the country are facing intersecting socio-environmental crises, and this research has highlighted the importance of working with emotional, place-based attachments and identities within

such contexts, instead of rationalising them away or dismissing them as lacking scientific substance or hard evidence (Kleres and Wettergren, 2017). Doing so allows transformation to be conceived beyond an abstract goal as an embedded, relational and collective process rooted in care and solidarity. At the same time, engaging with transition and policy frameworks can enrich emotional and place-based research by connecting lived experience to the institutional and governance processes through which change is often navigated and negotiated.

Findings also speak to ongoing debates around NIMBYism and YIMBYism within sustainability discourse, where both resistance to and advocacy for interventions are deeply entangled with place identities, emotions and justice perceptions (Brown and Glanz, 2018; Devine-Wright, 2009; McKinlay, Baldwin and Hamerlinck, 2025) – we see traditional NIMBYism occurring in affluent neighbourhoods tied to heritage and power, but also resistance to change in areas due legitimate concerns and insufficient consultation. We have also seen how support for environmental and social change (in line with YIMBY arguments) is deeply emotional, shaped by anger at inequality, love for place and hope for a better future. By highlighting how different groups express emotion around change in the city, the research reveals the complex and often conflicting attachments that shape urban transformations, highlighting the need to negotiate the technocratic and policy focused elements and the emotional dimensions of change concurrently.

From a policy perspective, this research raises important concerns about the emotional disconnect embedded in top-down carbon neutrality and net-zero

transformation efforts<sup>84</sup>. Metrics and measurable outcomes – typically framed in economic terms – often take precedence, leaving the emotional stakes of change overlooked. Yet, this research suggests that without considering emotion, particularly the anger and fear expressed by communities, transformations risk becoming superficial or exclusionary. Grounding policy in genuine ongoing collaboration with affected actors at all stages from development to implementation may help in making them more just. This requires moving beyond confusing, lengthy or superficial consultations and tokenistic gestures (Williams, Martin and Stirling, 2022). Instead focusing on humble and reflexive practices within institutions enacting policy changes (Saville, 2021; Boosabong and Chamchong, 2024), utilising community knowledge and creating true partnerships and collaborations. Institutions should cultivate more self-awareness and openness, making space for a plurality of knowledges and experiences to inform transformation processes (Scoones, Leach and Newell, 2015), while also embracing the constructive resistance that inevitably emerges from doing such work.

This thesis, by engaging with various groups across the city, highlights the impact that different actors have on transformation processes. Emotions cut across communities, institutions and activists alike, and help shape how change is resisted and enacted across the city. It highlights the city as an understandable scale for operationalising such transformations as a relational entity capable of holding productive tension. We see how abstract agendas of sustainability gain meaning and urgency when grounded

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<sup>84</sup> Similar dynamics can be observed in other policy domains such as housing or addressing the cost-of-living crisis where planning and infrastructure reforms generally seek to fast-track growth with little consideration of place attachments and emotional meanings.

in place and the attachments and emotions entangled within them. The thesis therefore encourages policymakers to work with these subterranean and situated dimensions of transformation, reinforcing the potential of the ordinary city as a site where participation, solidarity and contestation can coexist in the pursuit of more just urban futures.

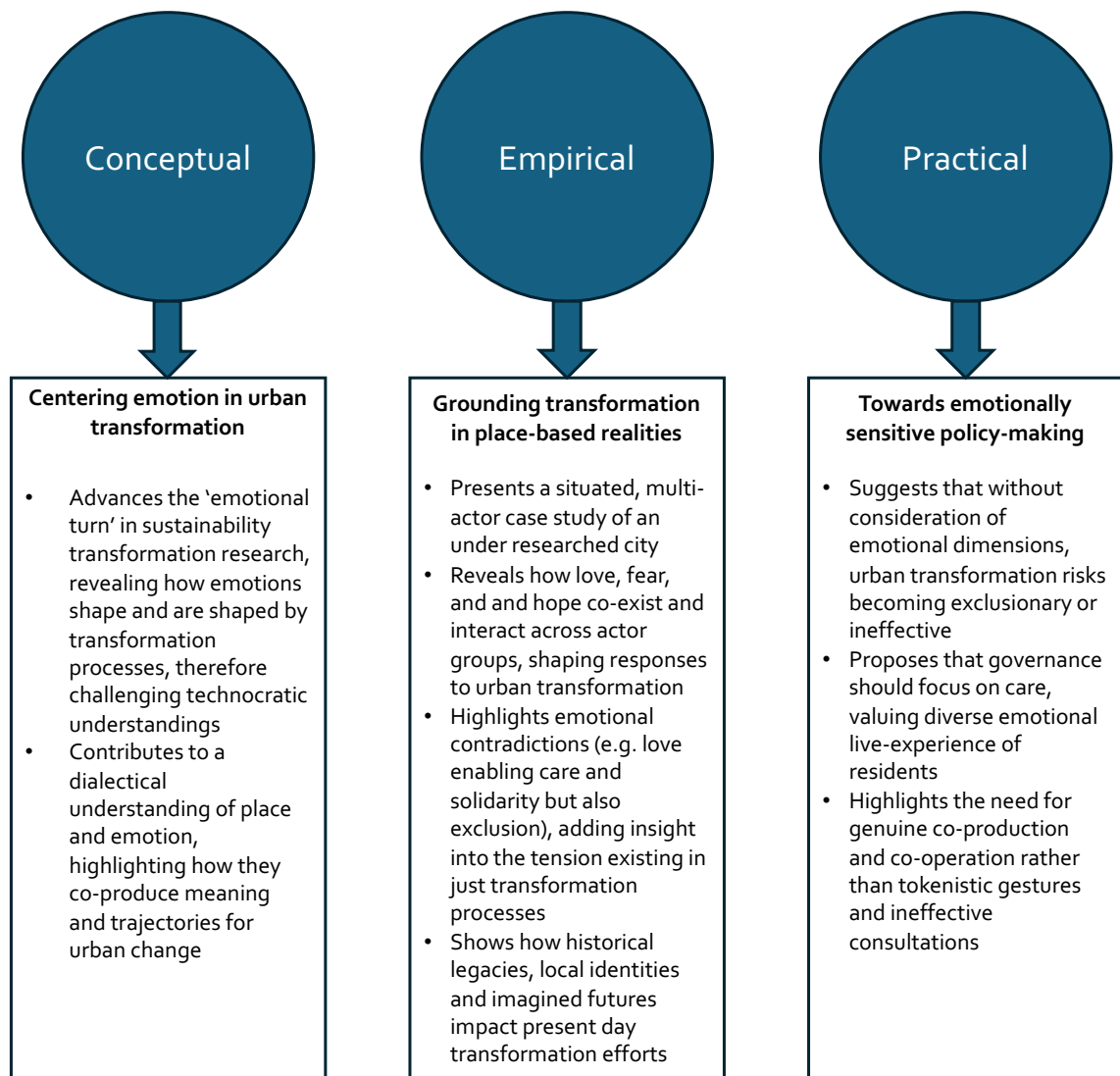


Figure 38 Summary of conceptual, empirical and practical thesis contributions

#### 9.4 Future research avenues

This thesis has highlighted the value in attending to emotion within urban transformation and has begun to unpack their dynamics within a singular case study. In drawing out place-based themes of justice and inequality, attachments, historical legacies and future visions within transformation research, it excitingly opens several pathways for future enquiry. One potential direction is the exploration of a wider range of emotions. Drawing on the work of Pihkala (2022), future research might consider the roles of other climate emotions<sup>85</sup>, how they may shape transformation processes, as well as how they intersect and interact.

Another important consideration is understanding how policy and governance structures can better attend to emotionality. Building on Amorim-Maia et al (2024) and Boossabong's (2025) call for emotionally aware public policy and governance, utilising frameworks that foster social empathy through emotional connection, future work could explore how policy creation could be reimagined to prioritise empathy, care and emotional reflexivity. This could include investigation into the division of emotional labour within environmental transformations (Moser, 2024)<sup>86</sup> as well as

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<sup>85</sup> As Pihkala notes, climate emotions are simply emotions that link to how people feel about the climate crisis.

<sup>86</sup> Moser (2024) differentiates slightly between emotional and transformative labour, defining the latter as 'The work – inner and outer, visible and invisible – that is required to initiate, affect and navigate the difficult processes involved in achieving system-transcending, transformative change' (p.4).

considering how participatory processes could be restructured to allow for emotional expression (Wickson, Lambert and Bernstein, 2025).

There is also a necessity to bring in voices that have been under-represented in research on both climate emotions and urban transformations. More work should be undertaken with young people in the climate space to build upon already existing literature (e.g. Arya, 2022; Pickard, 2019), including my own (Wilson et al., 2024).

Future research should continue to explore intergenerational perspectives, especially related to expressions of climate emotions. Similarly, further work could engage more explicitly with how experiences of emotion and articulations of justice are shaped by factors including class, race and migration, particularly in diverse urban contexts, which remains underexplored in this thesis and more widely.

Finally, more longitudinal research is needed to unpack temporal dynamics of emotion and attachment in the context of environmental transformations. Questions remain about how climate emotions change over time, how shifting political and social landscapes (such as the impact of Section 114 in Nottingham, or the rise of right-wing influence locally) impact emotions, attachment and narratives of justice, and how these in turn impact the momentum or direction or transformation efforts. Further research could also follow what happens post CN28 – what comes next in terms of the city's environmental goals, and how might the city recover from the Section 114? How does the city navigate a 'just recovery'? Holistically, these future avenues exemplify the need for research to deepen, broaden and extend emotional and justice-oriented

dimensions of urban transformation in ways that speak to the lived realities of communities.

### 9.5 Final reflections

In this thesis, I have examined processes of justice-oriented urban transformations in Nottingham through the lens of emotion. By focusing on emotions, including love, fear, anger and hope, and how they shape and are shaped by these transformations, I have highlighted how such processes are not simply technical or policy-driven, but are deeply relational and tied to people's identities, attachments and lived experiences. The emotional dynamics at play highlight the complex and interconnected ways in which urban change is felt and contested by communities, activists and policy makers, revealing important tensions and contradictions.

The urgency of this research has become more and more clear – since 2021, we have seen increasing precarity and injustice in communities, devastating cuts in city services, and the worrying increase in far-right influence in the wider county, with Reform having taken control of Nottingham County Council in May 2025 and several Labour politicians defecting to the party. At the same time, the city is experiencing worsening and increasingly frequent climate events including heatwaves and flooding. These unfolding crises not only highlight the importance of transformative action but also amplify the need for such a transformation to be rooted in a range of emotions that may help to drive and sustain change towards a future based on justice for all people and the planet.

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## Appendices

### 1. Example interview questions

<b>For participants of groups</b>
How did you become interested in environmental/ climate issues?
How did you find out about x group?
What was your motivation to get involved? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How long have you been involved?</li> <li>• How are you involved?</li> <li>• What do you gain from your involvement?</li> </ul>
Are you affiliated with any other groups or organisations? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If so, which and what do they do?</li> <li>• How do they differ?</li> </ul>
What does the group hope to achieve (aims and objectives)?
Why do you think some people do not engage/ get involved in action?
What methods does the group use in order to create change? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why is this important?</li> </ul>
To what extent do justice/ equity enter the work of (group name)? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you have an example of this?</li> <li>• How would you define justice/ equity?</li> </ul>
What do you think are the biggest issues facing Nottingham currently? (generally) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In terms of the environment? How do you think climate change might impact Nottingham?</li> <li>• In terms of justice/ equity?</li> </ul>
Do you feel like the group is helping to tackle these issues? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What role do you think the role of community groups/ organisations/ movements is in environmental transformation?</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you feel like the group has the power to influence decision making within the city?</li> <li>• What has been the impact of your work so far?</li> <li>• Are there any barriers you feel the group faces in terms of tackling these problems?</li> </ul>
Why do you think Nottingham is an important place for this group?
<p>Are you aware of environmental initiatives or policy set by local council/ government?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you heard of CN2028?</li> <li>• If yes, what are your thoughts? Strengths/ weaknesses?</li> </ul>
<p>What do you think a 'sustainable' Nottingham should look like?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social sustainability?</li> <li>• Environmental sustainability?</li> <li>• Economic sustainability?</li> <li>• How do these interact?</li> <li>• How could this be achieved?</li> </ul>
Is there anything else you would like to talk about?

## 2. Ethical approval

March 2021

Please continue on a separate sheet if necessary.

### Declaration of ethical research

Please sign and date below.

***If you ticked any of the shaded boxes in Sections 1 - 6 of this form, you should have completed Section 7.***

Please submit this checklist by e-mail to Sue Davis ([ttzsf@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:ttzsf@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk)).

**By signing this form you are agreeing to work within the protocol which you have outlined and to abide by the University of Nottingham's Code of Research Conduct and Research Ethics.** If you make changes to your research protocol (such as changes to methods of data collection, the proposed sites of data collection, the means by which participants are accessed) which in turn would change your answers to any of the above questions then you **must** complete a new form and submit a copy to your supervisor (if relevant).

Once approved this checklist will be archived with the School Office.

Signed  Date 28/06/22

For postgraduate research student this form must be additionally signed by your supervisor before review by the research ethics committee:

Supervisors name: Christopher Ives

Signed  Date ...5 July 2022.....

**The Research Ethics Panel**

- ☐ agrees that the research can go ahead as planned
- ☐ requests further information and/or amendments to the research protocol (see details below)

School REO...  Date: 21.07.22

Office Use Only

Start Date: \_\_\_\_\_ 21/07/22 (Usually approval date  
unless requested otherwise)

Finish Date: \_\_\_\_\_ 21/07/26 (Usually 4 years from start  
date unless requested otherwise)

### 3. Consent form

#### Consent form

PhD Thesis: An 'ordinary' city with extraordinary climate goals? Transformation, place and social justice in Nottingham's journey to 'carbon neutrality'

I would be grateful for your consent to allow myself, Katie Keddie, to interview you as part of my PhD project for the School of Geography at the University of Nottingham.

The interview will last 30-45 minutes, subject to your availability. You have the right to stop the interview and withdraw from the project at any time. The information from these interviews will be used subject to your permission with this consent form.

If you have any questions pertaining to this form, please contact Katie Keddie directly on 07749111622 or [katie.keddie@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:katie.keddie@nottingham.ac.uk) and if required, contact my supervisors Dr Chris Ives ([chris.ives@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:chris.ives@nottingham.ac.uk)) or Dr Nick Clare ([nick.clare@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:nick.clare@nottingham.ac.uk)) .

Please tick appropriate boxes	Yes	No
I have read and understood the project information sheet		
I have been able to ask questions about the project		
I agree to take part in the project and understand this means taking part in an interview		
I agree that notes will be <u>taken</u> and the interview will be recorded		
I understand that I can refuse to answer questions		
I understand that my taking part is voluntary and I can withdraw from the study at any time by notifying the researcher involved and I do not have to give any reason for why I no longer wish to take part		
I understand that my withdrawal or refusal to take part will not impact any relationship with the researcher or university		
I understand that any personal information collected about me that can identify me such as my name or where I live will not be shared beyond the research team		
I understand that the information I provide will be used for a PhD thesis and publications		
I understand that my information will be anonymised so that I cannot be identified in these outputs		

Participant name and signature:

Participant contact details:

Researcher signature:

Date:

#### 4. Summary of project for stakeholders

Link to document:

[https://www.canva.com/design/DAGqCFrB7lg/gyFVyuMgPG1SCh56X4uruA/view?utm\\_content=DAGqCFrB7lg&utm\\_campaign=designshare&utm\\_medium=link2&utm\\_source=uniquelinks&utlId=h4oe9ba5dac](https://www.canva.com/design/DAGqCFrB7lg/gyFVyuMgPG1SCh56X4uruA/view?utm_content=DAGqCFrB7lg&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link2&utm_source=uniquelinks&utlId=h4oe9ba5dac)

## Feeling environmental transformations in the 'Rebel City'

A very short summary of a very long thesis

Katie Keddie



Transformations to a more sustainable and just society are essential, and are increasingly reflected in policy nationally and locally, including Nottingham's Carbon Neutral 2028.

However, this change isn't just about carbon targets or infrastructure - **successful transformations hinge on how people feel, belong and participate within the context of urban transformation.**

This research project, based on three years of qualitative research in Nottingham, has shown that emotions like **love, fear, anger and hope** all have huge impacts on how change is enacted, supported and contested within the city - **emotions must therefore be treated as an important part of the conversation.** The following pages outline key messages from the project, and what this means for policy and practice.

Several key themes have emerged from this research:

- 1) Emotions are central to how people experience and engage with urban transformation processes** - emotions motivate action and shape resistance but can also fuel division and exclusion. Love, fear, anger and hope are deeply intertwined and relational, recognising their varied impacts are vital.
- 2) Place and emotion are deeply connected** - people's senses of place and identity shape how they feel about change. Attachments to places can motivate grassroots action but can too create barriers and exclusion. Transformative action must engage with this complexity.
- 3) Justice-centred transformation needs real collaboration** - strategies like CN28 require citizen involvement and collaboration, yet residents often feel tokenised and sidelined. Grassroots initiative that are already creating change deserve greater recognition and support.
- 4) Historical context and future imaginaries matter** - Nottingham's rebel identity and past struggles shape how people see transformation today, and impact how the future is imagined. More explicit engagement with processes of collective visioning linked to memory and identity could be insightful for informing future action.
- 5) Transformations entail emotional labour** - people acting for change are undertaking heavy emotional work, navigating a whole host of emotions and sometimes negative repercussions like burn out. Recognising this, supporting and caring for one other and sharing the emotional burden is essential for sustaining momentum.

These themes have implications for policy and practice, creating key recommendations:



By recognising emotional and relational dimensions associated with urban change, and connecting them to policy and practice, **more equitable, context sensitive and collective transformations** may be possible.