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Objects of desire: rules as boundary objects for system change in greenspace governance

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Abstract

Purpose – This article examines attempts to transform the funding, governance and management of municipal green spaces. It advances knowledge on what enables or prevents systemic change, focusing on the function and potential of rules within a three-year programme to "transform" greenspace management in the UK. We focus on how rules become interpretable and contestable "boundary objects" or interfaces between different actors as system change programmes are implemented.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on a longitudinal qualitative investigation of the Future Parks Accelerator programme, a system change programme that spanned eight UK locations, the article shows how attempts to rewrite the rules of public institutions fare under real-world conditions.

Findings – The research finds that participants in change programmes identify rules that are open to interpretation, test how far reinterpretation is possible and change or rewrite the way rules are applied. These processes of locating, testing and shifting depend on legitimacy and timing. This did not happen to the extent envisaged by the funders.

Practical implications – Policymakers should exercise caution over philanthropic or government funders' efforts to radically accelerate systemic change, instead embedding ambitions of paradigm shifts within the incremental, contested and continuous work of reinterpreting and realigning rules and resources through adaptive governance.

Originality/value – The article advances understanding of system change by emphasising the value of rules as malleable and contestable resources. This complements the current emphasis in public management literature on adaptive approaches to complex challenges. We question the continuing emphasis in policy and practice on rules as instrumental levers of change.

Keywords Greenspace management, Governance, System change, Rules, Leverage points, Boundary objects

Paper type Research article

Introduction

This article examines an attempt to "accelerate" systemic change in response to the chronic underfunding of urban parks and green spaces (Mell, 2018; Nam and Dempsey, 2020), showing how efforts to rewrite the rules of public institutions to address this challenge have fared in practice. Meadows (1999) identifies rules as one of 12 "leverage points" in complex systems, where an intervention can precipitate wider changes. Our contribution is to highlight how the interpretability of rules, as opposed to their instrumentality, enables them to function as leverage points. Such interpretable resources are described as "boundary objects" (Star and Griesemer, 1989) or points of negotiation and realigned understandings between different parties. This focus on boundary objects complements recent public management scholarship on adaptive governance (Siemers, 2025) and trust-based management (Norkin *et al*., 2025)

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by spotlighting the resources around which adaptation occurs, while underlining the need for caution regarding expectations of rapid system change.

The article considers a three-year programme – the Future Parks Accelerator (FPA) – which was seen as an international pioneer within the greenspace sector and was expected to have wider impacts across local government and environmental governance. FPA was intended to "transform" management and funding of green spaces in eight UK locations. It was an example of "strategic philanthropy" – an intervention by charitable organisations designed "directly and deliberately ... to influence public agendas and policies" (Lagemann, 1992, p. 365). Such interventions have been a feature of recent public policy and practice in response to complex challenges (Jansson and Randrup, 2020; Shaw *et al*., 2021) but post-hoc analysis of such initiatives has been limited.

Systemic change, as Meadows recognised, is complex, involving many agents and interests. Complexity is a concern within public management scholarship and practice because of the need to negotiate policy solutions and outcomes between multiple stakeholders (Norkin *et al*., 2025; Parkinnen, 2025; Sahamies and Anttiroiko, 2024; Siemers, 2025). Scholars have highlighted the need to understand the lifecycles of collaborative governance (Moussa *et al*., 2026) and to build trust (Norkin *et al*., 2025; Grimbert *et al*., 2026) as well as individual capacities to adapt (Siemers, 2025). Such approaches highlight the need for collaborative and facilitative responses to policy problems rather than "direct steering" (Sahamies and Anttiroiko, 2024, p. 557). Rules play significant roles in such multi-stakeholder collaborations, both as constraining factors (Weeratunga *et al*., 2026) and as resources that are open to change (Ravazzi *et al*., 2026). This article highlights the challenges that arise when an "accelerator" approach to complex change is adopted, which demands the rapid reinterpretation of rules within a system.

System change in greenspace management

Our research is concerned with how system change in greenspace management was enacted through the FPA's intervention, focusing on the mechanisms used and the barriers and enablers encountered. Our findings reveal that rules act both as interfaces for interpretation (new meanings are ascribed to existing rules) and as entities that are changed through reinterpretation (rules change to fit new meanings). This reinterpretation requires legitimacy and timeliness. This has important implications for public management, showing that rules in themselves are not sufficient to generate systemic change: their effects derive from their interpretability in practice, which depends on favourable conditions. These findings speak to Taylor's call (2014) for nuance and pragmatism to balance systemic thinking with evidence-based public management; and Siemer's observation (2025) that "enhancing the individual adaptive capacity is crucial for effectively deploying adaptive governance strategies on the organisational level".

The varied benefits of urban parks have long been extolled in literature and policy rhetoric, from supporting development of moral and social virtues (Conway and Rabbitts, 2023) to their importance for health and wellbeing (Dobson and Dempsey, 2021). Despite their known benefits, financing their upkeep is an international dilemma (Nam and Dempsey, 2020). This has been a persistent issue in the UK, where our research was situated and where most public urban green spaces are the responsibility of municipalities (Dobson, 2021). Municipal budgets for public parks in the UK are discretionary, in contrast to statutory local services such as refuse collection, so greenspace provision can be regarded as an "optional extra" (Mell, 2018, p. 752).

Long-term management of green spaces is crucial to sustain their benefits (Fongar *et al*., 2019). This goes beyond maintaining physical assets to include regulation and coordination of the actors and actions involved (Said and Tempels, 2023). These actors vary in the UK, depending on location and time (Dempsey and Nam, 2024), but increasingly include the private and voluntary and community sectors as public funding is reduced and management responsibility is transferred (Lindholst *et al*., 2020).

This has led to non-governmental organisations stepping in, with government backing, to provide piecemeal, small-scale competitive funding. Such competitions are premised on an idea of multi-stakeholder partnership, raising questions of complex governance (Jansson and Randrup, 2020; Fors *et al*., 2021). To understand the implications, academics have explored parks management as a complex, adaptive and interactive system (Aly and Dimitrijevic, 2022). Such systems-thinking permits consideration of parks as complex public spaces consisting of dynamic, constantly changing sets of assets (Said and Tempels, 2023; Aly and Dimitrijevic, 2022). Public space management literature highlights the multiple actors involved, their contribution to strategic decisions, the design of greenspace "assets" and implications for long-term management and funding (Dobson and Dempsey, 2019; Simson, 2018).

Our research is situated in the context of nearly a decade of real-terms cuts to local government funding in England, with a parliamentary inquiry concluding that public parks were "at a tipping point of decline" (House of Commons, 2017). The combination of known benefits and persistent under-resourcing has led to pressure to revalue parks in terms of their potential to address policy challenges such as mental illness or obesity. Although blue and green spaces are often described as assets, they are typically treated as liabilities, or of limited interest, in decision-making because of the costs of upkeep (Hislop *et al*., 2019). This has focused attention on how change can be achieved at a systemic level, a challenge taken up by the FPA.

This focus on systemic change led us to consider whether or how such change could be achieved. As the programme evolved, it became clear that rules played a distinctive role in these processes. From longitudinal research involving documentary analysis, participatory workshops, participant observation and 146 transcribed interviews, this paper identifies how rules are framed and interpreted in the service of broader systemic shifts. Building from Donella Meadows' leverage points perspective, which seeks to show how systemic change can be enabled (1999), we highlight the use of rules as interpretable boundary objects (Star and Griesemer, 1989) that can enable wider paradigm shifts within existing modes of governance. We also foreground the importance of legitimacy in enabling a rule to function as a boundary object; and we reveal boundary objects to be temporally contingent as well as dependent on interpretation.

We now turn to our theoretical framing, paying particular attention to the use of rules and their importance as boundary objects. Then we present the empirical research, detailing context, rationale, methods and analytical approach. The fourth section outlines our research findings. Next we discuss how issues of legitimacy and temporality affect how rules function as boundary objects. We conclude by outlining implications for public management and systems change programmes.

System change and rules as boundary objects

A well-established approach to understanding system change is the "leverage points" lens (Meadows, 1999). These are places within a complex system where a small shift in one area can produce widespread impacts (Meadows, 1999). Meadows identifies 12 such points. The greatest impacts, she argues, occur through a change to overarching mindsets or paradigms. This change of worldview influences decision-making at every level. Towards the other end of the scale are changes in stocks and flows – resources and the ways they are deployed. In the middle are the system rules, which provide incentives, punishments and constraints.

Meadows argues that changing rules is an effective way to intervene in a complex system (Meadows, 2008, p. 159). Rules are embedded in organisational and institutional cultures and so are linked closely with the "paradigms" that she sees as key to system change. While Meadows views rules as subordinate to paradigms – the worldview fashions the rules – an institutional perspective suggests the reverse is also true.

Institutional scholarship reveals that rules are not only instruments of a system but also act as structuring forces. A key element of system change is realignment or repurposing of the institutions that set the "rules of the game" for society (North, 1991). Ostrom (1986, p. 5) describes rules as "linguistic entities" that detail the actions required, prohibited or permitted in structuring "repetitive, interdependent relationships" ... "to achieve order and predictability within defined situations". They are thus durable but open to change and negotiation; institutions and rules exist in a state of continuous mutual structuring. In greenspace management rules thus exist at an interface between what is known and what is done (Dobson and Dempsey, 2021).

While changing rules does not shift the paradigm from which a system is imagined, it modifies the incentives and penalties actors receive. Rules are thus a tool actors can use to pursue change – either by changing how they are interpreted and applied, or overtly rewriting them. In the case of urban green spaces in the UK, there have been frequent calls to rewrite the rules by placing the provision of parks on a statutory footing (House of Commons, 2017). This has been resisted by government. This resistance has bolstered efforts to change how green spaces are understood and valued.

The notion of "boundary objects" helps to explain how such reinterpretation can happen. A boundary object (Star and Griesemer, 1989) is an artefact, object or concept that can act as an interface between different groups or interests. Star and Griesemer outline how exhibits in a zoological museum functioned as sites of "coherence and cooperation in science" (p. 392): they brought together groups of otherwise disconnected actors around common interests. As boundary objects, rules can be debated, interpreted, moved or ignored according to circumstances (Figure 1). They are distinguished by characteristics of commonality and malleability (Meerow *et al*., 2016) and provide an "anchor for dialogue" (Hajjar *et al*., 2024).

A rule straddles the divide between the material and the conceptual, being reified and codified (usually as text) while remaining susceptible to multiple interpretations and practices. As a boundary object a rule links actors around actions that are enabled or prevented and behaviours that align or transgress. Alamad *et al*. (2021), for example, consider how "ethico-faith based rules" in Islamic finance function as boundary objects, both constraining financial innovation and enabling coordination between actors. Nicholls and Huybrechts (2016) show how shared textual artefacts (such as a Fairtrade certificate) can be deployed as boundary

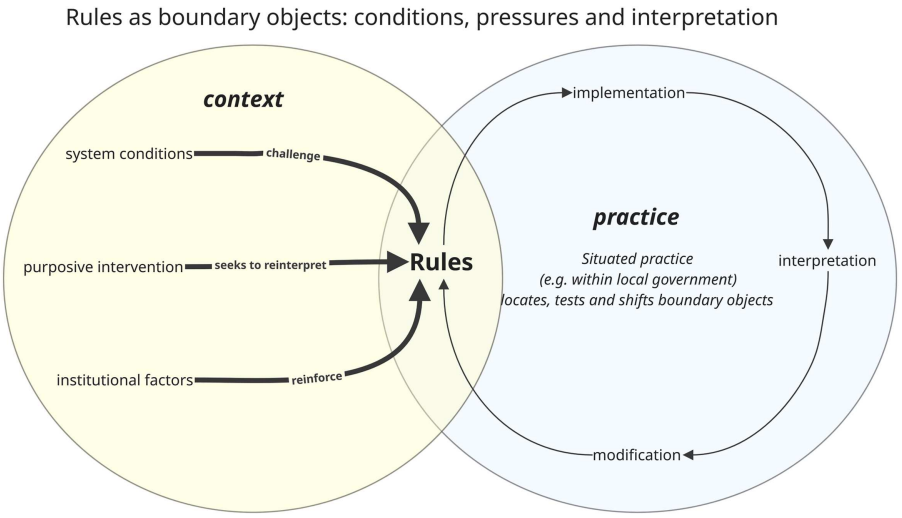

Figure 1. Illustration of how rules can function as boundary objects. **Source:** The authors

objects to rebalance asymmetrical power relations. They propose that boundary objects can align logics between organisations while enabling "tolerance of dissonance".

There has been little exploration of how boundary objects change through interpretation and contestation, as well as functioning as an interface. Drawing from the discussion above, in conversation with our empirical findings (below), we identify three sets of relevant processes. These are:

(1) *locating* boundary objects through bringing different parties together around a shared object (in our case sets of rules)

(2) *testing* boundary objects through interpretation of rules and selective reinterpretation to suit context and desires, or potentially finding the limits of malleability

(3) *shifting* boundary objects: negotiated change in the qualities of a boundary object, in our case rewriting rules.

These three processes involve negotiation between parties who engage with a boundary object and are critical to advancing or restraining purposive interventions in public services. They are also subject to factors such as external shocks or institutional interventions like policy or legislative changes.

The research study and methods

The FPA programme was designed to stimulate systemic change in the management and upkeep of green spaces in the UK (National Lottery Heritage Fund and National Trust, 2022). FPA was primarily concerned with governance and finance systems. It sought to influence local government to create a more financially and socially sustainable long-term management approach. The programme was a partnership between a major national charity (the National Trust) and a public body set up to distribute National Lottery funding (the National Lottery Heritage Fund). Between 2019 and 2022 it invested £14m in FPA, aiming to create "a critical mass of public parks and green spaces in the UK on a path to sustainability and transformation to deliver even greater public benefits for the next generation" (National Lottery Heritage Fund and National Trust, 2019). The eight funded places, chosen following a competitive bidding process, were based around urban centres but also included peri-urban and rural areas. They were Birmingham; Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (a recently merged local authority); Bristol; Cambridgeshire and Peterborough (a partnership of seven local authorities); Edinburgh; a joint project by the London boroughs of Camden and Islington; Nottingham and Plymouth. Local project teams were supported to examine options for strategic planning, funding, management and community engagement.

Given the legacy of austerity (Simson, 2018) and government policies at the time, the funders considered it unrealistic to expect public funds to perpetuate existing models. Instead, their central focus was to change existing ways of thinking and working (Dobson *et al*., 2020). These changes related to governance and community engagement; finance and fundraising, including income generation and private finance and a wider vision of the purpose of parks in supporting environmental, public health, employment and inclusion goals.

The intent to catalyse systemic change was underlined in FPA documentation. The initial programme guidance (National Lottery Heritage Fund and National Trust, 2018, p. 8) explained: "By providing a blend of grant funding and in-house expertise, we aim to create vital headspace and extra resources . . . to create a fresh vision for how parks and green spaces will thrive at the heart of communities in the future." An outcomes framework (National Lottery Heritage Fund and National Trust, 2020) described the current funding model as "broken" and declared that "we need a systemic solution to the funding of greenspace, one that is connected to communities".

In terms of Meadows' leverage points, the projects sought to address both the paradigm governing the value of parks and the rules influencing how they are managed and funded.

Our analysis does not judge their success; rather, it identifies issues raised when working purposively to change systems and reinterpret their rules of operation.

Methods

We researched the programme from its outset, adopting an iterative longitudinal qualitative case study approach (Rosenbaum *et al*., 2017) to examine how change unfolds. For our research, a multiple case study approach meant in-depth research for the whole intervention sample to understand change in different contexts. The eight-case approach also allows us to consider broader transferability of findings and offers more robust verification of conceptual insights than in a single case study (Stewart, 2011).

Methods were replicated across the cases. Ethical approval was granted by Sheffield Hallam University and participant information was anonymised. The main data gathered and analysed were:

(1) Documentary evidence, including programme guidance, successful project applications, newsletters, images and notes from meetings and events

(2) Semi-structured interviews (n = 146, covering 171 participant interactions) with project team members, local government officers, partner organisations, and funders

(3) Notes and summaries from baseline workshops with each project

(4) Notes from further focus groups and workshops in 2021 and 2022

(5) Four evaluation reports produced during the programme

Table 1 below provides anonymised details of the number, distribution and timing of participants over the course of the programme.

In each round we interviewed project leads, and across the four rounds we also interviewed:

(1) Key project team members

(2) Internal partners (e.g. elected officials; senior project sponsor; supporting department)

(3) External partners (e.g. charitable foundations; social enterprises; community organisations; finance providers, local businesses)

Table 1. Details of participant interviews

Participant group	FPA team, Dec 2019–Jan 2020	Jan 2020 project leads	Summer 2020	Spring 2021	Autumn 2021	Spring 2022	Total
Birmingham		2	8	4	5	4	23
BCP		1	6	3	3	3	16
Bristol		1	14	3	6	0	24
Cambridgeshire		1	3	4	4	2	14
Camden & Islington		2	2	3	0	3	10
Edinburgh		1	8	4	3	3	19
Nottingham		1	8	3	2	2	16
Plymouth		1	7	3	2	2	15
Funders (National Trust & National Lottery Heritage Fund)	10			7	10	7	34
Total	*10*	*10*	*56*	*34*	*35*	*26*	*171*

Note(s): Total n = 171; 146 full interviews transcribed. Several interviews involved more than one participant, and several participants were interviewed repeatedly

Interviews generally lasted between 40 and 90 min. Additional details on the participating locations and the research process are available in the programme's final report (National Lottery Heritage Fund and National Trust, 2022). The authors analysed data thematically following an iterative process of manual coding and comparison between members of the research team, to consider how system change was conceptualised; how participants felt they were contributing to change and how the programme's achievements could be understood as system change. Complementing manual coding, interview transcripts and project applications were analysed using six key search terms, reflecting the language used in programme guidance and project applications. They were:

(1) "system change", "system" or "systemic"

(2) "whole place"

(3) "transform" or "transformation"

(4) "culture change"

(5) "strategy" or "strategic"

(6) "legacy"

We first trawled the data for relevant material and conducted detailed thematic analysis. These themes were then discussed and categorised. We sought to identify underlying understandings of systemic change that the material revealed. After the project ended, the authors revisited these data to draw out further insights on systemic change, and the findings below reflect this subsequent analysis. The data presented below therefore focus particularly on systemic change, and more comprehensive information about the programme's impact and lessons learned is available in its final report (National Lottery Heritage Fund and National Trust, 2022).

Findings

Within institutions such as local government, rules and procedures serve sensemaking and normative functions, maintaining "logics of appropriateness" (March and Olsen, 1989). Adapting or changing these rules was essential to inculcate the "fresh vision" the funders sought to inspire. In practice, this involved the intersection of a rule-driven funding approach (with bespoke structures and guidance) with the highly structured and rule-bound world of local government.

The funders' vision played out differently in terms of projects' ambitions and focus. Plymouth, for example, adopted an ecosystem-led approach. Birmingham focused initially on using parks and green spaces to meet the needs of other municipal services, such as education and economic development. Others focused on deliverables – a 30-year strategy in Edinburgh, for example – which some of the funding team saw as overshadowing efforts to achieve fundamental culture change. From the outset, project teams complained that the funders had not appreciated how long it takes to enact change within local government, including practical challenges like recruiting staff to deliver projects.

Over the course of the programme the level of ambition expressed by project teams gradually reduced, partly as a result of Covid-19. The projects became sites of constant tension – creative as well as frustrating – over how much, and how quickly, change could be achieved. Examining these tensions, we identified three processes at work: locating, testing and shifting rules in relation to their function as boundary objects (Table 2). These also build from the theoretical literature above, providing a potentially transferable framework for further analysis of system change.

Table 2. Key thematic findings

Theme	Key findings
Locating rules	Some rules are open to reinterpretation (e.g. funders' management processes) Funders adopted an intentional approach of bending or breaking existing rules
Testing rules	The intention of bending rules met with local resistance where rules were regarded as fixed The funders themselves were selective about their openness to flexibility and interpretation Interpreting rules was dependent on establishing trust-based relationships
Shifting rules	In some cases, processes of interpretation and testing led to new approaches to rules or the establishment of new implementation frameworks Long-term change was vulnerable to external pressures and the time-limited nature of the programme

Locating rules as boundary objects

Not every rule functions as a boundary object. It does so when it acts as an interface and topic of negotiation and interpretation. Certain rules and processes lent themselves to this. As organisations with established processes and governance structures, National Trust and the National Lottery Heritage Fund forged a partnership and an integrated team, then worked with projects in an intentionally challenging mode. They encouraged the local authorities both to ascribe new meanings to existing rules (e.g. rethinking the purposes of green spaces) and to adapt rules to new meanings (e.g. matching funding to perceived ecological benefits). At first the funders were optimistic that their own partnership could model such creative working:

> That's the interesting thing about Future Parks is you've got, you know, the UK's largest charity, the UK's largest funder of heritage and a government department all trying to work together . . . because we're a working partnership we're able to kind of break some of the rules by doing things a bit differently (Funder interview, 2020).

This ability to rework rules between project partners (for example, on financial management, contracts of employment, and establishing joint systems) was sustained as the programme continued:

> Working in partnership . . . has meant we've been able to flex our rules considerably, so recruitment of staff, through how we pay grants and our processes, saying we're in partnership, we need to do it differently, has been really helpful (Funder interview, 2021).

From these interviewees' perspective, the programme's strategic intentions overrode organisations' established processes. As boundary objects, existing funding processes, recruitment procedures and organisational systems brought the funders together to establish new ways of working. However, as described further in the text, the process of identifying and locating rules as boundary objects, driven largely by the funders, was often countered locally by a process of testing, in which the capacity of a rule to function as a boundary object was challenged. This was often driven by local government staff within the funded locations, pushing back against initiatives proposed by project teams.

Testing rules as boundary objects

As well as providing money, FPA provided advice, specialist support and the services of an "account manager". The funded local authorities were expected to bend their rules as the funders had done. But in the relationships between the funders and localities, rules were frequently treated as unnegotiable. Projects were held accountable to funding agreements and delivery milestones. In testing partners' willingness to flex and reinterpret rules, they became objects of contestation:

> . . . we wanted to be so flexible and so responsive and so exciting that we were committed to be doers, not sitting around scratching your head planning. I think there's a time and a place for all of that [. . .] I think we're in delivery mode now and we're very focused on what we have to do (Funder interview, 2021).

One funder interviewee reflected how rhetoric about disruption and change sometimes created problems as projects attempted to match the funders' expectations to their situations:

> We can rip up the rule book and be much more light touch, but what we ended up with was a much more onerous process (Funder interview, 2020).

Rules initially presented as flexible and amenable to new forms of meaning-making became a means of asserting the accountability of the projects to their funders – creating potential conflicts with local accountabilities. In one case, relationships broke down and the project closed early. Local project staff felt that rules set by the funders shifted without due consultation, and while the funders had a very different view, the quote below illustrates how rules can become barriers rather than boundary objects:

> To have this third party come in and say these are the rules and this is what you've got to do and change those rules at whim, it's just not appropriate (Local project manager, 2021).

The findings above illustrate that a boundary object need not be stable and may not always function as a boundary object. Turning to efforts by the projects to change rules and procedures on greenspace funding and interpretation (for example, as an ecological network in Edinburgh or as a health resource in Camden and Islington), we found that the balance between disruption and continuity was a constant challenge, involving judgements about which rules were to be prioritised and whose rule-setting should take precedence.

Central to consensus-building was the ability to generate trust about a shared direction of travel. Trust-building challenges the timeline- and milestone-focused nature of project management, requiring flexibility and adaptability. Actors must perform multiple roles, using rules as resources to legitimise action with different audiences. Several project staff highlighted the importance of porous borders around roles and rules:

> I think systems leadership is about trust. [. . .] outcomes are emergent, so you cannot project manage towards the outcome that you want (Local project manager, 2020).

> We're working really hard to develop relationships between departments [. . .] So I think it's very much about being comfortable to work across boundaries, looking at the roles that everyone can play in leadership is really critical (Focus group participant, 2021).

Such observations underline the importance of locally situated and trust-based understandings of the actions that governance structures or funding mechanisms can enable. The "high challenge" approach adopted by the funders clashed with the slower, consensus-based approach to policy and service management within local government.

Shifting rules and redrawing boundaries

Under the right conditions, rules can be rewritten or replaced as an outcome of the interplay of locating and testing. Negotiation and interpretation may establish new behaviours and meanings. Project teams did not have executive powers to do this. They had to use their influence, negotiating with other actors.

In Birmingham, for example, a new method of prioritising investment in green spaces was developed and adopted, based on a concept of environmental justice that directed resources towards the most environmentally at-risk and spatially under-provisioned communities. This was a noteworthy example of reinterpreting rules (on funding allocations) within an existing system (by changing spending priorities), with the reinterpretation reinforced through the

actions of system leaders. The rules were adapted to accommodate new meanings. One project team member commented:

> The City of Nature concept which was really just being thought about six months ago seems to have landed now and has been widely accepted and now we're getting into the detail of boards and the governance of making things happen, so that's a positive. That's slightly different to where we were, six months ago we were still making a decision whether City of Nature was needed or not (Project interviewee, 2021).

Other localities were able to craft new structures and policies. Camden and Islington developed strategic and practical links with public health and the wider health system through its Parks for Health programme. The programme was referenced in Camden's public health strategy and the two councils developed a joint Parks for Health strategy. Reflecting on such changes, one funder commented:

> I think probably if we think right back to the beginning there's been a real shift in thinking about parks as entities [then] as opposed to a whole system of nature in a city or in an urban area [now] (Funder interview, 2022).

In some places there was progress in establishing innovative financial initiatives, including the UK's first urban habitat bank in Plymouth. An urban habitat bank allows developers to offset the biodiversity impacts of development by investing in restoration or creation of habitats elsewhere within a local area. FPA also successfully supported the case for greenspace budgets to be protected in most locations, at least in the short term. Underlying this increased appetite for investment was a reinterpretation of local authorities' responsibilities for green spaces: rather than being seen as liabilities, they were beginning to be viewed as assets.

However, desire to reinterpret rules was constrained by the acceptability of new interpretations. Most projects chose not to create new governance structures (such as charitable trusts and foundations), despite funders' early hopes. While there was scope for layering new rules over old ones (in creating new financial structures), there was resistance to suggestions that long-established rules (on governance and democratic accountability) should be overturned. This highlighted the constraints imposed by the time-limited nature of the programme, as one project-based participant commented:

> It's the time window . . . I always thought when [it was] set up, if you're talking about transformation and culture change that's always going to be a challenge (Focus group participant, 2021).

Rules and paradigms can therefore be seen as fluctuating and as variably interpreted and actioned. In more than one case FPA participants commented on local authorities' tendency to retreat into internal systems when under pressure:

> I've seen examples where we have had an agreement [. . .] about budgets with this . . . officer and the local elected members and then we've tried to implement that through the local finance officers [only] for them to turn round and say no, they've got no approval really, this is what the budget says and this is what we're going to do (Project interviewee, 2020).

A boundary object, then, can afford actors a capacity to create new meanings, but can also be used to reassert the status quo.

Discussion

Drawing out key themes from our findings, we note the importance of context, legitimacy and timing in enabling rules to function as boundary objects. Growing awareness of the global climate and nature emergencies, for example, influenced a shift towards viewing parks as part of an ecological network providing resilience to climate change impacts. The value of green spaces for mental wellbeing was significantly enhanced through experiences of the Covid-19

pandemic. This changed the mood in local and national government about the importance of green spaces, though not the funding available (Dempsey and Dobson, 2021).

However, the political turbulence that followed, with three changes of prime minister between 2022 and 2024, limited opportunities for policy influence. Local government continued to suffer from long-term austerity: two of the eight localities, Nottingham and Birmingham, were effectively declared bankrupt, announcing that they could not meet their financial responsibilities. FPA also had to deal with regular reorganisations, changes of personnel and reshuffles of senior leaders. These circumstances generated both "push" and "pull" factors influencing change at local level.

In light of these wider pressures, our findings highlighted the importance of legitimacy and temporality in enabling or blocking reinterpretation of rules (and thus their utility as boundary objects), contributing to the broadening knowledge in this area (e.g. Dobson and Dempsey, 2021; Fongar *et al*., 2019).

Legitimacy and buy-in

For a rule to function as a boundary object, it needs to serve as an interface between groups of actors and be sufficiently interpretable to help them pursue their objectives. In British local government, the financial rules that shape flows of resources and the governance rules that delineate organisational structures and ensure accountability are key to the outcomes of any initiative. Rules can be malleable when their malleability is recognised and desired by different parties.

Evidence from FPA suggests that contextualised legitimacy is significant in how rules are interpreted. What matters in practice is the ability to achieve or to change a consensus over how rules are understood and applied. Nicholls and Huybrechts (2016) and Alamad *et al*. (2021) both highlight the role of boundary objects as enabling collaboration while also maintaining legitimacy. Karlsson *et al*. (2023, p. 558) argue that some boundary objects "are resources that can be converted into leverage and legitimacy" with wider audiences. The FPA programme indicates that before this can happen, the process of interpretation itself needs to be regarded as legitimate. Where there were conflicts, as happened in some instances between the funders and project teams, the rule can cease to function as a boundary object.

In general, the programme witnessed a high degree of flexibility and there was evidence that the reinterpretation and rewriting of rules was regarded as legitimate and was supported by decision-makers (for example, Birmingham's environmental justice approach; Plymouth's revisioning of greenspace valuation). Across the cohort projects developed new ways of thinking about and planning for green spaces as natural networks to support health, wellbeing and climate goals. This whole-place approach led towards new long-term strategies in most places, with buy-in at a senior level. This suggests that rules, in their function as boundary objects, can accelerate long-term change when the need for new interpretations is accepted.

Temporality

A second observation is that boundary objects' function as such is unstable, influenced by external circumstances as well as their position as interfaces. A boundary object may be considered flexible only for a limited period, or only if supported by external factors. FPA's time-limited resources facilitated local conversations that enabled greenspace finance and governance to become boundary objects. In two cases – Cambridgeshire and Camden and Islington – this involved different local authorities coming together for the programme, enabling previously unachievable coordination.

However, after the programme concluded it became more challenging for projects to continue their work and influence senior leaders. This position was compounded by the continuing local government financial crisis in the UK. Rules and processes that might have served as boundary objects during FPA now had to be considered in light of wider financial

pressures. This suggests a need for funding programmes to build in sufficient flexibility to respond to external forces (see Said and Tempels, 2023).

Contributions to systemic change

Attention to rules as boundary objects adds complexity and nuance to considerations of systemic change. In the Meadows model, rules change behaviours. Evidence from FPA suggests a blurrier picture dominated by what Meadows calls "weaker rules", balanced and practiced in dialogue with other rules that may have countervailing agency. This is particularly relevant when considering the non-statutory nature of UK greenspace management. Changing rules and procedures – as in Birmingham's rethinking of investment priorities – may affect stocks and flows at the lower end of the system (resource allocations) and influence paradigm shifts at the higher end (introducing ideas of justice into greenspace management) but nonetheless have limited impact on the financial context.

This is important when considering claims of systemic change. By 2022, the programme had helped to develop and enhance a significant evidence base on the importance of green spaces, their ecological benefits, and the values attachable to green assets. These changes relate to the interpretation and understanding of existing rules. Most funded localities also adopted strategic visions for their public parks and green spaces, with some evidence of changes in the way parks are conceptualised and valued. In other words, there was some movement in the paradigm from which the rules are interpreted.

These shifts were dependent on the conditions created by FPA, which included financial investment; expert "critical friends" who supported project teams; technical support; and, importantly, the "headspace" for project managers to connect with decision-makers. These investments provided resources that let participants use the boundary objects of rules relating to strategies, finance and governance more imaginatively to achieve their purposes. When the programme ended the funders were confident it had created evidence that could influence national spending priorities. However, three years on, the overarching crisis facing parks and green spaces in the UK has not lessened. The system as a whole has not changed.

Conclusion

This article has advanced understandings of system change by identifying how rules function as interpretable boundary objects in complex governance contexts, and by highlighting the conditions of legitimacy, resourcing, and time that allow rules to become open to interpretation. It expands scholarship by shifting attention from the instrumental and directive function of rules towards the potential flexibility that enables them to serve as restructuring devices within evolving systems. It thus complements the emphasis in recent public management scholarship on adaptive governance (Siemers, 2025) and the importance of trust-based approaches to complex problems (Norkin *et al*., 2025) by showing how change can hinge on how (or whether) rules are interpreted and under what conditions – in other words, how they function as boundary objects within change programmes.

Here we highlight three implications for public management research, policy and practice. First, having identified that legitimacy is a condition for functioning as a boundary object; that boundary objects may be temporally unstable; and that their contribution to systemic change is circumstantially contingent (Aly and Dimitrijevic, 2022), we suggest that rules can become malleable boundary objects under certain conditions. While the FPA programme does not give us sufficient evidence to catalogue these conditions, it reinforces the theory that investment in niche activities (Geels, 2004) can lead to innovations to support broader transitions.

Second, within the context of system change we propose that the fuzziness of boundary objects has inherent advantages. It enables negotiation, contestation and formation of new meanings without the risks associated with revolutionary disruption, chiming with other research calling for flexibility (Fongar *et al*., 2019; Aly and Dimitrijevic, 2022). Our analysis

suggests that rules provide points of reference that can be used to advance or oppose different objectives. They are therefore in constant dialogue with the paradigms that govern the goals and functions of a system. In the case of FPA, rules on finance, governance and greenspace provision delineated the porous boundaries across which ambitions of system change were translated and negotiated. Their simultaneous fixity and flexibility can create an enabling environment for system change while reassuring actors that they are still in broadly known territory.

We can thus observe, finally, that just as system change is subject to iterative meaning-making, chronic problems are likely to remain and mutate, manifesting in new forms and demanding new interventions. We therefore suggest that the sometimes-heroic discourses of system change as a radical activity (Shanahan *et al*., 2013), often adopted by funders, should be resisted in favour of an understanding that embeds ambitions of paradigm shifts within the incremental, contested and continuous work of reinterpreting and realigning rules and resources. This requires a focus in policy and practice on long-term investment and learning, as called for in public space management studies (Conway and Rabbitts, 2023; Dobson and Dempsey, 2021; Aly and Dimitrijevic, 2022; Jansson and Randrup, 2020; Fors *et al*., 2021).

From a practice perspective, these conclusions emphasise the need for learning-based and collaborative approaches to persistent policy problems (Moussa *et al*., 2026; Siemers, 2025) to identify where within governance and public management systems the rules offer the potential to become interpretable boundary objects. Change programmes should provide space for the processes of locating, testing and shifting rules as boundary objects to evolve. Our findings show that such processes take longer to embed than three-year programmes allow, requiring sustained investment in relationship-building and cooperative problem-solving by all stakeholders.

Our research design, covering in-depth study across multiple cases, supports transferability of findings. Building from this, further research should examine similarities and differences with change programmes in other contexts, identifying the conditions under which rules as boundary objects may contribute to broader paradigm shifts; the types of rules that are most likely to function as boundary objects and the actors and resources involved in creating, sustaining or destabilising rules as boundary objects.

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