

REVIEW ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

The Importance of Place in Advancing Sustainable Mobility Thinking and Practice

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Received: 17 May 2025 | **Revised:** 6 December 2025 | **Accepted:** 11 December 2025

ABSTRACT

How, why and where people move, and the larger processes that impact these decisions, are key concerns within the discipline of geography. Yet even though substantial research on mobility has been undertaken, particularly in recent years through the ‘mobilities turn’, limited attention has been paid in geography or mobility studies to mobility’s place-based aspects. We argue that including the concept of place is critical to advance sustainable mobility. Unlocking more sustainable forms of mobility is a necessary part of climate action, progressing climate goals, and enhancing liveability and human wellbeing. To date, many sustainable mobility policies have mostly been top-down, responding to international or national imperatives and focussed on critical infrastructure development and active travel. Very often they are presented as ‘one size fits all’ solutions that fail to account for local, place-based and social differences impacting on uptake and social acceptability. We argue that mobility needs to be better understood through the lens of the lived experience as an embodied, differentiated and political process. Further, a place-based approach to sustainable mobility is required to achieve meaningful behavioural change and more explicit attention needs to be focussed on the intersection of place and mobility. For transformative policy shifts at national and other scales to have real-world impact, they must be informed by the local context. The research reviewed here supports our argument that for sustainable mobility to succeed, more attention needs to be paid to place, and the everyday aspects of movement. A place-based approach to sustainable mobility should be locally grounded, place specific, and take into account place characteristics and capabilities. We argue that for sustainable mobility policies to enable impactful change, place must be central to thinking, planning and practice.

1 | Introduction

Place is a fundamental concept within the discipline of geography and over the last decade, a place-based turn has become increasingly evident in inter-disciplinary scholarship, education, policymaking and climate action (Barca 2019; Pugalís and Bentley 2014; Keller and Virág 2022; Moore-Cherry et al. 2025). However, within geography’s mobilities turn, transport geography and mobility studies more broadly, the importance of ‘place’ as a tool to engage with mobility at the everyday scale and to view it as an embodied, differentiated and political process has been neglected. In this paper we argue that the concept of place

is essential to advancing sustainable mobility. To make this argument, we firstly consider mobility geographies as a sub-discipline, before focussing on sustainable mobility. Finally we advocate for our place-based sustainable mobility approach to improve sustainable mobility outcomes.

Mobility is a concept with a long and often loosely defined history within the discipline of geography as geographers have sought to understand how our movement through space impacts on our spatial experiences and understandings. Over the past 2 decades, the mobilities turn or the new mobilities paradigm has become increasingly visible within the discipline and

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generated an acceptance that ‘mobility is endemic to life, society, and space rather than exceptional’ (Kwan and Schwanen 2016, 243). Indeed, the centrality of mobility to human life and geographical relations has prompted Kwan and Schwanen to suggest that mobility should perhaps be included as one of geography’s core concepts, alongside space, place, network, scale, and territory. In an era of hyperconnectivity, technological advancement, global capitalist interdependency, and poly-crises, greater numbers of people are moving between places more frequently and often over longer distances. Our decisions and capacity to move are inherently political as they are intertwined with the broader socio-cultural, economic, policy and urban environments within which we live our lives. How we move, and with what impact, is of increasing concern for sustainability, climate action and just transitions.

In this paper, we suggest that work to date on sustainable mobility, has paid limited attention to these socio-cultural-political contexts and advocate for the insertion of a ‘place-based’ lens that: recognises the importance of lived experiences of mobility and transport; recentres mobility studies on individual and community lives; and moves beyond abstract conceptualisations or narrow statistical models. Transport planning and policy have traditionally been dominated by positivist and engineering approaches without considering the wider diversity of knowledges and experiences that are embedded within them. As a result, many plans and policies are perceived as disconnected, aspirational and fail to achieve the scale of change demanded. The main theoretical contribution of this paper is that we advocate for a more place-based and people-centred approach, acknowledging that those with lived experience of emplaced mobility and transportation challenges possess knowledge essential to effectively understand, address and innovate around these complex challenges. Mobility can be better understood when it is rooted in the everyday—how people travel to work, home and leisure activities. Academics and policymakers can use a place-based approach to sustainable mobility to create transformative mobility policies, in local, national and international contexts. Using the concept of place to rethink sustainable mobility can have real world impacts. New approaches to mobility policies are needed (Mehdizadeh et al. 2024) to achieve climate targets internationally, and a place-based approach is a particularly promising one for academics, policymakers and transport engineers/planners to further develop and complementary to the ‘place-based turn’ in other policy domains.

This paper has four sections. Moving towards a place-based sustainable mobility approach necessitates beginning with mobility, followed by sustainable mobility literature, before we outline our approach. Firstly we introduce mobility geographies to delineate mobility in the discipline of geography. Secondly we define the concept of sustainable mobility, including some of the current debates on the topic. Next we argue for the opportunities presented through a more place-based approach to sustainable mobility. Finally we conclude by considering what a place-based approach to sustainable mobility might entail. This paper proposes a research agenda for place-based sustainable mobility recognising that the movement of people, goods and services is not a simple or apolitical process and that greater attention must be drawn to the local and specific needs of people and places.

2 | Mobility Geographies

The movement of people has long been a concern for Geographers, and mobility geographies today is at an important juncture in its history, through the ‘mobilities turn’, which has led to more critical interrogations of the role of power in shaping people’s movement. For centuries, geographers have been interested in how and why people move and the larger processes at play - including ‘migration, transport, and trade to imperial expansion, travel writing, tourism, globalization, and cultural diffusion’ (Merriman 2020, 141). Building from the work of transportation geography, mobility geographies can, and have, made significant contributions to the discipline. The sub-disciplinary area of mobilities geographies emerged through recognition that movement is not only central to the discipline of geography but also to some of society’s biggest questions today (Cook 2018). Indeed Merriman (2009) highlights how mobilities are entangled with power relationships and urges the need to bring mobility back to the forefront of the discipline. As Kwan and Schwanen (2016, 243) have argued, ‘geography as a pluralistic discipline will benefit from further conversations between modes of conceptualizing, theorizing, and examining mobility’ (Kwan and Schwanen 2016, 243) and this complements the more traditional field of transportation geography to the mutual benefit of both disciplines (Kwan and Schwanen). To date, mobility has had a significant impact across many areas of the discipline, including not only transport geography (Cidell et al. 2021; Kwan 2013; Cidell and Prytherch 2015), but also migration (Wyss et al. 2023), urban geography (Blunt and Sheringham 2019), urban studies (Jensen 2013) environmental geography (Frändberg and Vilhelmson 2010), time geography (Miller et al. 2018), gender studies (Hanson 2010), racial geographies (McLafferty and Preston 2019), geographies of sexuality (Nash and Gorman-Murray 2014), geography and big data (Kwan 2016) and geographies of citizenship (Cresswell 2006, 2014; Aitken 2016). Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the concepts of immobility and mobility have become increasingly resonant (Bissell 2023; Hostettler Macias et al. 2022), including in rural areas (J. D. Nelson and Caulfield 2022).

As this area of geographical scholarship has expanded and deepened, so too have the methodologies used to explore mobility geographically. In attempting to better understand mobility from a geographical perspective, geographers have begun to challenge their own epistemologies, adopting new methodological approaches that enrich our understandings of mobility as both a topic of research and a way of conducting it. Innovative mobile methods emerged (Büscher et al. 2010; Finlay and Bowman 2016; Kusenbach 2003; Foley et al. 2020; Larsen 2014; Spinney 2009, 2011), specifically, walking interviews (Middleton 2010; Hein et al. 2008; Evans and Jones 2011; Belkouri and Laing 2024) and mobile ethnography (Novoa 2015; Hynes 2022; Smitheram et al. 2024; Howard and Küpers 2017). Additionally, new methodologies have also been adopted to create novel understandings of mobility, including co-creation approaches (Moore-Cherry et al. 2025), geonarratives (Bell et al. 2015) and the co-production of mobilities (Cook et al. 2016).

The mobilities turn in geography has been characterised by three key themes: firstly the recognition ‘that movement is a centrally

important geographical agent in its own right—something that is productive of places, social relations and phenomena'; secondly, an expanding engagement with mobility as a concept; and finally; an increased attention to methods of mobility (Cook 2018, 139). In their landmark text proclaiming a new mobilities turn within the social sciences, Sheller and Urry (2006, 212) described mobility as 'physical movement such as walking and climbing to movement enhanced by technologies, bikes and buses, cars and trains, ships and planes...[and] movements of images and information on local, national, and global media'. Mobility is both material and digital, but often trivialised and overlooked within the social sciences.

While Sheller and Urry's broad definition of mobility remains helpful, it is also limited in scope. Jensen (2019) has usefully conceptualised the link between the mobilities turn and the digital space, adding to the understanding of mobility as about *more* than movement. Castañeda (2020) highlights how mobility is not just a process that takes place within a city but also plays a role in the production of the city, which opens up questions of gender and mobility justice (Castañeda et al. 2024). As Merriman (2020, 141) has argued, we should also consider mobility as 'the potential of individuals or groups to move, which may usefully be approached as a kind of social capital or "mobility capital"'. Merriman contends that when exploring mobility, we need to focus not only on the movement of people through time and space, but the power or capacity that people have to create, influence, and change how they *experience* movement. Exploring mobility as more-than-physical draws attention to inherent power dimensions. Drawing on Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2011), the *capability* to move is inevitably shaped by the power relations governing our lives. Mobilities are 'caught up with a complex web of social and political relations, displaying uneven geographies of power' (Merriman 2020, 141). Here, Cresswell's argument that we need to move 'towards a Politics of Mobility' is useful, whereby 'mobility can be thought of as an entanglement of movement, representation, and practice' (2020, 17). So what therefore constitutes the politics of mobility?

Over the last decade, there has been increasing interest among geographers in a 'critical perspective on studies of transportation and mobility, or studies that take into account the power relations within systems of transportation that produce space, place, mobility, and/or identity' (Cidell et al. 2021, 1). As evident in current political discourse in different parts of the world, movement is not a neutral process. Enabling or preventing the movement of people and things is highly political and thus 'mobility is an important geographical relation and agent, one productive of power, places, peoples, justices, injustices and connections' (Cook 2018, 143). Davidson (2021) urges a radical perspective on mobility where scholars 'follow critical approaches to mobilities in tracing and critiquing relations of power within which mobilities are imbricated and through which mobility, sustainability and justice are defined' (Davidson 2021, 25). We contend that through the lens of everyday lived experiences we can better access and interrogate these power relations and critique the unfair power dynamics that create differential access to mobility. This is especially important in a context where 'mobility' is critical to addressing the challenges of climate change and climate justice at both global and local level, where changing mobility behaviours to

become more sustainable is a policy imperative, but also where these issues are becoming increasingly contentious and divisive. In the next section we review some of those current debates on sustainable mobility.

3 | Sustainable Mobility

In this section we focus on sustainable mobility, a focus of academic enquiry since the traditional focus on cars and roads within mobility studies' began to shift. Within this new domain increasing attention has been paid to more active and environmentally friendly ways of moving, including through the use of electric vehicles and more public transport. However these transformations and shifts are not without their challenges and we argue that geographers need to deepen our understanding of sustainable mobility to ensure it provides a pathway for inclusive just transitions. Inclusion of the public at all stages of sustainable mobility policy creation and implementation is needed to foster public acceptance and Banister argues that 'there is strong support for enlarging the scope of public discourse and empowering the stakeholders through an interactive and participatory process' (Banister 2008, 79). We suggest that place-based, bottom-up approaches offer one productive way to do this.

Frändberg and Vilhelmson (2010) argue that there needs to be an increased focus on frameworks for sustainable mobility, that combine socio-spatial processes and regional and urban planning structures. More recently, Brůhová Foltýnová et al. (2020) identify an implementation gap between sustainable mobility theory and how it is actioned as well as between policy aspiration and everyday living. Although the European Commission introduced the idea of Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMP) in 2013 to encourage cities to achieve more sustainable mobility and improved accessibility (Peters and Reisch 2025), each city's adaptation of a SUMP depends on their unique cultural and urban context. While they essentially embody the essence of a place-based approach, their effectiveness has been limited. Rossetti et al. (2024) argue that a significant implementation gap is evident.

Abduljabbar et al. (2021) provide a detailed review of the role of micro-mobility (e.g., e-bikes, e-scooters, and cargo bikes) but conclude that research in this area is fragmented. Looking at particular forms of everyday mobility such as cycling, or *vélo*-mobility, although they represent an alternative sustainable vision for everyday mobility, opposition remains because driving is seen 'as the essential mobility practice for the functional tasks of everyday life, while cycling is relegated to recreational and conditional mobility' (Egan and Caulfield 2024, 1). Pooley (2020, 155) has argued that 'once certain key modes of transport become established, they acquire such economic, social, and cultural significance that it is very difficult to change travel behaviour without dramatic intervention'. The dominance of the private car for more than half a century has impacts on our daily travel behaviour, as 'automobility has become the dominant aspiration of most people, and provision for motor vehicles has been a major plank of transport policies' (Pooley 2020, 154). People have also increasingly built their lives around automobility and the car has become synonymous with personal freedom. Attempts to restrict

or reduce reliance on private auto-mobility is being increasingly conjoined with infringement of civil liberties as evident in some of the debates around 15-min cities (Marquet et al. 2025) which are positioned by some as environmental ‘lockdowns’ akin to the restriction of movement associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. Theoretically and if the world was a flat plane, 15-min cities encourage people to increase their walking and cycling by geographical proximity, as ‘each citizen has quick access (15 min on foot) to essential services of various types’ (Papas et al. 2023, 544, see also Pozoukidou and Chatziyiannaki 2021). However the concept and its more flexible counterpart, the x cities concept (ranging from 20 to 30 min) (see - Adam and Schwanen 2024; Lu and Diab 2023) has not taken account of peoples capacity to cycle or walk to access services. As Willberg et al. (2023) make clear, individual experiences of mobility are not accounted for in ‘neutral’ concepts like the 15-min cities.

How we can transform transport and mobility systems to meet climate change goals and reduce social and environmental impacts (Ryghaug et al. 2023) is an emerging area of research in the field of mobility (see Merriman 2020 for an in-depth summary; Gallo and Marinelli 2020). Based on their review of the literature on sustainable mobility, Gallo and Marinelli note that the environmental aspect is not the only focus we must have. They also recognise the importance of social and economic dimensions. Mobility transitions are not experienced by all equally, and geography as a discipline has yet ‘to fully engage with a mobilities perspective, which views mobility as movement imbued with meanings that are embodied, differentiated (gendered, racialized, classed, etc.), and political’ (Temenos et al. 2017, 115). For example, Waitt et al.’s (2016) work calls attention to migrant women in Australia who felt forced to drive as the only viable transport option for them. Similarly, Nikolaeva et al. (2019) have explored how smart cycling can be used to deliver neoliberal urban agendas and advocate for a diverse understanding of cycling to create more equitable urban futures. Poltimäe et al. (2022) has focussed on rural mobility and illustrates that diversity of transport options is needed to ‘achieve the provision of environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable mobility solutions in rural areas’ (2022, 1). Bosworth et al. (2020) critique the assumed trickle down of technological advances from urban to rural areas, while Shibayama and Emberger (2023) argue that urban periphery, rural areas and remote regions need alternative sustainable mobility approaches.

As far back as 2012, Sheller argued that sustainable mobility and mobility justice need to be understood as twin pillars of a just transition. Newman (2017) suggests a ‘Mobility Bill of Rights’ as one way to achieve mobility justice that foregrounds the rights of ordinary people, rather than focussing on potentially exclusionary one-size-fits-all sustainability policies. R. Nelson et al. (2025) have recently explored equitable mobility futures and found that a continuation of past trends leads to inequitable mobility futures, whereas a future focus on integrated transport and cycling could decrease inequities. Critically their work finds that the adoption of transport solutions is not only an engineering challenge, but: ‘a *human problem* related to institutional capacity, trust, coordination, community agency and political vision’ (2025, 1). New approaches, concepts and methods are needed (Rau and Scheiner 2020), which should begin by recognising the ‘marginalisation of SSH [social sciences and humanities] in

transport planning that needs to be dealt with if we are to meet environmental, social and climate goals’ (Ryghaug et al. 2023, 771). Including more diverse insights from the social sciences allows for climate change mitigation in transport to be understood as influenced by multiple processes, to be researched using a wider variety of research methods and epistemologies, and finally for new questions to be asked (Schwanen et al. 2011). Building from this, we argue that geographers can bring a unique lens to sustainable mobility research and policy by bridging ideas of place and mobility and grounding future research at their intersection. Building on the insights of sustainable mobility debates and in particular the recognised need for new approaches, we now turn to consider what we can learn from a place-based sustainable mobility approach.

4 | Towards a Place-Based Sustainable Mobility Approach

In this section, we advocate for a new research agenda grounded in place-based approaches to sustainable mobility that embrace everyday lived experiences of mobility and transport. To achieve a more just and sustainable future, we need to rethink how mobility works in our cities, communities and societies and focus on how we can collectively transform the future. A place-based approach to sustainable mobility would account for local and social differences in the development of policy options and in the capability of both local officials and communities to make particular mobility choices and actions. To do this, the range and custodians of relevant knowledges being brought to the table needs reconsideration. Better understanding of the experience of mobility could support the creation of more appropriate and effective transport policies and plans that garner greater public acceptance.

In the sustainable mobility literature, place is sometimes considered (Janatabadi and Ermagun 2024), but often merely as location. Place ‘lies at the centre of geography’s interests’ but remains a contested concept (Cresswell 2020, 117). Since the 1970s, place has been conceptualised as more than just physical location on the surface of the earth but rather is additionally about sets of meanings and attachments. Place combines location, locale and sense of place (Cresswell 2020) as well as materiality, meaning and practice. Materiality refers to the physical structures within a place, such as its bridges, roads, and infrastructure. Meaning refers to what makes a place more than a location, and can be individual, shared or social. Practice refers to the processual constitution of place, as ‘people do things in place’, to create meaning. For Cresswell:

Places are continuously enacted as people go about their everyday lives—going to work, doing the shopping, spending leisure time, and hanging out on street corners. The sense we get of a place is heavily dependent on practice and, particularly, the reiteration of practice on a regular basis.

(2020, 117)

While there has been significant work done within geography to highlight the complexity of the concept of place (see

Cresswell 2020; Robertson 2018, for summaries), we focus on two key qualities of place in our discussion of the potential of a place-based approach to sustainable mobility: the processual and the political.

To unpack the first of these qualities, place can be understood as a process as it is constantly being shaped by the interactions, movements and practices that constitute it. As such, places are not static, they are constantly in the process of becoming (Massey 1994; Pred 1984; Seamon 2018). Understood this way, places can be viewed as ‘temporary constellations’ (Massey 2005, 153), non-permanent but integrated wholes made up of many related and shifting parts, rather than distinct, static components (Seamon 2018). This is contrary to the traditional practice of policy-making and planning which focuses on fixing particular understandings and ideas.

The second dimension of place considered here is the political; it is through place that we understand and engage the world. Places, as the ‘temporary constellations’ within which we live our lives and engage in socio-spatial relations, are experienced by people differently according to a range of social, emotive and environmental influences, including markers of identity such as age, gender, race and class. Massey proposed the term ‘power geometries’ to refer to the fact that ‘different social groups, and different individuals, are placed in very distinct ways in relation to ... flows and interconnections’ (Massey 1994, 3). Similarly, Pred (1984) argued that place is always a process and is impacted by power relations, and that the everyday scale—the scale at which people live their lives and generate personal and social meaning - is critical.

We argue that thinking through the concept of place could enrich sustainable mobilities policy development and implementation through emphasising more locally rooted solutions grounded in the dynamics of particular places. Rather than mobility policy being imposed as a top-down universal instruction to meet generic targets, attention to the nuances of place could enable more appropriate and effective policy to be created with stronger local resonance, acceptability and ultimately success.

The places from which sustainable mobility strategies are developed are important, as ‘places are key to our understanding of human mobilities and the other way around’ (Salazar 2023, 582). For example, transposing high-level mobility policies from large metropolitan areas to smaller urban settlements will neither be appropriate nor generate support if they do not address differential and scalar barriers and challenges. Rather than being transferred directly, the mobility of policy itself requires nuancing through more fine-grained understandings of particular places, their needs and potential. Gottwald et al. (2024) call for a stronger understanding of sense of place within the place-mobilities nexus which would include accounting for power dynamics and considering the temporalities of place and mobilities. They argue that more diverse research methods are required to consider the nexus of place and mobility ‘as a complex and multifaceted two-sided relationship’, where both sense of place and mobilities ‘exist in an uneven landscape of power’ (Gottwald et al. 2024, 2 and 5). The complicated relationship between mobility and place was also explored by Di Masso et al. (2019), who retain a focus on place

and how places are affected by mobility, rather than considering mobility and place as intertwined, ‘a co-constitutive relationship, making it difficult to disentangle one from the other’ (Salazar 2023, 582).

While acknowledging the complexity of the challenge, we argue that a focus on the politics and lived experiences of sustainable mobilities provides an interesting potential avenue to a deeper understanding of the place-mobilities nexus. Hansen and Coenen (2015) have argued that although place has been acknowledged in sustainability literature, there has not been enough work done to conceptualise how place affects sustainable transitions. In a recent paper, Moore-Cherry et al. 2025 (p. 15) caution that ‘transitions must be seen within the wider history of regional social and spatial inequalities and thus an agonistic approach is critical in shaping visions for transition to a new future’. They advocate for the potential of a place-based approach to not just develop and address policy goals in an appropriate way, but also to work on rebuilding trust between public institutions and community groups. The political is therefore front and centre in place-based approaches to mobility and other key policy domains and can be a crucial lever to redressing existing power imbalances in who has the capability to move. By whom, and how, place-based policy is created is also worthy of attention as the means and capability to engage is also entwined in socio-spatial, economic and other relations. While some research has been conducted utilising place-based mobility approaches, we contend that further research that draws more fully on the ‘political’ is a promising avenue of sustainable mobility research.

5 | Conclusion

In an era where climate action and policy demands new mobility behaviours and choices, we argue that mobilities for/of sustainability must be locally rooted and place-specific in order to be effective. A place-based approach to sustainable mobilities thinking, policy and practice could help tackle the emergent disconnects between the worthy aspirations of mobility policy and the reality of movement in our everyday lives. This will be critical to achieving climate mitigation goals. It is through mobility that the local and global come into dialogue—global sustainability imperatives are realised through local action, but meaningful local action can only occur where the global is nuanced through the specifics of particular places. Intellectually, it is clear that transport emissions need to be cut, but Skjølsvold and Coenen (2021, 5) urge us ‘to zoom out and to situate discussions about accelerating climate and energy transitions as part of a broader set of societal concerns which ultimately entails asking which kinds of societies we want to be part of co-producing’. Sustainable mobility narratives and policies need to have a richer focus on place and be locally grounded in the societies and communities that are creating them and on which they strive to have influence. As a discipline concerned with exploring complex processes as they manifest in specific places, geography and its practitioners have a key role to play in supporting appropriate and more just sustainable mobility planning and practice through new research foci and more participatory approaches.

Place is crucial to the discipline of geography and a place-based approach to mobility opens opportunities to recognise the politics of mobility as an embodied, differentiated and political process, affected by power dynamics. This paper contributes to debates on sustainable mobility by identifying the potential of a more place-based approach to sustainable mobility to inform academic debates, policy development, and enhanced community outcomes. Following Gottwald et al. (2024), we concur that place and mobility needs to be studied in conjunction with each other, as connected and co-constitutive processes. At its core, geography as a discipline is about the relationships between people and place and the 'mobilities turn' has demonstrated that movement is a critical lens through which this can be examined. But movement is not apolitical; people's access to mobility, or lack thereof, influences how they engage with the world (Merriam 2020). The approach we are suggesting accounts for the nuances of places and advocates for both recognising and valuing direct experiences of mobility and transport as important sets of knowledge and input. This people-centred and place-specific approach disrupts the power geometries inherent in transport planning and policy, and through community empowerment encourage greater acceptance of sustainability measures. Through this new approach to sustainable mobility, the achievement of just transitions for all can move from policy aspiration to everyday reality.

Author Contributions

Rachel McArdle: led the analysis and writing of this paper. **Dean Phelan:** contributed to the idea generation, analysis and writing of this paper. **Niamh Moore-Cherry:** contributed to the idea generation, analysis and writing of this paper. **Madeline Gan and Brian Caulfield:** contributed to the idea generation and feedback to the paper's revisions. **Niamh Moore-Cherry and Brian Caulfield:** secured funding for this project.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Research Ireland for funding our work and for all the participants who helped inform the insights discussed in this paper. Thank you to the reviewers and editor who gave us helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.

Funding

The Researchers who wrote this paper are funded by Research Ireland, under the Sustainable Communities Challenge.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval has been awarded for this project.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

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