

Gloucestershire Living Lab

The initiative

The Gloucestershire Living Lab is one of 11 Living Labs that participated in the EU ROBUST Project.

ROBUST Project (2014-20) was a European research project comprised of 24 European transdisciplinary partners from both research and practice focused organisations.

ROBUST's key priorities, and challenges related to the speed of development of both urban and rural habitats and the impact that development has on food security and the environment. There is consensus that the synergies between rural and urban areas need to be redefined so that local farming communities see the gains from the anticipated growth and benefit through the co-creation of solid opportunities. Among those challenges was the question of how rural-urban governance could facilitate the emerging circular economy agenda to bring about greater resource efficiency.

The project was funded by the Horizon 2020 funding programme, and between 2014-2017, around €500 million was allocated to funding nearly 100 multi-actor projects.

The project brought different actors together to facilitate the exchange of good practice, identify and deploy the roles of different stakeholders, set common goals, and engage in activities with a view to growing smart and circular solutions that are jointly supported. Their remit is to drive innovative solutions through multi-stakeholder participation and co-creation across the network (Figure 1).

Multi-level governance

The food system is complex with a diverse range of participants who each have a role to play or are impacted by it. It calls for an interactive form of governance in the process of policy formulation and implementation. Multi-level governance is interactive, in that it forges trans-national co-operation and exchange, and involves all stakeholders in the process of policy formulation. It recognises that no one actor will have complete knowledge for effective governance and goes beyond traditional forms of participation that are about informing or consultation.

The University of Gloucestershire is the research partner affiliated with Gloucestershire County Council, the practice partner, to form the Gloucestershire Living Lab (LL). However, this was a participatory project involving a wide range of stakeholders and communities of practice (Figure 2).

Dr Daniel Keech of Gloucester Living Lab Research Partner explains that: ***“Living Labs have been successfully applied in software development which tries to address pressing social challenges (such as resource efficiency) and, increasingly, as ways to help citizens devise, improve or operationalise public services. Within ROBUST, our challenge is not to invent new ICT tools, but to improve governance structures and decision-making in Gloucestershire.”***

The challenge facing the Gloucester living lab was how public procurement could be reimaged to solve the challenge of food chain localisation, with the

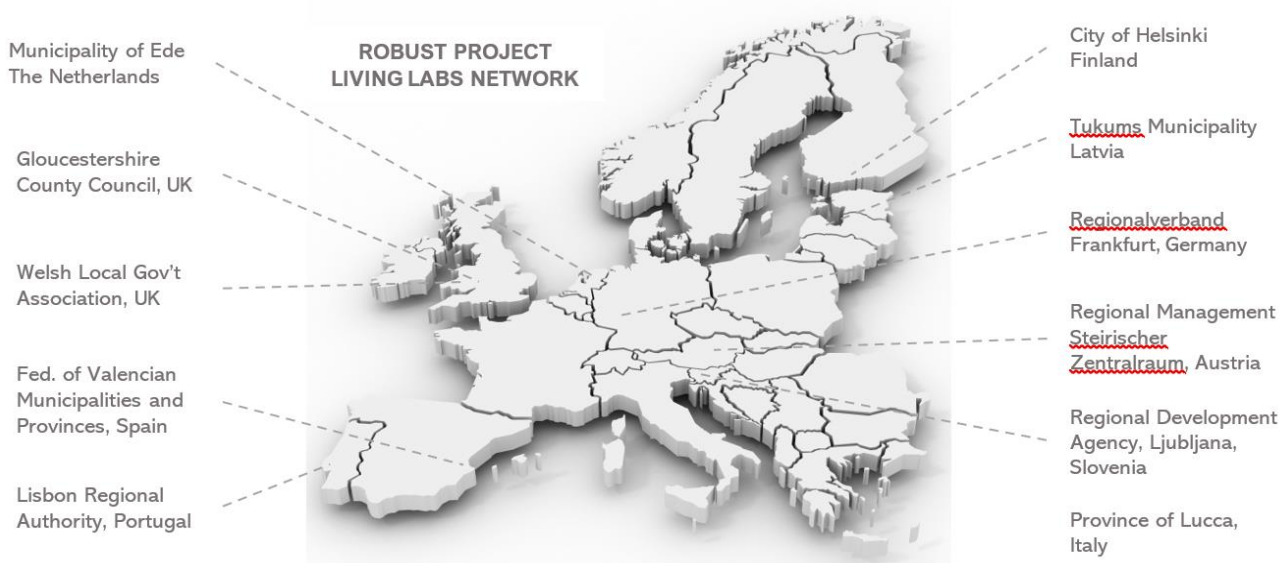


Figure 1: Robust Living Labs Participating Cities.

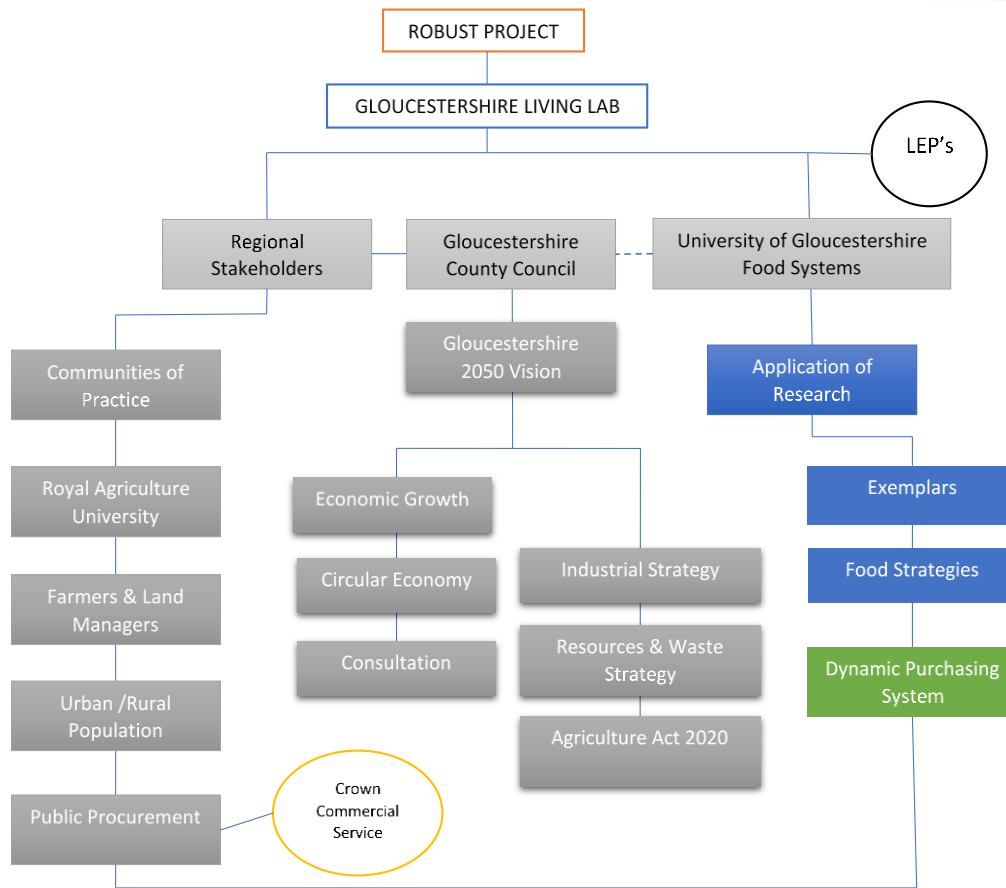


Figure 2: Chart of GLL Ecosystem.

additional benefits of improving the environmental performance of the food system, which in turn impacts transportation efficiency and lowers greenhouse gas emissions. The public sector food chain is an important catalyst and innovation arena to achieve this. to cultivate a series of stakeholder-led action groups based around specific challenges.

Dynamic Purchasing Systems

“A Dynamic Purchasing System is a public sector sourcing tool for services and goods (Public Contracts Regulations 2015). It is similar to an electronic framework, but new suppliers can join at any time. This is an electronic way of sourcing which means that both suppliers and customers do not need any special IT equipment. It therefore eliminates unnecessary activity for the supplier up front.” Crown Commercial Service Heat & Electricity Generation Assets Dynamic Purchasing System

Gloucestershire living lab collaborated with regional stakeholders to delve into how rural-urban governance could enable a circular economy across three pillars of:

- Sustainable Food Systems
- Ecosystems Services
- Business Models and Labour Markets

Key areas of experimentation in the Living Lab are agri-industrial innovation and local sourcing of food for public procurement

The Gloucestershire living lab business support programmes and governance measures had evolved locally through public consultation, workshops, and negotiation, particularly tied to the ‘Gloucester 2050 Vision’ which explores avenues for urban expansion and economic growth allied to environmental enhancement.

Through its quarterly policy meetings, the Living Lab has been setting the strategic direction and actions for the ‘Gloucester 2050 Vision’.

What does success look like?

The living lab informed the development of the Gloucestershire Food Strategy, for the localisation of public procurement (Figure 3). The Dynamic Procurement System (DPS) taskforce have been successful in rewording the next 5-year school food tender document as an incentive to introduce DPS-sourced food in the supply contract.

Daniel Keech notes that: ***“The County Council is about to issue a new tender for the school meals contract. The living lab’s vision of success is that the wording of the new contract will reflect their support for the DPS system, for example, if we could get the wording for the new contract to say that we would like interested parties to hook up to this DPS possibilities at the South West Food Hub regional trial.”***

The key benefits of the DPS system

DPS allows smaller-scale producers to supply the public sector without the drain on resources that generally accompany major tenders. Living lab activity is now about connecting Gloucestershire producers with a regional trial for DPS via the South West Food Hub.

The living lab helped secure the location of the DPS pilot. In supporting a localism / social value model DPS enables suppliers to bid for business either locally, thereby reducing waste and costs.

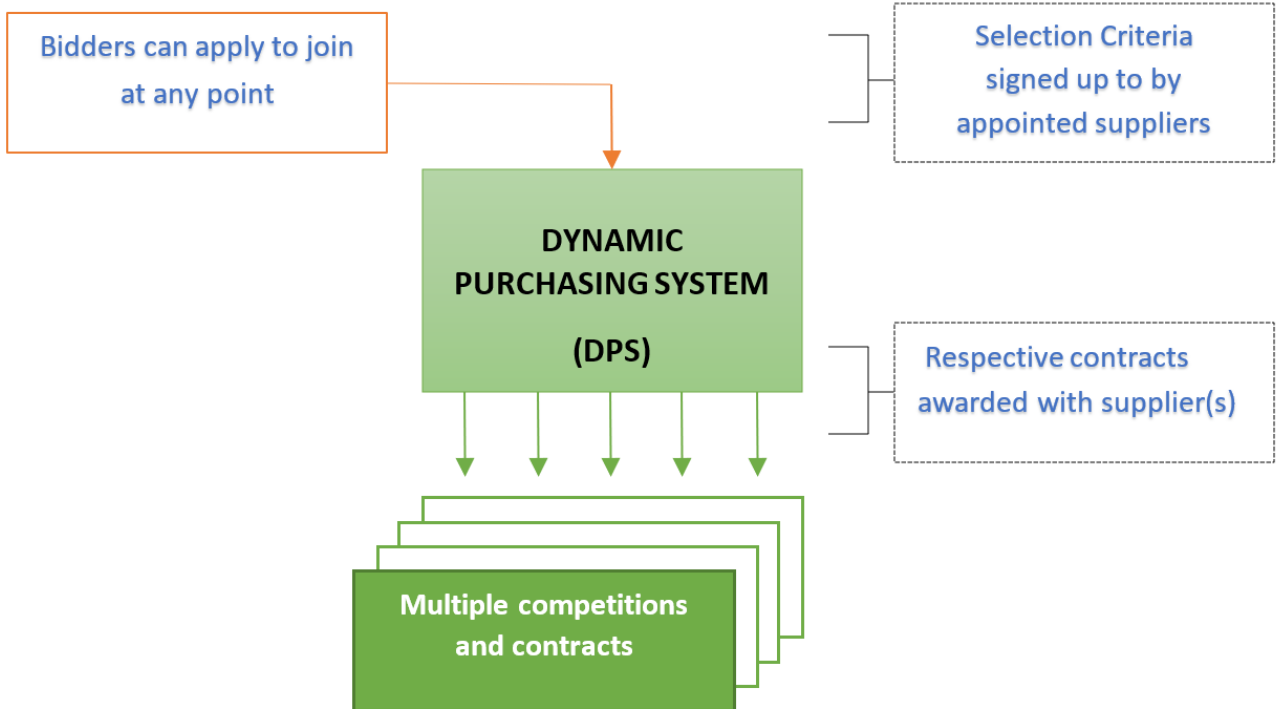


Figure 3: Chart adapted from Crown Commercial Service HELGA DPS.

Challenges

Brexit and the Covid-19 restrictions have challenged the project in terms of timing. A particular challenge is the need to balance plans for the predicted significant urban growth with environmental protection and sustainable modes of mobility. The high expectations of local citizens were often frustrated by the difficulty of managing the change process.

Sandra Šūmane, a researcher at the Baltic Studies Centre in Riga, Latvia, notes: ***“As a researcher, I find the living lab component of the project more real life driven [...] What actually happens during the joint project work, is often beyond initial expectations and plans – and that is the challenge and excitement of the living lab.”***

Councils can be very slow moving and a complex and slow land use planning system was gradual in its response to the changes needed to create a sustainable environment, with those who reject change able to delay or block progress. Figure 2 maps the living lab ecosystem in Gloucestershire.

Key recommendations and longer-term impacts

Dr Daniel Keech notes: ***“The benefits generated by the living lab process is the subject of research currently being carried out by ROBUST, with papers being published later in the year with a good degree of learning. The living lab process is useful, because you are trialling, so ... go for it! Throughout ROBUST, there has been a very clear duality between both research and practice partners, and this has been a very positive relationship. Researchers are there to help, not to lead, so there are particular roles where perhaps the councils could take a lead role as they know the ecosystem and the people on the ground. That makes for very good working relationships.***

“If you can hook up your experimentation to existing policy frameworks, that helps too, because you can get political buy-in.”

Although the ROBUST project came to an end in 2020, the impact of the 180 multi-actor projects on circular economy resource efficiency is still being felt, as over 100 of these projects have already started, touching on agriculture, forestry, and rural development over the seven years of Horizon 2020.

An evaluation of the ROBUST project and the publication of related research papers is due in 2021.

