The Power of Place

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Contents

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Introduction: Living, Leading and Belonging in Place

By Robin Tuddenham

Robin has been Chief Executive at Calderdale Council, West Yorkshire, since June 2017, and Calderdale's Accountable Place Lead for the NHS West Yorkshire Integrated Care Board since July 2022. He is responsible for leading both the Council's and Calderdale Cares Partnership workforce, supporting system leadership across the area with public, private and voluntary sector leaders in support of Calderdale Vision 2034, and overseeing a major capital programme across the borough's market towns.

Robin chairs West Yorkshire Chief Executives Group and is joint Senior Responsible Officer for Improving Population Health for NHS West Yorkshire Integrated Care Board. He is Yorkshire and Humber Lead Chief Executive for Migration/Asylum and Workforce.

In October 2024, Robin was elected President of Solace (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and senior managers) commencing his two-year term in January 2025, having been Solace spokesperson for Economic Prosperity and for Health and Social Care in recent years. His priorities for the sector during his term are focused on 'People, Place, Purpose and Equity', building a stronger narrative for the foundational work colleagues do every day in their places.

Robin has been a Local Government Association Peer for twenty years, providing support to other local authorities, most recently, the London Borough of Islington and Oxfordshire County Council. He was Chair of the West Yorkshire Local Resilience Forum from 20218-2022 through the pandemic.

Robin was previously Director of Communities and Business Change for Calderdale, leading the redevelopment of the multi-award-winning restoration of the Piece Hall and new Central Library in Halifax, and prior to that worked in local government in East London, the Probation Service and the voluntary sector. Robin is an honorary life member of the Faculty of Public Health, and a Trustee of Belong: Cohesion and Integration Network, and was a secondary school governor for seven years.

Place is not a fixed point on a map, nor is it defined by boundaries alone; it begins with lived experience.

It's as intimate as the street you walk down every day and as expansive as the nation you belong to. Place is personal, and yet it is also collective. It operates on multiple levels—in memory, in relationships, in responsibility, and in identity.

I am from Norwich. I now live in West Yorkshire. I work in Halifax. I am English. I am British. Each of these statements is true. Each holds meaning. And each shapes how I understand myself, my sense of belonging, my role, and my contribution to the communities around me.

This report on Place – the first of four due to be released during my time as President of Solace –, is an exploration of those layers. It brings together reflections and provocations from across the country and across disciplines, to ask: what does 'place' really mean? And how can we positively shape, protect and evolve our places in a time of intense challenge and change?

When we surveyed our members and asked what 'place' means to them the answers were as layered and textured as the places themselves. Some began at the hyper-local—describing neighbourhoods, connected streets, schools, shops and homes, imbued with memory and meaning. Others pointed to wider footprints: towns, boroughs, regions and counties, each defined not just by geography but by community identity and shared experience. Place, many said, is where we live, work, study, or visit—but it's also how we feel about those spaces: a sense of belonging, affection, loyalty, or pride. It's physical—our built and natural environment—, it's social and economic—encompassing the people, cultures, and challenges that define a locality—, and it's emotional too. It is home, context, community and connection—shaped not only by maps and infrastructure, but by the bonds between people and the stories they tell. One survey respondent summed it up best when they simply said: "Place is everything."

So what makes a place work? According to our members, there is no single formula but some themes shine through. Thriving places are defined by connection—between neighbours, institutions, and sectors—and a shared purpose that unites public services, businesses, voluntary groups and residents alike. Successful places are built on strong relationships, active communities, and a collaborative spirit where people see beyond individual interests toward common goals. They have clear identities, but also shared values, pride, and mutual respect. The physical environment matters too—well-curated public spaces, good infrastructure, and access to nature, amenities, and cultural opportunities all contribute to quality of life. But above all, places that work are those where people feel they belong, where there is trust between institutions and the community, and where innovation and inclusion go hand in hand. As one contributor noted, "What really makes successful places is people"—working together, animated by care, purpose, and belief in the place they call home.

"Place is not a fixed point on a map… it's shaped not only by maps and infrastructure, but by the bonds between people and the stories they tell."

More than 20 contributors working within and outside of local government have kindly written for this report with the aim of reflecting the sheer breadth of what place encompasses and what makes a place work. Our contributors also provoke thoughts about what enables places to flourish, and why some are held back. Amid all this rich tapestry one common thread is clear: councils play a critical role in all that is good (and not so good) about a place.

And in this lies both opportunity and responsibility. For those of us in local leadership, 'place' is not a neutral word. It carries power. It confers duty. And it demands care.

As councils and their partners we don't just administer place, we help to narrate it. In the stories we tell about—and to—our communities. In the vision we hold for their future. In the investments we make. In the values we prioritise. All of that can be a source of great hope and creativity, but it can also be a source of tension, especially where resources are stretched, and where some voices are historically less heard.

Can we ever truly capture a place? Perhaps not fully – indeed, given all that 'place' is and means there are inevitably thematic gaps not covered within this report. But let's use this as a conversation starter and a challenge to keep seeing place in all its richness and contradiction. To work harder to hear those who feel excluded or dislocated. To be ambitious for what our places can become, while being honest about their challenges and limitations. And to never lose sight of the fact that the places we lead are places we live, too.

I would welcome your reflections and thoughts on this report. But, more importantly, I would invite us all to consider how we can hold space for lived experience, foster belonging, and commit ourselves to the hard, hopeful work of building places in which everyone can thrive.

"Can we ever truly capture a place? Perhaps not fully—but let's use this as a conversation starter and a challenge to keep seeing place in all its richness and contradiction."

By Barry Quirk CBE

01

Places and People Matter the Most

Barry Quirk worked in London's local government for 45 years, almost 30 years of which he spent as a chief executive. First at Lewisham (from 1993 to 2017) and then at Kensington & Chelsea (2012 to 2022) which he joined to manage the response to the Grenfell fire tragedy in North Kensington. Barry has been both President and Chair of Solace. He has a PhD in political and social geography and is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.

"We live in places and places live in us. Places give identity and meaning to our lives."

Place is the starting point. Place matters on a fundamental and personal level - to all of us; as individuals, as families and as communities. We live in places and places live in us. Places give identity and meaning to our lives.

The contours of the British landscape, its rural character, its cities and townscapes and its unique coastlines, have inspired British art, sculpture and literature for hundreds of years.[i] And the interplay, throughout our history, of popular sentiments about the supposed virtues of 'the country' and the alleged vices of 'the city', has given colour to our nation's complicated culture and politics.[ii] The fabric of place, its rich history and its differentiated geography, gives texture to our lives: to our origins, our journeys and our imagined destinations.

People in places

Our perspective of place is dynamic. It is shaped by our age, our personal life events, and broader social changes. As we move through different stages of life, our relationship with place, and what we expect or value from it, naturally evolves.

Many people live within twenty miles of their birthplace. I live just four miles from mine. For those who live close to their place of origin, their lives are written into the landscape in which they live, and the landscape is written into the memory of their lives.

But most people do not stay in the same place. They move from place to place - for work, for family, for education and for many other reasons. Their life journeys take them through many places; some near, some far. In fact, of the 69 million people living in the UK, around 11 million were born overseas.[iii] That is one in every six people who live here.

In the past four years, long-term international migration to the UK has been at unprecedented levels. According to ONS: "This has been driven by a variety of factors, including the war in Ukraine and the effects of the post-Brexit immigration system. Pent-up demand for study-related immigration because of travel restrictions during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic also had an impact."

Close examination of why people immigrate to the UK shows a range of work-related, study and family reason.[iv] This rise has recently led the Government to tighten the rules for entry into the UK in an attempt to drastically reduce in-migration.

One-third of international migrants have settled in London. With 40% of the 9 million people living in the capital having been born overseas; in the 2.5 million living in the 10 cities and towns with the highest proportions of people born overseas, it averages 33%; and for the rest of the areas of the UK, with 58.5 million people, it averages 11%. There is no local authority area in the UK where less than 2% of the population was born overseas.

In England, around 3.7 million people move from one local authority area to another every year. And of these, 1.4 million people move from one region to another.[v] The region with the largest net gain from this internal movement of people is the South West - which experiences an increase of around 27,000 people each year. In contrast, London loses to the other regions, around 100,000 people each year - most of them young families. That's one million people moving out of London every decade.

For many people, the memory of past landscapes and places where they once lived may be as ingrained as the everyday image of where they now live. Whether it is someone from Warsaw now living in the West Midlands, or someone from London now living in the South West.

As a nation we share a strong sense of place. And not just because we live on an island. But because we are much more densely populated than other nations in Europe. What happens in one place, spills over into neighbouring places through, what economists call, negative and positive externalities. This has a crucial bearing on our economy and our politics.

England has 434 people per sq km; this compares to 241 in Germany, 201 in Italy, 122 in France, and just 94 in Spain. Only the 18 million Dutch residents in the Netherlands live at higher population density than do people in England.

Place and community

Living at high population density in an open society inevitably leads to more discussion about how space and place are best shared. Not just about, "how many new homes should there be and where should we build them?" There are currently 30 million homes in the UK, the Government's intention is to build another 1% each year for the next five years. Where they finally get built will be the end-product of many thousands of local public discussions and agreements.

Living at high density requires a clear sense of how the 'common good' is defined locally. Is this piece of land to be held in common; and if so, should it be shared by one or several community groups or should it be kept available for all to use? Helping people to find ways to agree and disagree peacefully through everyday dialogue is an essential civic capability.

But local public dialogue is not just about how to facilitate the new. It is not simply a struggle over place and a claim for resources. It is also about how an everyday 'moral operating system' gets developed in each locality - based on the ordinary virtues of trust, tolerance, forgiveness, respect and compromise.[vi]

Councils support and strengthen communities, but they also help to create a bridge so that civic dialogue is maintained between differing communities - of place, identity and interest. Dialogue that promotes mutual respect and the traditions of sharing - and not just of public resources and amenities, but of customs, culture, food, sport, and face-to-face conversation.

Unfortunately, these issues of civic stewardship, community building, and the revival of local democratic practice are rarely at the heart of debates about the future of local government. The discussion is too often about what should happen inside the council and what should happen between different councils.

Let's face it, policy arguments about institutional change, by horizontally combining authorities or by vertically linking them, are rather meaningless to most people. Indeed, from the outside, these arguments look little more than turf disputes over power, rights and influence between competing local political elites. There is a sense that the public are reduced to being spectators.

Place and politics

Almost 100 years ago in the UK, the Equal Franchise Act of 1928 gave women the vote on the same terms as men - at the age of 21. The first general election with universal suffrage was the 1929 general election. Over 76% of the electorate voted. Since then, there have been 25 UK general elections. In only two of these elections was the voter turnout below 60%. The first was in the year 2000; the second in 2024.

Of the 29 million people who voted in the 2024 general election, around 10 million voted for a different political party than they voted for just five

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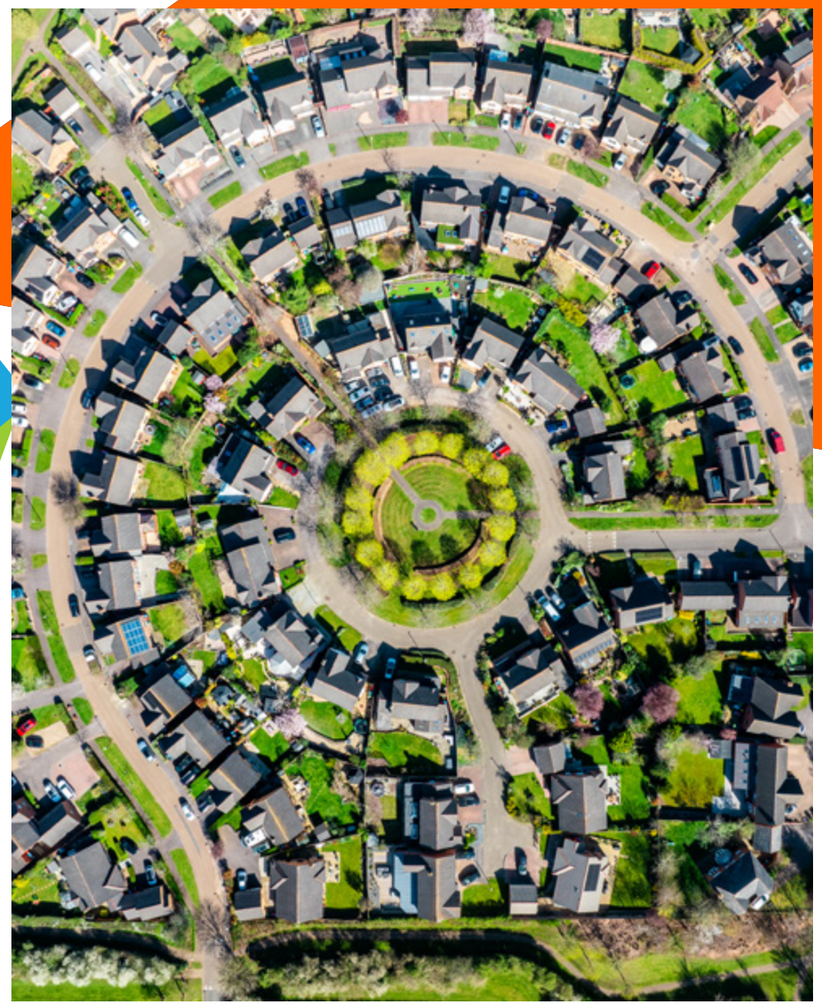

years earlier in 2019. The extent to which this represents the changing policy positions of the political parties or the shifting sentiments of the electorate is a moot point. It may be the electorate isn't responding to the political parties but that the parties are chasing a dynamic electorate.

One problem is, however, very clear. Where in the mid-20th century there was a strong degree of deference to formal authority, now in the early 21st century there appears to be growing indifference. The decline of deference is to be welcomed. But in an open democratic society, the incline of indifference is something to be worried about.

Since the turn of the millennium, the gap between electorates and those elected, including the appointed public managers who serve them, has widened considerably.[vii] This has led to discontent with incumbent governments and increasing degrees of democratic disillusionment. As a result, all political parties are considering what they need to do to bridge the divide and better address the core concerns of the electorate.

The rise of more populist political responses is a global trend, but it has a strong presence in Britain. And it is now strongly present in local government. The recent local elections in England have introduced a new politics to many County Halls and civic centres. For some councils this may come as a significant departure - in terms of policy priorities and their programmes of action.

But this turn in political control of some councils will also generate new responses and may herald a new dynamic of competition of ideas in local government. For politics is arguably subject to Isaac Newton's third law of motion - "for every action there will be an equal and opposite reaction."

Changes in style and changes in substance will undoubtedly occur throughout the sector - as needs intensify and as finances become ever more straitened. But with at least four more years of a Labour government it is likely that the largest imprint on local government over the near future will stem from changes to government policy and the changing pattern of nationally determined resource allocation.

The sense of a place

For the late Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, place is not just a backdrop but a living participant in the shaping of identity and history. In this way, landscape, with its layers of myth, memory, and political conflict, becomes a site of both personal and collective meaning.[viii]

Kerri ní Dochartaigh is a modern author deeply influenced by her roots growing up during 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland.[ix] Her book, Thin Places is an evocative account of life and landscape around the River Foyle in Derry/Londonderry and beyond. She recounts an old Celtic saying that Heaven and earth are only three feet apart. But in 'thin places' that distance seems even shorter.

These ‘thin places’ make us feel that we are part of something bigger than ourselves, as if we are held in a place between worlds, beyond experience. Few people on the British side of the Irish Sea will have the experience of a place forged in the intensity of sectarian community violence. But we all know places that are rich in personal meaning - places that literally lift our spirits, and that restore our sense of ambition and hope. Each of us has places that we cherish. Places where we find joy or contentment, and in which we can rediscover hope and happiness.

Place is central to the purpose of local government. But the current frame of local public policy seems too closely tied to the case for economic growth and regeneration. Arguments currently swirl about spatial scale or ‘footprint’ and about the numbers - of councils, councillors, and citizens. Not enough of these arguments are tethered to purpose and to function. And too few are linked to the distinctive capabilities, the comparative advantages, and the vitally important connectivity of places.

Of course, councils need to improve the opportunity and prosperity of their places. But they need to do this by investing in their people, especially children and young people, as well as in the social capital that thrives in the communities in their areas. And they need to help those communities develop everyday civic virtues so that strangers become neighbours, and neighbours can become friends.

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How Place Shapes Outcomes for Children and Families

By Ade Adetosoye CBE

Ade is the Chief Executive Officer of Bromley Council. Prior to joining Bromley Council, Ade worked in several senior positions and transformed services in both the City of London, Waltham Forest Council and Lambeth Council. Ade is Solace’s lead spokesperson for Children & Families, as well as a Trustee/ Governor of Coram, the United Kingdom’s first ever charity dedicated to supporting the adoption of children. He is also a Freeman of the City of London, a unique historical title that dates back to 1237, as well as being a Liveryman of the Haberdashers’ Company, an ancient merchant guild.

02

When we talk about "place", it's easy to focus on economic growth, infrastructure, or the built environment. But for children and families, place is something more fundamental. It's the streets they grow up on, the schools they attend, the parks they play in, and the safety, or lack of it, that surrounds them. Place is formative. And too often, it's destiny.

Across the country, where a child is born still plays an outsized role in shaping their life chances. Educational outcomes, long considered a matter of individual or school performance, are in fact deeply tied to the context of place. Access to good early years provision, stable housing, safe public spaces, reliable transport, and health services—all vary significantly by geography. These are not just service considerations; they are the building blocks of a child's ability to learn, participate, and thrive.

In places experiencing entrenched deprivation, children are more likely to start school already behind their peers in key areas such as speech, language, and emotional development. Despite best efforts, that disadvantage more often than not compounds over time.

This, in turn, affects economic outcomes. Post-16, young people in more disadvantaged areas are less likely to access higher education or quality apprenticeships. They are more likely to enter insecure, low-paid work or find themselves not in education, employment, or training.

The economic story is only part of the picture. Place also plays a critical role in shaping social outcomes. Poverty isn't just a matter of income—it's experienced through housing conditions, food insecurity, access to cultural and recreational activities, and exposure to crime. For too many children, particularly those in care or on the edge of care, the cumulative impact of living in an area with few opportunities and limited community resources can be profound.

We see the consequences in the growing number of children presenting with complex needs, the rising demand for mental health support, and the increasing strain on safeguarding services. There is a troubling and well-evidenced link between place-based disadvantage and the likelihood of children being drawn into harmful situations, including criminal exploitation, gang involvement, and substance misuse.

What's often missing in these places is not just opportunity but safety and a sense of belonging. Children need to feel secure in their communities to flourish. They need trusted adults in their orbit, whether that's family members, teachers, youth workers, community leaders, or a combination of some or all of these. They also need spaces that are designed with them in mind—places to be curious, creative, and connected.

This is where local government's role as a steward of place becomes so important. Councils are not just service providers; they are conveners of the

"The outcomes we care about—educational success, economic participation, safety, wellbeing—all begin and end in place."

systems and networks that shape daily life. They influence the quality and quantity of childcare, the nature of housing developments, the availability of local employment, and the accessibility of support services. Most importantly, we are the tier of government closest to children and families, with the unique ability to see and respond to the specifics of local need.

We know that early intervention is key. But we also know that early intervention cannot happen without stable, long-term investment in the services that enable it—children's centres, family hubs, targeted youth support, and joined-up data systems. And investment is only part of the answer.

What's also needed is a place-based strategy for children and families. One that recognises the interdependence of services, systems, and environments. This means thinking across traditional boundaries: joining up education with public health, housing with early years, and community safety with family support. It means working with local anchor institutions, the voluntary and community sector, and—crucially—young people themselves, to design services that are responsive and rooted in the lived realities of place.

Good examples already exist. In some areas, councils have worked with schools and local employers to develop youth employment pathways tailored to the local economy. Elsewhere, place-based safeguarding partnerships are successfully reducing exclusions and the risks associated with serious youth violence. But these successes remain too patchy, too dependent on short-term funding pots, and too vulnerable to shifting central priorities.

We must be more ambitious. Every child, no matter their postcode, should grow up safe, supported, and hopeful about their future.

That won't happen through isolated programmes or rhetoric. It will happen when national government trusts local leaders to shape their own strategies; when neighbourhoods are given a strong, consistent voice in the services they receive; and when we shift our focus from simply managing demand to getting ahead of problems before they present themselves and genuinely improve outcomes.

The ask is simple, but vital: give councils the tools, the funding, and the trust to build the kind of places where children can thrive. Because in the end, the outcomes we care about—educational success, economic participation, safety, wellbeing—all begin and end in place.

Combined Authorities and Place: Harnessing the Heft

By Amy Harhoff

Amy Harhoff is the first permanent Chief Executive of East Midlands County Combined Authority (EMCCA). Amy joined EMCCA from her role as Corporate Director for Regeneration, Economy, and Growth at Durham County Council, where she led major initiatives for the past four years. Her extensive leadership experience also includes senior roles at Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, South Yorkshire Combined Authority, and Transport for Greater Manchester.

03

"There are multiple complexities on why our places haven't seen the improvements in the economy"

Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) across the county are working amidst an increasingly diverse spatial and political landscape – as many more shapes and sizes come forward, we can start to see how the model works in all varied place contexts. Where initially MCAs were established in metropolitan areas in the North and West Midlands, we now have a blended model, varying in size – from the smallest population in the newly established Hull and East Yorkshire of 600,000 to the West Midlands of nearly 3 million.

The English Devolution White Paper published last year, set a pathway to create mayoral combined authorities (described as Strategic Authorities) across England, alongside an ambitious programme of local government reform for local councils (described as principle authorities), which will see all combined authorities partnered by unitised local government operating at scale. With 15 MCAs across the Country (and more to come), 8 of the MCAs are core city MCAs (like mine in the East Midlands). MCA's cover North and South, host global cities, great cities, county and coast, urban and rural – the model is being tested and working outside of monocentric regions.

But why does it work for different places? One reason is that MCAs not only act as a convener and major actor on resources and policy within a region, but they also work cross-boundary on key issues and priorities. For example, the East-West Midlands Compact focuses on major industrial strengths such as our automative industry. We have also seen the Great North, focused on trade and investment and research. There are many more examples of MCAs striv-ingfor common purpose drive agglomeration, align on key issues and work coherently for the benefit of their communities.

Another reason we work is acting as a regional family of authorities, harnessing our collective worth - the MCA in the East Midlands is a mayoral led authority, with four constituent councils and partnership with 15 districts. The East Midlands is a strong region of 2.3 million people, a £60bn economy and 80,000 businesses, a region where our local authority partners and wider business community worked hard to secure a devolution deal and Mayoral Authority for the greater good of our place.

Despite our heft in the East Midlands, we are at the top of the wrong league tables - for child poverty, low skills and educational attainment. The 2023/24 HMT data showed that transport investment in the East Midlands was £386 per capita compared to the national average of £687 per capital. There are multiple complexities on why our places haven't seen the improvements in the economy: a lack of coherence (or proximity to) markets, whether its transport, our ability to secure venture capital, public capital, plans and strategies such as transport. We had not, that is, harnessed our heft.

Mayoral leadership of combined authorities gives the authority for the institution to act on behalf of place and people – a single democratically elected leader, elected directly to govern the CA and drive growth. In the East

Midlands we have a once in a generational system leadership opportunity to ensure our collective alignment on place, alongside the re-structuring of the Integrated Care Boards, national government relocation which, for the East Midlands includes Great British Rail in Derby City, and strengthen this further through becoming an established Mayoral Authority and delivering local government reform.

EMCCA has already started to change how we think about place. Whilst some of the initial focus has been on governance and administration, we have a local growth commission led by Andy Haldane and in parallel prepare a mission control of growth plan, transport strategy and spatial vision (to name a few). We are setting out how we build from the travel-to-work areas, labour markets, and infrastructure networks that cut across our traditional local government borders of Derbyshire/Derby and Nottinghamshire/Nottingham. That whole-region approach over our 5,000 square kilometres has already helped us articulate our Vision for Growth – launched at UKREIIF, it is our bold plan to transform the whole region, creating 100,000 new jobs, deliver 52,000 new homes, and add £4 billion to the economy.

We have seen our hard yards to date rewarded, with considerable investment through the Spending Review including £2bn transport investment and a share of £2.5bn in fusion technology addition to our devolution programme, investment giving confidence to move and grow – and now we must deliver.

For areas like ours, place must be seen for what it is – not a single dominant urban core, but multiple interconnected towns, cities, and rural areas with distinct identities but shared challenges and opportunities. Combined authorities like EMCCA operating at scale give us the opportunity, and privilege, to help lead these places not just as institutions but as systems – investing in connectivity, skills, housing, and innovation in a way that works for both cities and surrounding towns and villages.

Strategic place leadership requires joining up these systems across sectors and tiers of government, enabling a more holistic approach to inclusive growth – in Team East Midlands we are really starting to harness our heft.

By Dr Hans Rocha IJzerman, Nick Lancaster, and Dan Wainwright

04

The Architecture of Belonging: A Roadmap for Local Action

Dr Hans Rocha IJzerman is the founder and CEO of Annecy Behavioral Science Lab (ABSL), He leads a team working with governments, and other organisations to develop effective measurement tools and interventions transforming research into actionable solutions that deliver measurable impact.

Nick Lancaster is the Programme Manager at Neighbourly Lab. An organisation working to understand how to enable people to better connect.

Daniel Wainright is a Research Fellow at the University College of London Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose and the Portfolio Lead at Camden Council.

"When people feel connected—to each other, to institutions, to place—they are more likely to engage civically, rely less on crisis services, and contribute to resilient communities."

Belonging is not just a feeling—it's the glue that holds thriving places together. It shapes how safe, welcome, and invested people feel in their communities. Yet, despite its vital role in health and civic life, belonging is rarely planned for with the same rigour as transport or housing. It's treated as elusive—even intangible. But it isn't.

Belonging can be observed, measured, and built—just like physical infrastructure. And that means local authorities can lead in designing places where everyone, regardless of background or postcode, feels they truly belong.

Why Belonging Varies—and Why it Matters

We know from decades of research that social connection improves mental health, reduces anxiety, and even extends lifespan. But belonging—the sense of being accepted, valued, and part of a local community—doesn't follow a one-size-fits-all formula.

Our recent work across London boroughs confirms that the drivers of belonging differ sharply. What fosters connection in Camden may fall flat in Westminster or Waltham Forest. This means any strategy must begin with a deep understanding of local context—and a flexible, adaptive approach.

A Roadmap: Understand, Monitor, Act

At Annecy Behavioral Science Lab and Neighbourly Lab we've found that belonging can be strengthened through a structured, three-step approach.

First, understand what belonging means locally. In Camden, we used a machine learning technique—Conditional Random Forests—to analyse data from the 2021–2022 Survey of Londoners (see our summary at Psychology Today). This analysis revealed four key predictors of belonging: housing security, length of residence, neighbour contact, and public space use. But the numbers were only a starting point. Ethnographic follow-up could allow us to

interpret these patterns more deeply: Why weren't some residents using parks? What inhibited neighbour connections? What role did trust or perceptions of safety play? This blend of quantitative insight and lived experience enabled us to co-create locally grounded solutions that reflect how people actually live.

Second, monitor belonging systematically and responsively. Traditional surveys offer a useful snapshot, but they often miss how different groups—or individuals—experience connection. While we can draw on well-established tools from psychology and social science to measure belonging, these instruments often rely on assumptions that may not hold across all contexts.

That's why the next frontier is more adaptive measurement. We can begin by identifying the best-fitting instruments from the literature to anchor our assessments. But to ensure equity and relevance, we must also recognize that belonging is not experienced the same way by everyone—what matters to a young private renter may differ radically from what resonates with a long-time leaseholder or a recent migrant.

In this light, the goal becomes not just to measure belonging, but to tailor measurement tools that better reflect the lived realities of different populations—and, ideally, individuals. Emerging approaches in psychometrics and data science are making this possible. They allow local authorities to move beyond static surveys toward more responsive, context-aware insights—helping ensure that strategies for improving belonging are as inclusive and targeted as the communities they serve.

Third, act on insight to build connection. Many of the most promising interventions are not expensive—but they must be grounded in research and refined in dialogue with those they serve. While interventions like public space activation or welcome teams for new arrivals offer promise, their success depends on tailoring them to local realities—an approach many local authorities already take. In Camden, for instance, our data identified key predictors of belonging—including housing stability, neighbour contact, and public space use—which align with existing community-led efforts like Kentish Town Connects and One Kilburn. These initiatives stand out not for rigid structures or repeated rituals, but for their open-ended, trust-based approach: investing time with people in place, building relationships slowly, and adapting to community input.

Still, promising isn't the same as proven. To genuinely understand what works, we need rigorous, real-world evaluation. That includes using randomised controlled trials, where feasible, to test whether belonging-focused interventions deliver their intended outcomes. Staggered or stepped-wedge rollouts—where a programme is gradually introduced across different sites or neighbourhoods—offer a powerful way to balance learning and fairness. These approaches enable robust comparisons while still ensuring that all communities eventually benefit.

Done well, this kind of experimental research doesn't just tell us what worked in the past—it helps improve what we do next. It supports adaptation, course correction, and, critically, public accountability.

A Shared Responsibility: Local Authorities, Employers, and the Public
The case for belonging is both moral and strategic. When people feel connected—to each other, to institutions, to place—they are more likely to engage civically, rely less on crisis services, and contribute to resilient communities. Belonging supports public health, social trust, and long-term cost savings.

But these outcomes don't emerge by accident. They require investment in the everyday architecture of connection—rituals, relationships, and systems that meet people where they are.

This includes the workplace. Too often, belonging at work is treated as a matter of internal culture—perhaps a task for HR or a line in a well-being strategy. But workplace belonging cannot be reduced to isolated activities like onboarding sessions or away days. It requires a strategic shift—one in which relational well-being becomes core to how an organisation operates, retains talent, and supports performance.

And it's not just an internal matter. Businesses benefit from the infrastructure, stability, and social fabric that local authorities help sustain. They rely on safe streets, accessible transit, strong services, and thriving neighbourhoods. In turn, they have a civic responsibility—and a clear incentive—to invest in local belonging.

That investment can take many forms: partnering with community organisations, sharing spaces, supporting local events, or co-developing initiatives that bridge the workplace and the wider community. When businesses contribute to the social fabric around them, they help build places where employees feel rooted—not just in their roles, but in their neighbourhoods.

Belonging as a Civic Asset
If we are to build places that truly support connection, local governments, civil society, and employers must work together. Belonging is not a soft outcome. It is a measurable, actionable civic asset—and like any asset, it must be built, maintained, and co-owned.

With the right data, with community voices at the centre, and with institutions willing to test and learn in public, we can move beyond temporary fixes toward lasting change. We can design belonging—not just wish for it.

It Starts on the Doorstep: Rediscovering the Power of Local

By Sophie Hosking

Sophie is the Strategic Director for Neighbourhoods at Cornwall Council, with oversight of all the Council's community and regulatory services as well as the Fire and Rescue Service. Sophie has a strong track record of championing local devolution, building resilience and capacity in our communities, and working with voluntary and community sector along with town and parish councils. Sophie was formerly Chief Executive of South Hams District Council & West Devon Borough Council. She has also been very involved in community affairs in Cornwall, previously as the Chair of Governors for a large secondary Academy School, as well as the Chair of Trustees for the Cornwall Food Foundation, and she is currently a trustee of the Cornwall Community Foundation. Sophie is also Solace's Deputy Policy Lead for Economic Prosperity.

05

"Neighbourhoods may not always get the headlines, but they are where resilience lives and where place really begins."

What does "neighbourhood" really mean? For most of us, it's not a technical designation, it's a feeling. It's where we say we're from. It's where we instinctively turn to in times of celebration or crisis.

For me, it's the farming community where I've lived with my husband for a long time. For others, it's a fishing town, a mining village, a dockyard district, or a suburban street. But whatever form it takes, neighbourhoods are the foundation of place—and we ignore them at our peril.

Each neighbourhood has its own origin story. Some grew up organically around a port, a trade route, or an industry. Others, like the planned garden towns of today, are still trying to find their identity. You can't masterplan belonging. Identity develops over time, shaped by quirks in layout, shared histories, and common struggles. Cobbled alleys, village halls, sports clubs, pubs; these features, and many more, may seem small but they give neighbourhoods texture and soul.

As we centralise services and widen administrative boundaries, the need to stay rooted in the hyper-local becomes more urgent. One-size-fits-all approaches don't cut it. Understanding the issues, assets, and aspirations are different in different places—and being trusted to act on it—is central to meaningful local government.

Take Cornwall. We cover a vast rural area with over half a million residents, and no two places are the same. Our approach has been to apportion the county into twelve community area partnerships, each bringing together parish and town councils, voluntary organisations, and public services. These partnerships set their own strategic priorities based on what matters most locally—be it transport, youth provision, or climate resilience. From there, we align our resources and officers to support that vision. It's about facilitation, not control.

But even these twelve areas are larger than the true hyper-local. That's where the magic of neighbourhoods comes in.

One powerful example is Cornwall's library service. Facing budget constraints, we could have shuttered local branches and operated a single central library to satisfy our statutory obligations. Instead, we turned to the community. Through a process of asset transfer, volunteer recruitment, and local ownership, 24 libraries were handed over to town and parish councils. Not

only have these libraries stayed open—they've flourished. They're now warm spaces, community hubs, craft centres, and quiet refuges. Opening hours have increased, and community use has soared.

Another example, entirely outside council control, is the Newquay food bank. Linked into local churches, orchards, cooking schemes, reuse networks, and advice services, it has built an ecosystem of support that reflects the true spirit of place-based resilience. That kind of hyper-local coordination—rooted in trust and relationships—can't be replicated from the top down.

So what do neighbourhoods bring to the wider place-making agenda? First and foremost, people. Every neighbourhood has its "doers"—the unofficial leaders who organise events, keep the lights on at the village hall, and check in on their neighbours. Finding and nurturing these local leaders can't be forced. They often emerge in response to a specific need: a dangerous junction, a flood risk, a lack of youth activities. When they do emerge, our job is to back them. That means removing obstacles, not adding them. Bureaucracy, safeguarding rules, and digital-only systems can all become barriers. We must stop treating these individuals as liabilities and start recognising them as the assets they are and support them to do what they're passionate about.

Technology can also be an unlikely ally. In my own rural neighbourhood, a simple WhatsApp group has become a lifeline. Whether it's for spotting suspicious vehicles, sharing lost dog alerts, or promoting parish walks, it's drawn people closer. We've seen an uptick in participation at events, and even those who were previously disengaged now feel connected.

But none of this is possible without trust. Central government must trust councils. Councils must trust people. This trust must be backed by funding. In Cornwall, we used the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to seed community capacity-building—funding feasibility studies, engagement sessions, and volunteer infrastructure. Sometimes these projects stall or even fail. But often, they unlock a chain of additional investment, skills, and volunteerism that multiplies the impact of the original spend many times over. Central government should keep backing this kind of investment, not just in short bursts but through multi-year settlements that build confidence and sustainability.

Finally, we must be honest: the impact of hyper-local work can be hard to measure. Prevention doesn't always show up neatly in KPIs. But we know what it looks like when it's missing—fractured communities, disengagement, and mistrust. So we must keep advocating for the invisible work that neighbourhoods do every day to hold society together.

When asked what gives me hope, the answer is simple: people. Daily I see acts of quiet brilliance. Neighbourhoods may not always get the headlines, but they are where resilience lives and where place really begins.

Power to the People: Why the Next Place-making Renaissance Must Start from the Bottom Up

By Jon Rouse

Jon Rouse is Chief Executive of Stoke-on-Trent City Council. Previously, he was Chief Officer at the Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership, co-ordinating the delivery of Greater Manchester's strategy for the transformation of health and care services. Other previous roles include: Director General for Social Care, Local Government and Care Partnerships, Department of Health; Chief Executive, London Borough of Croydon; Chief Executive, Housing Corporation; Chief Executive, Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment. He has also held a wide range of non-executive positions, including on the Board of the Department of Health and as Chair of Shaw Education MAT. He currently sits on the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent ICS Board as a partner member. He is the executive champion for children's health. Jon is also currently the Solace national lead for Housing, Planning and Infrastructure and is a member of the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods.

06

"The greater success stories are where local government has worked with local communities to harness physical, economic and social capital."

In 1999, I was Secretary to the recently elected Blair Government's Urban Task Force led by the late Lord Rogers of Riverside.

In the opening chapter of our final report, 'Towards an Urban Renaissance', we wrote these words: "Local government should be based upon principles of subsidiarity, mediation and partnership. It should combine strong strategic leadership which can provide long term vision and consider in a holistic way the needs and opportunities of its geography, with the engagement of its people." Looking back, it's not a bad definition of the idea of local authorities as place-makers.

We've come a long way as a sector in the last quarter of a century. Back then, our report drew mainly on overseas examples, from places like Barcelona, Portland and Amsterdam. Now we can point to loads of brilliant success stories of where municipal leadership, sustained over time, has made great things happen across the UK.

And this story is not only about the regeneration of our major cities, although that is a remarkable story in itself. Perhaps the greater success stories are where local government has worked with local communities to harness physical, economic and social capital in unlikelier places, unleashing the power of local community. Under the banner of programmes like New Deal for Communities, Big Local and the Coalfield Communities Campaign, sustained investment and the sharing of power brought about evidenced positive change in ex-industrial heartlands and the fringes of secondary towns and cities.

Now local government faces a fresh place-making challenge. After close to 15 years of sustained austerity and increased geographical polarisation between the 'haves' and 'have nots', there are hundreds of communities across the UK crippled by the toxic combination of embedded deprivation and lack of social capital. There are left-behind places and, for this Government, they are mission critical as without intervention they will cause a sizeable economic drag on the prospects for sustained growth.

The Independent Commission for Neighbourhoods (ICoN), of which I am a Commissioner, has shown empirically that there are hundreds of these mission critical communities across the country. Yes, there is still a concentration of these places in the ex-industrial heartlands but they are also found in coastal towns, in some rural market towns, in military towns as well. Some are already

in Mayoral areas, others are not, meaning that any solution for this Government cannot only be delivered through the favoured lever of Mayoral devolution. And even where Mayors are seen as the conduit, there is a large distance between a Mayor sitting in the centre of a city region, and the needs of a small neighbourhood on the edge of an industrial town in the hinterland of that region.

The good news is that there are already brilliant examples of local government stepping up to the challenge of supporting and enabling these neighbourhoods to find their feet and recover. In West Wigan, working with a local Community Interest Company, the local authority is enabling a powerful network of bottom-up provision to bring a sense of self-efficacy back to the people living there, based on the principal of mutuality. In Stoke-on-Trent we have amazing partnerships with local trusted organisations working in some of our poorer communities such as Middleport Matters, Urban Wilderness and the Portland Inn Project. And we are not afraid to bring in trusted national partners where they are willing to embed and commit for the long-term, as has been the case with the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, Local Trust and Thrive at Five.

Elsewhere, I love the work that has been going on in Ladywood in Birmingham, using doughnut economics principles to enable local people and businesses to express what is important for them and to consider with decision-makers how inevitable trade-offs in priorities are made. In other places, civic leaders have woven new uses into the build heritage, breathing new life into run-down structures and spaces. Examples I admire include Kelham Island in Sheffield, Stockport Town Centre and Plymouth's Royal William Yard. The danger, of course, in these and other cases is that regeneration can almost be too successful so that local people consider these places are no longer for them, creating a new divide. That has to be avoided.

Following the Spending Review, it will be interesting to see how much Government reflects on the lessons of the past and the existing best practice in determining how it will empower local leaders to embark on the next wave of place-making. At the heart of the Government's approach should be a deal – empowerment of local elected leaders to control the resources and the investment needed to reconnect the left-behind neighbourhoods to economic opportunity combined with a firm expectation that power is not to be hoarded, but rather given away so that the communities themselves can take control of their destiny. Subsidiarity, mediation and partnership – they made sense to me as guiding principles at the end of the last century, and I believe they still hold good today.

The Glue That Holds Us Together: Why Social Cohesion Can't Be an Afterthought

By Kelly Fowler

Kelly is the Chief Executive of the Belong Network, and she draws on over 25 years' experience in roles leading the development of cohesion policy and overseeing the research and delivery of programmes that challenge hate, counter extremism and promote dialogue across the UK and beyond. Kelly has worked nationally and internationally from grassroots to government level and her experience includes her role as Director of Programmes at the Tim Parry Johnathan Ball Foundation (formerly the Peace Foundation), co-chair of the European Commission's RAN network and Policy Advisor to the Mayor of Greater Manchester.

07

"This country can no longer pretend that divisions do not exist in the societies and communities we live in."

The importance of place should not be underestimated. For most of us, where we live is home, and therefore local authorities play a critical role in helping ensure that we feel safe, happy, and respected in those homes. Those working in local authorities are often driven by their own passion for place making and communities. Doing the best for the communities they serve is what drives their decision making. Declining budgets from central government and the challenges they present for decision makers means that local government is faced with endless challenges about where investment must and should be made.

Cohesion is an agenda that we all know matters. Cohesion is about the very fabric of our society - the glue that holds us together. But as with so many difficult to measure 'prevention' focused policy areas, it can be the first thing to be squeezed and pushed down the agenda when times are tough fiscally. Too often we fail to notice its absence, until it's gone.

The violent disorder that shook the country in summer last year following the horrific murder of three young girls was a tragic reminder that we cannot afford to take our eye off this agenda.

The targeting of Muslims, asylum seekers and visible minorities made these the worst outbreaks of racist violence seen in the UK for decades. This was the most serious disorder since 2011 with areas such as Belfast, Tamworth and Sunderland seeing considerable targeted acts of violence including attempted murder and arson. The setting on fire of a hotel housing asylum seekers in Rotherham was a shocking and visible reminder of how serious things had become.

The violence, hate, and division that many of us saw transformed the places in which we live and work into hostile environments. As outlined in Belong's report, After the Riots, this country can no longer pretend that divisions do not exist in the societies and communities we live in; we have to acknowledge this and work together to build the bridges that bring the communities living separately in the same place, back together. One of our recommendations to government is the development of bespoke, locally tailored cohesion strategies that respond to the specific wants and needs of different communities. Looking back to the riots of 2001, the innovative, hands-on responses by Bradford, Burnley, and Oldham offer valuable lessons that councils across the country could learn from.

The community-led strategy adopted by the councils crossed divides and brought people together. The councils achieved this by opening up more opportunities for mixing, providing young people with the chance to learn about the cultures of their peers, and by creating a shared sense of belonging that denoted the places in which the residents lived. The focus was on tying an individual's sense of self to the place they called home, entrenching a greater sense of belonging and eliminating the us-and-them attitude that had prevailed for so long. However, this was not possible without the help, energy, and commitment of local partners, such as the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector, faith leaders, and education leads, who all used their positions in different communities to act as conduits of trust and cohesion.

Drawing on local assets enabled the councils to craft a bespoke response that reflected the needs, wants, and desires of all residents. It is likely therefore that this investment and sustained commitment to cohesion efforts over time enabled Bradford, Burnley, and Oldham to avoid the fate of other near-neighbours that did not fare so well during last summer's riots.

The Community Recovery Fund (CRF) formed part of the government's response to the riots providing much-needed funding support for the councils most affected by the disorder. Belong is working with communities and public sector partners in nine of the towns and cities that fell victim to the disorder, and we are already seeing promising results from our work.

In the North East, we have facilitated dialogue in some of the most seldom-heard communities and have given residents the opportunity to have their say – and be heard. In the Midlands, we are facilitating 'difficult conversations' workshops equipping residents and people from different backgrounds to engage in debate that avoids division. We are working with partners from anchor institutions and public and private sector partners to review policies and approaches to cohesion that can help support meaningful policy and strategies. As outlined in our report, Beyond Us and Them, the return on investment for local authorities is significant. Our poll of 39,000 respondents found that those living in local authority areas with investment in social cohesion reported 10% greater trust in national government and 19% stronger social connection than those in areas without such investment.

But it is not just post-riot towns and cities that are investing in cohesion; Manchester City Council and Calderdale Council are local authorities that 'get it' and have sustained a place for cohesion in their local priorities. Belong has had the privilege of working with both councils on their local engagement and the development of their cohesion strategies. Over time, both authorities have focused on developing place-based identities that help foster a sense of belonging and pride. Their cohesion strategies build on existing strengths and assets with a focus on local, place-based interventions that take account of the needs of specific geographies and communities in their areas.

10.6% of Calderdale's residents enjoy higher levels of trust, and the residents feel 16% safer than the rest of West Yorkshire, and 78% of the population feel a strong sense of belonging. Similarly, 68% of Manchester's residents feel that their local area is one where people look out for each other, and 71% feel a strong sense of belonging. These figures contrast the recent poll conducted by More in Common, which found that 50% of Britons feel disconnected from society. These figures alone are evidence that social cohesion is an investment worth making.

At Belong, we are proud to partner with local authorities across the UK to make cohesion a priority. As we deliver with partners across the country our work is showing us that if we are really serious about tackling the issues that threaten to divide us, we need to build much greater resilience to narratives of division and resentment. We know that this will require strong political leadership at a national level, but also at a local level, to set a strategic lead and tell a positive story about cohesion. This means place-based strategies and cross-sectoral partnerships aimed at strengthening communities and building our social capital.

We have so much to build on and so much to fight for – the time is now for us to ensure this work is firmly on the agenda.

Places of Learning, Partners in Place

By Professor Jane Robinson

08

Jane is Pro Vice Chancellor and sits on Newcastle University's Executive Board leading on Engagement & Place Strategy, focussing on building partnerships to enhance the societal benefit of the university. She is also executive lead for sustainability and social justice. Previously, Jane was Durham University's Chief Operating Officer with strategic oversight of operations and external engagement. Before taking up her position at Durham, Jane was Chief Executive of Gateshead Council, playing a central role in the culture-led regeneration of the borough. Jane has also held leadership positions in the cultural sector, including Director of External Relations at Arts Council England. Jane is a Deputy Lieutenant for Tyne & Wear and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. She chairs the North East Confederation for British Industry (CBI) and Insights North East and holds a range of non-executive positions, including the Centre for Cities, the Centre for Life in Newcastle, North East Museums, and Energy Central Campus in Northumberland.

"In the face of significant pressures, it could be tempting for universities to retreat to 'core business'... and yet, it is that civic engagement that… fulfils our mission to benefit society."

The idea that universities play a role in their places is not new. My own institution, Newcastle University, was founded by the pioneers of the Industrial Revolution nearly 200 years ago to train much-needed doctors to improve public health, to innovate and provide engineers to support the burgeoning local industries which would shape the future economy.

A lot has changed since then and our university has evolved in response, but we have maintained our core mission to benefit society through our world-leading research and education. We have demonstrated what the "quadruple helix" model means in practice – connecting academic, public, private sectors with civil society - and played a leading role in the Civic University movement.

The late Lord Bob Kerslake – former CEO, Sheffield City Council amongst many other roles – led the Civic University Commission report in 2019, providing a blueprint for strengthening connections between universities and their places. Nationally, over 70 universities have developed "Civic University Agreements" setting out how they will work with their local authorities and other partners to benefit the communities they serve.

Newcastle and Northumbria Universities have come together to develop our Collaborative Newcastle Universities' Agreement (CNUA). Newcastle is home to nearly 60,000 students – one of the highest ratios of students to permanent residents of any city in the UK, and the Newcastle East parliamentary constituency has the highest contribution from international students (net impact £264m in 2022) of anywhere in England. Newcastle also has some of the highest levels of child poverty and lowest levels of university participation in the Country. As part of the CNUA, we co-fund Into University based in a community centre in the East End of Newcastle, which has supported over two thousand young people and their families resulting in progression rates to university rise from 12% to 74%. We also recognise our role as anchor institutions through, amongst other things, our commitment to the Real Living wage.

We know that universities are drivers of economic growth and social mobility. We only need look at the recent analysis from London Economics highlighting that every £1 of public funding for higher education generates a remarkable £14 return. If we take a step back and consider the purpose of universities, historically the focus was on knowledge creation. The concept of a 'civic university' introduced the idea of knowledge sharing. As we move into a new era – a new generation of university perhaps - we're seeing a shift towards the co-creation of societal value and collaboration in every sense within broader ecosystems.

Newcastle Helix is a good example. A partnership between Newcastle University, Newcastle City Council, and Legal & General, Helix has transformed the former Newcastle Brewery site to become a global exemplar of urban innovation and inclusive, sustainable development. Helix brings together students, academics, businesses, and new homes for local people, as well as the offices for our new Mayoral Combined Authority. A magnet for inward investment, the £350m mixed-use development has created over 4,000 jobs.

While industry partnerships often take centre stage, universities' collaboration with a diverse range of partners – spanning culture, sports, and the voluntary sectors – plays a vital role in enriching the heritage and identity of our communities. It is this broader engagement that makes our universities – and the towns and cities we call home – such vibrant and diverse places to live, work, study and visit.

We see the huge importance of working with cultural organisations. For example, our partnership with North East Museums, including the Great North Museum: Hancock and the Hatton Galley provides a bridge for engagement with thousands of local people of all ages and background – benefitting local communities and enhancing our own education and research.

Like others, the university sector is facing growing challenges - a volatile policy environment, unsustainable funding model, and wider global geo-political instability. In the face of significant pressures, it could be tempting for universities to retreat to "core business" and focus on teaching and research, rather than "nice to have" civic engagement. And yet, it is that civic engagement that enhances our student experience, ensures our research has impact, and fulfils our mission as a registered charity to benefit society.

We must also be mindful of the wider socio-political context. A recent letter from Education Secretary, Bridget Phillipson, to sector leaders, set out an expectation that any increase in funding will be tied to universities demonstrating their contribution to economic growth, widening opportunity, employability, and civic mission. Globally, recent experience in the United States shows us that attention must be paid to the (perceived) relevance and value of universities to the wider community.

One could argue, therefore, that it is both a business and a moral imperative for universities to develop new approaches with Government, regulators and other partners to strengthen our focus on place, deepening our partnerships with local government and the communities we serve. What Bob might have called "enlightened self-interest".

Right Here! Right Now!

09

By Adrian Friedli

Adrian was appointed Interim Executive Director of Homotopia in September 2024. His previous roles included Director of Visual Arts & Literature for Arts Council England, Yorkshire, Director of Digital Project for Arts Council England, Director of Artlink in Hull, and Director of Crescent Arts in Scarborough. As a creative consultant, Adrian was Programme Lead in the team that bid successfully for Hull to be UK City of Culture in 2017, and Network Coordinator for Yorkshire & Humber Contemporary Visual Arts Network. He is Interim Co-Chair of Bloc Projects in Sheffield.

As the UK's longest-running LGBTQIA+ arts organisation and festival, Homotopia's essence and impact lies in its sense of place, its rootedness; quintessentially Liverpool and Scouse.

The strap line to Homotopia Festival's return in November 2025, Right Here! Right Now! celebrates the fact that activism begins in our homes, our venues, our neighbourhoods, our bodies. It happens right here in Liverpool, a city with a long history of grassroots organising, working-class solidarity, and cultural dissent. It happens right now, in real time, as communities rise to defend one another in the face of hostility.

Homotopia's genesis and longevity are intimately connected to support and partnership with Liverpool City Council, and its longstanding commitment to arts and culture being at the heart of planning for the future of the city and now the wider city region. Also by recognising and valuing the contribution arts and culture make to wider social agendas such as inclusion, wellbeing, safe and vibrant communities. Liverpool City Council's support for Homotopia, annual revenue support through its Culture and Arts Investment Programme (CAIP), undoubtedly strengthened the case for Homotopia becoming the only Queer-led arts organisation at the inauguration of Arts Council England's National Portfolio Organisations programme in 2012, and Homotopia's continued presence in the portfolio.

The pilot Homotopia Festival in 2004 was commissioned by Liverpool Culture Company's Creative Communities programme, in response to Liverpool's successful bid for European Capital of Culture 2008 and appreciating the importance of including the LGBTQIA+ communities in the cultural offer at a time when Liverpool did not have a Pride. As we develop the programme for the 21st Homotopia Festival, where Queer art and culture meet, the urgency and exigency to ensure LGBTQIA+ communities are visible, welcome, and celebrated is all too evident.

A project that directly responds to this as part of the festival is 'Residents,' a co-commission with Open Eye Gallery (also CAIP funded) and Liverpool City Region Combined Authority's Culture Programme, of Queer photographer Ming de Nasty. Ming is inviting members of the LGBTQIA+ community in Liverpool, young and old, to have their portraits taken, through an open call in collaboration with Sahir (House). Twenty-one life-size portraits will be exhibited: sixteen displayed throughout the city centre on fabric installations, and one in each of the Boroughs beyond the centre, showcased at Merseyrail stations in partnership with Merseyrail.

For a relatively small arts organisation like Homotopia, a project of this ambition and scale is only feasible through collaboration and partnership, the prospects for which are greatly enhanced and actively encouraged through Culture Liverpool's convened CAIP network, and membership of Culture Network LCR. For Homotopia, part of the ambition for 'Residents' is to advocate

and evidence the relationship between creative communities, visitor economy and LGBTQIA+ communities is a positive driver for change.

'Culture Makes Liverpool,' Liverpool City Council's new Cultural Strategy, is currently out for consultation. It reaffirms Liverpool's cultural ambition and sets out a bold vision for how culture can strengthen communities, support individuals, celebrate identity, and drive economic growth. The overarching 'Liverpool 2040' plan, developed by the Liverpool Strategic Partnership and convened by Liverpool City Council, includes 'An Exciting and Distinctive City' as one of its key goals. This creates an enabling and engaging strategic framework within which Homotopia can develop its plans for supporting Queer artists and reaching and advocating for LGBTQIA+ communities.

Set within a broader context, One Creative North — the Northern Creative Corridor — has released a report advocating for devolution and collaboration as key drivers of national growth, with a focus on strengthening the creative industries and nurturing talent in the North. In this context, Homotopia is proud to be a partner organisation of Queer Arts North, a network of arts organisations strategically supporting LGBTQIA+ arts, artists, organisations, venues and festivals across the North of England. Coordinated by Hartlepool-based Curious Arts, Queer Arts North also functions as a peer support network, looking to sustain a breadth of offer across the North, while partners navigate varying levels of core funding and local support. Could there be partnerships between local authorities that would greatly improve the prospects of such a sustainable breadth of offer?

Before working in Liverpool, my experience of culture led initiatives with different local authorities (Hull's bid for UK City of Culture in 2017, Sheffield's bid for Great Exhibition of the North in 2018, Waltham Forest's bid for London Borough of Culture in 2019, Warrington's bid for UK City of Culture in 2021) highlighted the unique position councils hold in understanding their local context and being able to foster and facilitate partnerships, across sectors and disciplines, to deliver positive change for their communities.

Homotopia's existence and experience is testimony to the positive results of this position being acted on, catalysing creative identity in growing the local economy, and at the same time championing a culture of openness and welcome when communities are feeling vulnerable and under threat.

Homotopia Festival 2025 will centre on hyper-local resistance, art made in and for the community that surrounds us, but equally looking at what hyper-local resistance looks like elsewhere. As well as partnering with local organisations such as Unity Theatre, FACT, The Bluecoat and Everyman & Playhouse, the festival will embrace art that exists outside of institutions and traditional spaces - murals on walls, DIY gigs in basements, poetry in cafés, Drag in the streets, protest banners on lamp posts, stickers on bathroom mirrors. It will speak to 'Liverpool 2040' vision of Liverpool as place 'where no one is left behind.'

Toon to the Moon – Every Place Has its Story, What's Yours?

10

By Pam Smith

Pam joined Newcastle City Council as Chief Executive in January 2022 having been Chief Executive at Stockport Council since 2017. Prior to that, she was Chief Executive at Burnley Council and has also worked for the Audit Commission and in the private sector. Pam is the Solace lead spokesperson for Economic Prosperity and a Fellow of the RSA. In April 2024 Pam was appointed Visiting Professor of Practice at Newcastle University, within the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology.

"We have an opportunity now to enter a new era in which the role of places as economic drivers is recognised."

"Town halls are obvious places to find capable managers," The Economist declared on 24 May 2025. I agree — but we are also so much more. We are the place shapers of our local economic engine rooms and communities and if resourced properly we can significantly contribute to UK Plc.

How does this work in practice? And how can we match our European and North American counterparts when it comes to economic impact? First, ambition. UK Plc decides what slice of global economic growth we want and in what sectors. In other words how fast do we need to grow to help our citizens thrive and be successful.

For example, the global space economy is projected to grow from $600 billion to $1.8 trillion over the next decade — an annual growth rate of approximately 9%. This sector will drive innovation, technological advancement, and help deliver sustainability on Earth, while enabling further human exploration beyond it. In Newcastle, we recognised this opportunity early. The North East Space Skills and Technology Centre (NESST), due for completion in 2026, will create world-leading technology and act as a beacon for research, innovation, and skills development. NESST will house internationally renowned experts and place the city region at the forefront of the UK's space economy. This is Toon to the Moon. Its success is built on strong partnerships between government, private industry, and the forward-thinking Northumbria University.

The Government's Industrial Strategy, which identifies eight high-growth sectors and prioritises innovation, reflects this level of ambition. Yet, the role of towns and cities in delivering the vision remains undefined. What we must not do is stick with the status quo. The traditional top-down approach to economic growth driven by the centre has simply not worked. In the 30 years following the Second World War, our average annual growth rate was around 3.6%, dropping to roughly 2.1% in the following three decades. However, since the start of the financial crisis in 2007, this has fallen to an average of just 0.2% per annum.

We have an opportunity now to enter a new era in which the role of places as economic drivers is recognised by central government, making this a statutory duty and establishing economic development as a core function of local authorities.

Government should also seize the opportunity to devolve 10% of its £22 billion Research & Development budget to local authorities. Critically, councils already have mature relationships with universities and the private sector but devolving a small proportion of the R&D pot will also enable local authorities to seek match funding on a national and international scale and build an inclusive economic approach.

We must therefore take a global view and harness the ability of local government to fully participate in global trade. Many of us already work with the Office for Investment to promote our places globally but with more backing we could do – and more importantly deliver – so much more.

The core ingredients needed for places to become powerhouses of scalable innovation are there, but with more flex over local spend we have the potential to supercharge future growth by unleashing innovators right across the country who will lead us into the Fourth Industrial Age.

The message is clear: local places must be empowered to lead by setting their own economic visions — rooted in their strengths and future opportunities, focused on inclusive growth and ensuring residents are not left behind. Most importantly, it must be a vision in which people can see themselves living and working in.

A key part of economic growth is good quality housing. Housing is an investment, not a cost. Without a secure home, people cannot access jobs or contribute meaningfully to economic growth. More than that, housing underpins wellbeing, learning, and participation in an inclusive economy. Working closely with private and public partners, local government has a critical role as both a house builder and in developing resilient communities. Local authorities and housing partners are ready to build more social and affordable housing. However, we already recognise that the capacity and capability of the workforce to meet the country's housing demands is insufficient so we are working with partners to scale up and upskill a workforce that can build homes for every pocket.

If we have a coherent strategy for UK Plc and local economic leadership in places this provides a solid foundation for growth. Working together both central and local government can align capacity and resources to maximise our assets and kick start innovation. And while we are capable managers who deliver vital services and support our most vulnerable, we are also place leaders who are primed to drive inclusive economic growth, create good jobs in critical sectors to our communities, and help the UK become a global leader in innovation. Whether it is Toon to the Moon or something else, to make all places fly we need Government's full-throttled backing.

Placemaking for All: Councils as Catalysts for Inclusive, Community-Led Change

By Dr Zoe Appleton

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Zoe has been a Senior Associate at the Innovation Unit since 2018, and works across public sector transformation to improve outcomes for children and families, especially those most impacted by inequality. Zoe holds a PhD and a couple of postgraduate certificates in research methods, providing a strong foundation in evidence-based practice. Her expertise allows her to translate complex research into practical, meaningful change—ensuring transformation in children's social care is not only ambitious but effective.

"Councils are… increasingly reimagining their roles from service commissioners to place leaders—co-producing, convening, and embedding change."

Community wellbeing, equity and inclusion are at the core of successful places. Across the United Kingdom, councils are demonstrating their unique position to lead this transformation. Through their deep-rooted presence in communities and their mandate to deliver essential services, councils are not only convenors of local systems but can also be shapers of social fabric. They are central to the success of place-based approaches to social care and inclusion, particularly as national reforms such as current reforms to children' social care become embedded.

At the heart of any thriving place is the wellbeing of its people. In particular, the health and wellbeing, safety, and life opportunities of young people and their families are a strong barometer of the strength of a community. We know when most families present to Children's Social Care it is because they are parenting in adversity, in distress and with high needs of vulnerability, whether that be parental mental health, drug and alcohol misuse, domestic abuse and/or family poverty. And we know these issues have local variation and present differently.

We also know when families are supported early, holistically, and close to home, outcomes are much more likely to be positive and sustainable, and hence the announcement of £270m of funding allocated through the Children's Social Care Prevention Grant in 2025/26. This grant is designed to support councils to invest in prevention services for families and children through implementing the reforms set out in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. Councils are at the frontline of this work, and are increasingly reimagining their roles from service commissioners to place leaders—co-producing, convening, and embedding change.

Children's agendas driving local systemic change

The children's social care reforms, informed by the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, call for a rebalancing of the care system towards prevention and relational support. These ambitions align strongly with the strengths of local government. Councils, in partnership with police, health and education colleagues, can lead and design integrated responses that recognise the complexity of families' lived experiences, enabling services that are non-stigmatising, culturally appropriate, and place-sensitive.

A key vehicle for delivering this vision is the Family Hub model, which brings together early years services, parenting advice, mental health support, employment help, and more. Yet what distinguishes successful hubs is not just co-location of services, but their community orientation. Councils such as Wirral, for example, have positioned their Family Hubs as part of wider neighbourhood-based systems, blending statutory and voluntary provision and encouraging co-production with local parents and carers. This fosters trust, breaks down silos, and builds resilience.

Connecting Social Care and Inclusive Growth

Councils are also demonstrating their role in placemaking through the inclusive growth agenda. It is widely acknowledged that economic growth alone does not guarantee improved outcomes for all; councils need to bridge this gap to improve outcomes for children, young people and families, by aligning regeneration strategies with social goals. This includes investing in childcare infrastructure, youth skills, accessible transport, and employment pathways—especially in areas of high deprivation.

For instance, Greater Manchester Combined Authority's work on inclusive growth has linked early years development with long-term economic planning. Through a sharp focus on school readiness, GMCA has recognised that a fairer economy starts with a strive towards creating more equitable foundations. This is further supported by GMCA's 'Live Well' agenda, which promotes integrated, person-centred health and care across neighbourhoods—placing community wellbeing at the heart of economic resilience and local service reform.

Why Councils?
What uniquely positions councils to promote and elevate their areas is not only their statutory responsibilities, but also their democratic legitimacy and enduring presence. They are accountable to communities in a way other partners are not, and their long-term presence enables them to steward change that is generational in impact.

Moreover, councils can design joined-up, place-based approaches that reflect real lives and are based on local needs and risks. Where Central Government sets direction, it is local government that adapts, integrates, and innovates on the ground and responds based on their own contexts. This local flexibility maximises sustainability, the Guidance Document for the Families First reforms is purposely broad to allow local context to be considered as we know a one size fits all approach to delivering Children's services is not what local areas need.

Conclusion
Placemaking today must reflect the full complexity of modern life—physical infrastructure and social fabric, services and relationships and outcomes and lived experiences. Councils are essential pillars of their communities. Place[1] based approaches to social care and inclusion are not only feasible but essential.

In a time of growing need and constrained resources, it is more important than ever to promote and support the leadership of councils in shaping places where everyone can thrive, especially young people and families. Their role is not incidental. It is foundational.

Shaping the Building Blocks of Healthy Places

By Jo Bibby

Jo Bibby is Director of Health at the Health Foundation. Jo is responsible for leading the Foundation's Healthy Lives strategy to create the opportunities for everyone to lead a healthy life. Joining the Foundation in November 2007, Jo initially led the Foundation's influential portfolio of work in patient safety and person-centred care. Jo has worked in health care at local and national level for 25 years, including 10 years at the Department of Health. Before joining the Foundation, Jo was the Director for the Calderdale and Kirklees Integrated Service Strategy where she led a major service reconfiguration programme to deliver improvements in quality, safety and patient experience. She is a trustee at the Centre for Homelessness Impact and from June 2021 a non-executive director at Rotherham NHS Foundation Trust. Jo has a PhD in Medical Biophysics.

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For an organisation with a mission to improve health and care in the UK, some may be surprised to find how much of the Health Foundation's work looks towards the role of local government. Delivering this mission, of course, needs a funded, sustainable NHS, it needs the rapid adoption of technology and innovation, and two of our strategic priorities address these challenges. The third, to improve health and reduce inequalities, recognises that the NHS can only go so far in keeping people healthy. If we want to close the striking 16-year gap in life expectancy people experience based on where they live, we need to look at the factors that shape their day to day lives, many of which fall in the ambit of local government.

Over the last decade, the improvements in life expectancy we have come to expect have stalled. Looking beyond our borders, we can see that it doesn't need to be like this. The UK ranks 20th in male life expectancy across OECD countries and 27th for females. Of course, there are very many factors that drive this – the long run industrial decline that has eroded jobs and opportunities in many parts of the country. The changing food environment which has led to our hospitality and retail outputs being swamped by high fat, salt and sugar foods. These are tough problems to crack and need heft at national level.

However, there is no room to be passive or defeatist and local government holds many levers to create the opportunities for people to be healthy. Directly through their public health teams but also in the many ways they can shape local environments. Over and above their statutory roles, councils have the potential to convene stakeholders to unleash the wider opportunities of integration and inward investment. And, uniquely, through their direct accountability of elected members they can nurture the power of social capital to strengthen communities and wellbeing.

At the Health Foundation we have been fortunate to work alongside councils and combined authorities as they have sought to use these opportunities to create healthier places. Many have adopted the work of the Frameworks Institute to create a new health narrative – one that shifts the public mind away from health care and towards the 'building blocks of health'. By connecting the value of housing, green spaces, transport and community to the health benefits they derive, this seeds the understanding that a healthy society demands investment across the board. And that we can't be surprised if these vital building blocks are eroded, we see people's health and wellbeing decline.

As well as shaping the building blocks of health, local government has some scope – albeit not enough – to limit people's exposure to the core risk factors for health. Yes, our choices in terms of tobacco, alcohol and sugar affect our health but it would be wrong to think that these choices are driven by individual preferences. Environments that increase exposure through proliferation of fast-food outlets, alcohol licenses and advertising are shown to influence people's choices and opportunities to be healthy.

The Health Foundation has set out a framework for action, as well as laying out where national government needs to act. Locally, there are three ways in which councils can act: though their legislative responsibilities (such as licensing and planning laws) and enforcement; through role modelling action in the building and spaces they are directly responsible; and through system leadership and partnership. Of course, some of these actions are made harder by the unequal resources and power that councils often experience in the face of large corporate interests. And there is an inevitable tension between the need to raise business rates and limit licensing decisions and our accompanying briefing highlights these barriers and tensions and the need for national policy change.

Many councils are also adopting a health in all policies approach, seeking the opportunities to shape all their decisions to maximise health benefit. Our Economies for Healthy Lives programme illustrates how such an approach between public health and economic development teams can improve infrastructure planning; support local entrepreneurs and social enterprises and support groups often furthest away from employment find good quality work.

However, all these efforts have been, for too long, against a backdrop of shrinking investment in local government – and as work by the Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown – and an allocation formula that fails to reflect local need.

The Spending Review offers some signs that the vital role of local government is being recognised. And while there will be debate as to whether this is going far enough, fast enough, one thing that isn't in question is the commitment and drive of local leaders to take on the challenge of health inequalities and apply their local knowledge to create places for healthier lives.

Housing Associations: Building Great Places

By Kate Henderson

Kate Henderson is Chief Executive of the National Housing Federation (NHF), the voice of housing associations in England. Kate is passionate about tackling the housing crisis, inequality and climate change. She is a member of the New Towns Taskforce, and also sits on several government panels including the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Expert Group, the Fuel Poverty Strategy Working Group and the Social Housing Quality Expert Challenge Panel. Kate became a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in 2021. Prior to joining the NHF in 2018, Kate was Chief Executive of the Town and Country Planning Association.

"Placemaking starts by listening. When people are given a genuine voice in shaping their neighbourhoods, the outcomes are better and more sustainable."

Every person should live in a place they're proud to call home – a place that provides not only security and stability, but opportunity and a sense of belonging. Across the country, housing associations are making this a reality by doing what they do best: building much more than just homes. Working alongside local government and other partners, they are creating and sustaining great places.

Placemaking is at the heart of our work.
We build one in four new homes across the country, but crucially we ensure that the homes we build and the communities we support are resilient, inclusive, and full of potential.

We provide homes for around six million people, including for rent and ownership. And through supported housing we provide homes with care and support for people who have experienced homelessness, young people leaving care, older people and veterans, people with learning disabilities, and survivors of domestic abuse.

As we face the interconnected challenges of housing need, inequality, and climate change, this role – and our partnerships with local government - have never been more important.

Rooted in communities
Housing associations are rooted in place. They're not just providers of homes; they are long-term partners in the places and communities they serve. The deep local knowledge and trust built up over decades is what enables housing associations to work alongside residents to understand what makes their communities thrive.

Placemaking starts by listening. When people are given a genuine voice in shaping their neighbourhoods, the outcomes are better and more sustainable. Whether it's investing in green spaces, improving local services, or regenerating older estates, housing associations know that the best solutions are created with communities, not for them.

Making the connections that matter
If we are serious about tackling inequality and delivering growth across the country, then we need to invest in place. And we must do it in partnership. Housing associations are already helping to make these connections a reality, collaborating with councils, health providers, schools, and local employers to make joined-up decisions that put residents first.

Great places are about connections to decent jobs, education, health services, and public transport. They're places where people can access the opportunities they need to lead fulfilling lives. It takes collaboration across sectors and all levels of government to deliver change at scale, and that's where housing associations are uniquely placed.

Their local networks and commitment to communities make them well placed to bring partners together around a shared vision. These place-based partnerships are already unlocking innovation, through joint health and housing initiatives, community wealth building and estate regeneration projects driven by resident priorities.

Our sector brings a unique offer; we combine social purpose with financial resilience and long-term investment. This means we can lead the way in delivering homes and infrastructure that not only meet housing need but support inclusive growth. From retrofitting homes to meet net zero, to creating training programmes for local residents, housing associations are anchoring economic and social renewal.

Working collaboratively is essential, allowing housing associations to pool resources, align strategies, and tackle complex challenges in a coordinated way. It ensures that the voices of communities are at the heart of decision-making.

Rising to the challenge

The last few years have brought into sharp focus the inequalities that exist across our country. The pandemic showed the value of strong, connected communities and the critical role housing associations play in supporting them. But we know there is much more to do to ensure that every community can thrive, not just survive.

We must be bold in our ambitions. This means taking a long-term view, partnering with local authorities and other key stakeholders, investing in people as well as places, and embracing innovation that will shape sustainable, inclusive futures. It means ensuring that new developments are climate-resilient, well-designed, and rooted in local character. It means creating the conditions where community life can flourish.

And we hope that the government's Long Term Housing Strategy – due to be published this summer - could be the framework around which national and local government, housing associations, developers and residents can collaborate to deliver the social and economic outcomes we are all working towards.

As a sector, we are ready to collaborate. We have the expertise, the experience, and the values to drive real change. And we are committed to working alongside residents, local partners, and the government to create the places people want to live in.

Placemaking isn't a luxury, it's fundamental to tackling the housing crisis and building a fairer society. Housing associations are already making it happen, now is the time to support and scale this work, so that every person, in every place, can build a better future.

Planning for Prevention: How Councils Are Quietly Saving Lives

By Greg Fell

Greg Fell is the Director of Public Health in Sheffield. He graduated from Nottingham University with a degree in biochemistry and physiology in 1993. He has worked as a social researcher in a maternity unit; a number of roles in health promotion and public health before joining the public health training scheme. Greg worked as a consultant in public health in Bradford in the PCT then Bradford council. Since Feb 2016 he has worked for Sheffield City Council as the Director of Public Health for the city. Greg was also appointed to the role of Vice President to the Association of Directors of Public Health (ADPH) in December 2021 and then became President in October 2023.

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"Only 10–20% of our health and wellbeing is determined by access to health care services. The rest is shaped by our economic, social and environmental conditions."

At the heart of all local government is the ambition to improve life for its residents. That includes supporting them to be healthy – both physically and mentally. However, that doesn't just mean making sure people have access to good treatment when things go wrong. In fact, only 10-20% of our health and wellbeing is determined by access to health care services. The rest is shaped by our economic, social and environmental conditions – conditions that those of us working in local government have significant influence over.

As 'local Chief Medical Officers', Directors of Public Health (DsPH), who moved back to local government in England in 2012, lead a team of experts who work to improve health and wellbeing, reduce unfair and avoidable inequity in health, and tackle the preventable causes of illness and disease. They do this by providing independent system leadership, linking together evidence and data to policy and practice, often stitching together information and resources across many different departments, organisations and local partners.

It is vital that the need for this collective effort across disciplines, referred to as a 'health in all policies' approach, is recognised. Only by addressing the wider determinants of our health can we hope to prevent avoidable illness. This encompasses factors like ensuring our homes are built with health in mind, providing good education and jobs, regulating industries and products that are harmful, and creating environments where healthy food, drink and leisure options are both affordable and accessible to everyone.

Decisions made across local government contribute to these basic building blocks of health. By linking closely with DsPH and their teams, policies about a range of areas including transportation, education, and housing, are helping to reduce health inequalities by focusing on those places with the greatest need. In Gateshead for example, planning policies to restrict hot food takeaways in areas of deprivation have been shown to reduce childhood obesity.

This approach has had a tangible impact in my own patch of Sheffield where, 20 years ago, there was a disproportionately high rate of infant mortality, with 116 babies dying before their first birthday each year. Between 2018 and 2020 this had fallen by nearly 50% to 62. No one element made the difference. Instead, working consistently over a long period of time to engage a wide variety of local stakeholders and residents reaped rewards.

An important element of preventing ill health is to support communities to live healthier lives by adapting the places where they live, work and play. Working with local planners to provide urban design features such as green spaces and active transport can improve both physical health and wellbeing and, by targeting communities that don't have access to these things already, can reduce health inequalities.

Wakefield Council is one example of where public health teams have worked with planners to embed health into the planning process. Together, the teams

developed a new Health Impact Assessment spatial planning tool, which helps to identify and optimise the health and wellbeing impacts of planning, with a glossary of jargon-free definitions so that the public health and planning teams could work more effectively together through an improved understanding of each other's language.

Another example of where local authorities can make a significant difference is through the introduction of advertising restrictions. Advertising influences our choices and so it follows that advertising products that cause harm – like alcohol, unhealthy food or gambling – will in turn drive rates of consumption and increase the numbers of people experiencing preventable illness related to these products.

Councils across the country, from Gateshead to Greenwich, have introduced such policies. In fact, a third of local authorities are now restricting advertising of harmful products on council owned property, or through council owned services.

These examples show what can be – and is being – achieved locally. However, for councils to help central Government achieve its health mission, the expertise of local public health teams must be properly resourced and harnessed, both by colleagues across local government and by the wider system.

Earlier this year, after a decade of real-terms cuts, the Government announced a 5.4% increase in the Public Health Grant allocation for England for 2025/26. The £3.858 billion, which represents a 3% real-terms increase, is very welcome. However, to really make a difference, we need consistent, multi-year settlements, so that we can work with local communities to deliver sustainable initiatives that will improve health and wellbeing over the long term.

With large scale reform currently in progress both in local government and the NHS, also an integral partner in our efforts to improve health and wellbeing, this is a critical time to act. There is much uncertainty as to how any changes will impact teams across local authorities, but we are all united in the ambition to improve our local communities, and DsPH are ready and willing to lead the charge so that people are able to live healthier lives for longer.

Collaboration for Growth: Steering Wrexham's Rise 2018–24

By Ian Bancroft

Ian was Chief Executive at Wrexham County Borough Council for 6 years until 2024 and has been a local government Director in England and Wales for over 20 years. He now runs his own business, Traverse Leadership Consulting (TLC) Ltd, harvesting his experiences and belief in public service to enable public and social sector organisations and leaders to navigate their leadership journeys with maximum impact.

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"It is remarkable what can be achieved if partnerships are nurtured to achieve the full potential of a place."

Looking back to 2018 in Wrexham seems a lifetime ago. It is remarkable what can be achieved if partnerships are nurtured to achieve the full potential of a place.

Now, Wrexham is an international brand; has achieved city status; is seeing significant tourism growth; was runner up to Bradford in the bid for UK City Of Culture 2025; has a football club owned by American film stars Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney (Ryan and Rob) that has achieved back to back promotions to the Championship; and is the beneficiary of multiple major economic investments. There is much more to this story than just football, with the council and a range of partners, networks, and individuals with like minds and shared values being at the centre of steering this rise.

The Office for National Statistics (2018) showed that life expectancy for women living in the Gwersyllt West ward was, average 10 years less than the Welsh average. Burdened by the legacy of its mining and industrial past — and tarnished by national press coverage in 2018 branding it a 'spice town', with images of young people under the influence at the bus station — the area showed little sense of optimism for the future. The positive change did come, though, by creating strong connections between people and organisations for the benefit of Wrexham, growing the capacity of local leaders to make a difference, sharing the governance of local leadership to empower others to contribute, and harvesting together the benefits and pride that has resulted in Wrexham's growth.

In 2018 I was lucky enough to be appointed as Chief Executive to the council in the place I call home. With a Leader, Cabinet and council of the same mind we aimed initially to enable Wrexham to 'punch at its weight' not below it. The council proactively started to act as a convenor for the 'common purpose of Wrexham' with partners locally, regionally and nationally.

Wrexham convened an open, facilitated network of the Civic Leaders Group (CLG), bringing together professionals from across sectors. This group engaged political leaders across parties and levels of government, helping to shape a shared vision and set of aspirations for the area. This had eight clear aims or asks for the future.

Working with key partners involved in developing football in the area by convening their involvement in a campaign called #spiritualhomeofwelsh-football raised the collective aspiration. The untapped potential in a place is the

founding place for the Football Association of Wales, and the location of the oldest international football ground in the world, as well as having the highest participation rates in Wales for football was uniquely significant.

In a world where it is quoted we 'make our own luck' and 'timing is everything' the impact of involving people who believed in Wrexham at the beginning of the journey to grow the place was critical. One of the CLG was the Director of Wrexham AFC who led the discussions directly with Rob and Ryan for the sale of the Club. His understanding of the vision and aspiration for the area meant that Rob and Ryan bought not only the football club but fully into Wrexham, a point brought out in the title and stories of their FX-award winning series 'Welcome to Wrexham' (not Welcome to Wrexham AFC) that airs on Disney Plus.

The common purpose and positive collective view about the city were also at the centre of the successful campaign and application for City Status (2022). Wrexham had been unsuccessful three times before.

Themes of community and celebration were at the heart of networks that led the work for City of Culture and the creation of Wrexham Business and Community Awards. Over two hundred champions and city of culture ambassadors shared stories of their identity in Wrexham, recognising and celebrating their plurality and various aspects of the town, city, and historic countryside. Ten of us, from different sectors, in our voluntary time established a business

awards event, which in 2023 had four hundred people present on the night and over eighty-five award applicants, and this laid strong foundations with the business sector. A collaboration convened by the council, led by local business, supported by two national politicians from different parties, in partnership with our neighbouring authority with whom we had not worked jointly for a long time, then resulted in a successful campaign and application for a £160m investment zone in 2024.

People and network-led place development multiplies over time and in impact. The team working together for Wrexham is continually learning — supported by capacity-building that helps people share their own and Wrexham's stories using public narrative techniques, empowers others to lead through an executive coaching style, and strengthens collaboration by embedding shared values and behaviours. Impacts include: a £450m investment into the football club and Wrexham Foundation from the USA after a networking visit to Syracuse in New York State; first stage plans for the Wrexham Gateway and the oldest international football ground in the world being commercially complete; Wales Men's Football team committed to play international games at the stadium for every future major international tournament.

The importance of people-led place development convened by a council means that it is not reliant on one person, and when underpinned by capacity building and celebration means many have the skills and motivation to take the journey to another level. Further foundations for the next steps of Wrexham are being led across sectors by the newly established Town Board and City of Culture company bidding for UK City of Culture 2029.

Looking back from 2025 on the journey so far it is clear that people make places, that people are stronger together, and the development of an international brand means everyone is 'Welcome to Wrexham'.

The Role of Councils in Improving the Health of a Place

By Tom Stannard

Tom Stannard is the Chief Executive of Manchester City Council. He is also the designated Place-Based Lead in the Greater Manchester Integrated Care System, as well as the Greater Manchester Combined Authority Chief Executive lead for the economy, business and international portfolio. Tom joined Manchester City Council following more than 27 years of experience in local government across the UK, including in Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire, and London. Tom is a Chartered Surveyor, a Member and Chair of the UK Institute of Economic Development, and a Commissioner on the Living Wage Foundation for the UK. For several years, he has been a member, policy lead and spokesperson for Solace, currently on Health and Social Care.

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"Councils are anchor institutions that improve the health of a place."

In February, I joined Manchester City Council as Chief Executive and Place-based Lead for the Manchester Integrated Care Partnership, a role I previously held in Salford too.

Following work over nearly 30 years of successive rounds of health reorganisation, news of the NHS England disestablishment and integrated care system reforms came just five weeks into my new job. I believe the reforms bring with them an opportunity for the wider health and social care system to benefit from some of our expertise: councils are anchor institutions that improve the health of a place by addressing wider determinants of health, connecting closely with our residents, supporting their interests, and coordinating local initiatives. There are immense strengths within places like Manchester for the health and social care system to benefit from and this can support in realising the 'three shifts.'

The Realities of 'Place'

Our cities are often focussed on as economic drivers and hotbeds of opportunity. Less often talked about is the fact that many cities, like Manchester, have stark contrasts in deprivation and disparities within their own populations. Though deprivation exists across both rural and urban areas, it is most highly concentrated in cities. Deprivation, along with compounding issues for lower-income communities cause significant variation in health between many cities' residents. As the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) illustrates in the annual report published in December 2024, cities have unique challenges for health, such as facing high rates of non-communicable diseases (e.g. diabetes, cardiovascular disease) driven by lifestyle and environmental factors, and higher levels of mental health issues, exacerbated by social isolation, housing stress, and economic insecurity. Challenges also compound, with many of these issues along with air pollution, noise, and lack of green space disproportionately affecting the health of lower-income urban communities.

The CMO warns that the NHS and delivery of public health interventions may fail "because the variety of communities and the very marked concentration of deprivation and consequent ill heath in specific parts of cities is not sufficiently reflected in planning." This highlights the importance of close relationships and aligned goals and delivery to reduce disparities and prevent ill health between local authorities and the health and care system.

There are strengths to draw from in addressing these issues. With the denser population of cities there is more likely to be access to health facilities and health-promoting chances like education, employment, and cultural amenities. Cities can be designed and redeveloped to support wellbeing for example by promoting active transport, reducing pollution and maximising green space, and forming local partnerships that tailor interventions to serve different populations, including ethnically diverse groups.

Our cities are hubs for innovation in health technologies, data use, and for piloting and scaling new initiatives.

The Unique Role of Councils in Health Improvement

Many council-led initiatives not only improve individual health outcomes but also strengthen community resilience and economic wellbeing.

In Manchester, our work which focuses on tackling inequalities - Making Manchester Fairer - is progressing to do exactly what it says on the tin. One aspect is supporting people at risk due to ill health such as musculoskeletal conditions or mental health challenges to remain in work wherever possible. This Work Well initiative is still in early phases but is showing extremely positive signs.

We are focussed on preventing ill health before it begins, and where it already exists, ensuring it does not hinder people's lives further. Our reablement services in adult social care have undergone largescale transformation to

prevent, reduce and delay the number of people requiring longer term support, resulting in improved outcomes for residents. Evaluation of the programme has also shown £39.33m of costs have been avoided through providing alternative types of support that enables independence.

Local authorities have broad influence and understanding of the determinants of health, such as housing, education, transport, and the built environment. We act as conveners, bringing together partners across sectors to address complex health challenges.

Locally, our Manchester Housing Providers Partnership is a good example – pooling together the expertise, focus and passion from our social and affordable housing providers with us as a council to not only unlock affordable housing opportunities none of us could achieve alone, but also to collaborate in initiatives such as Manchester Living Rent, and in supporting our communities in their work, play and volunteering.

As local authorities we are in constant dialogue with our residents, and their voices are vital to our work. At the end of April, we launched the new Our Manchester Strategy setting our ambitions for the next 10 years. Over 10,000 residents contributed their views to the strategy, just one example of the connections we have with our residents, and the clear understanding we have of their aspirations. The governance structure for delivering the strategy is a further example of a shared forum to meet, connect and jointly progress work with key stakeholders - across business, higher education and VCSE sectors.

A fairly recent development for us in Manchester is work focussing on Community Power. We have been seeking to understand how well we do currently in supporting our residents to have a voice and say in decision-making – and to set some ambitious goals for how we might shift to improve this.

Integrated Care and Place-Based Leadership

Within the Greater Manchester Integrated Care system, we see the value of place-based leadership as we work to further develop a model of neighbourhood care and neighbourhood-based services.

Local authorities can have a unique role in pulling together the benefits of government reforms and initiatives which might otherwise remain disparate interventions.

For example, in Manchester our neighbourhood-based family hubs will be crucial to deliver on many of the SEND and healthy families reforms being progressed through Education. We know that along with the trailblazer funding through DWP, as well as our adult skills work, our strong relationships with VCSE providing key services, and many other public health initiatives already underway in our communities, we can progress an integrated model which provides holistic support for our residents traversing reform contexts.

"Reform presents a chance to address some of the structural and geographical inconsistencies."

This kind of model can meet residents where they are in their neighbourhoods and further empower them to determine aspirations for themselves, their families, and communities.

Challenges and Opportunities
Councils continue to face significant challenges - budget constraints, workforce pressures, and balancing multiple priorities.

Messages I have shared with civil servants about the local authority perspective over the last few months has been about caution, pragmatism, and carefully considered timeframes. I pose this as an alternative to disregarding the impacts on an already strained local government system which is progressing its own reorganisation. There is opportunity to be taken in reform, but opportunity that must be carefully progressed to preserve and expand on the benefits already seen in the system, reduce costs, and improve outcomes for our residents.

Reform presents a chance to address some of the structural and geographical inconsistencies in current arrangements. In places undergoing reorganisation, changes are being met with concerns around legitimacy, duplication, and fragmentation if health reforms are not aligned with the new local authority map. Conversely, in areas like Greater Manchester, where integration is mature, there is growing anxiety that system-wide cuts could unpick hard-won gains in place-based commissioning and locality teams.

Conclusion
My view is that it is vital that local authorities boldly tackle this opportunity; to share, expand and preserve the good work we do for our residents. Councils have an integral role in creating healthier communities through their own delivery, as well as collaboration and innovation, and we need to be forthright in our ambitions to embed this in the health and social care reforms.

Protecting Places Through Local Crisis Support

By Rachel Casey and Yasmin Ibison

Rachel works on housing policy at JRF, developing credible solutions and partnerships to ensure more people live in a decent, affordable home. Rachel's interests are in housing, health, social justice and grounding solutions in lived experience. Rachel has worked on housing and homelessness policy within the charity and public sector. Prior to this, Rachel worked for several years as a case worker in a Youth Offending Service, and has worked in Children's Social Care. Rachel completed a Masters in Social Work in 2017.

Yasmin is a Senior Policy Adviser at JRF, where she leads on our communities and placed-based policy work. Yasmin also designed and delivered JRF's AI for public good programme - an example of the organisation's exploratory, cross-cutting work. Previously, Yasmin worked at Black Thrive Lambeth managing the employment workstream, which sought to improve employment outcomes for Black people with long-term health conditions in Lambeth, South London. She also previously ran her own social enterprise which worked with young Londoners to widen access to arts and cultural spaces.

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"Local crisis support plays a vital role in protecting people from hardship, providing access to cash or essential goods and services when people face destabilising life events and unexpected financial shocks."

Local crisis support plays a vital role in protecting people from hardship, providing access to cash or essential goods and services when people face destabilising life events and unexpected financial shocks. Increasingly, however, this support is being relied upon not just in times of unforeseen crisis, but to meet the rising costs of everyday essentials – reflecting the deep and persistent hardship experienced by millions in the UK.

According to JRF's Cost of Living tracker, in the six months leading up to October 2024, 7 million low-income households were going without essentials, such as enough food, heating and showers. This number has remained alarmingly consistent for two and a half years. Meanwhile, the basic rate of Universal Credit continues to fall short of covering the cost of these everyday essentials.

Without substantial policy action, this crisis in living standards is set to deepen by the end of this parliament. The fall in disposable income (after housing costs) is expected to be steepest for low-income households. In this context, alongside national policy change, strengthening the system of local crisis support has a key role to play in tackling hardship at the local level.

Councils already play an important role in protecting people from hardship

Councils are already working diligently and innovatively to protect people from hardship. Some use revenue and benefits data to proactively identify people at risk of hardship – such as Gateshead Council's use of council tax arrears data or Newcastle City Councils targeting of residents affected by the benefit cap or removal of the spare room subsidy. In both cases they offer information, advice and support to try and prevent crises from spiralling.

Other councils have integrated wider support services with crisis support. For example, Lewisham Council offers 'sustainable support', which connects HSF applicants to longer term support such as income maximisation and debt advice, alongside immediate cash payment. Identifying underlying unmet need through a 'no wrong door' policy is necessary to prevent deepening crisis and repeat applications for crisis support.

Even in a deeply constrained financial situation, Birmingham City Council has been working to strengthen the network of civil society organisations offering crisis support, income maximisation, advice and help.

The current system of crisis support is flawed

These efforts are hard won against a challenging backdrop. Crisis support has been fragmented and spread across multiple funding streams – such as local welfare assistance (LWA), the household support fund (HSF) and discretionary housing payments (DHP) - making the system difficult to navigate for people who in need it and administratively burdensome for councils.

Moreover, many LWA schemes have been scaled back or closed as funding plummeted by 87% between 2010/11 and 2019/20. As a result, access to crisis support varies depending on where you live, and by 2023/24, 36 local authorities in England had no LWA scheme. A further 8 were 100% funded by HSF, which has propped up LWA in recent years and been beset by short funding cycles which have hindered the development of strategic approaches.

Crisis support also remains limited for people with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) despite their high risk of hardship. Most people with this visa condition find themselves locked out of the mainstream safety net, even when facing destitution. Their ability to access crisis support is also varied, with some LWA schemes excluding them entirely and a lack of clarity about eligibility for HSF.

At the Spending Review the Chancellor announced a multi-year settlement to transform the HSF into a new Crisis and Resilience Fund. The commitment to a multi-year funding settlement is vital as 6 in 10 local councils say they would be

unable to replace the funding if it were withdrawn. But even with this welcome clarity, the system remains dysfunctional. It is time for the Government to think seriously about reforming the system, so everyone has somewhere to turn to for financial help and support in a crisis.

A vision for reform

National government must do its part to reduce poverty by reforming Universal Credit, supporting people to work and tackling the cost of housing. This will ease but not eliminate the need for crisis support. A reformed system should be a central-local partnership based on 4 key principles. Local crisis support should be:

1. Available everywhere – central government's commitment to a multi-year funding settlement makes a significant difference here, but it still only provides certainty for 3 years. It is striking that no part of government has a statutory duty to provide crisis support, despite it being a vital part of the safety net. This should be rectified.
2. Available to all - Local crisis support should be removed from the list of restricted funds for people with NRPF, so that we all have somewhere to turn to in a crisis.
3. Cash first - Cash should be the default for support, providing people with dignity and choice. In-kind support should be offered only when requested or is more practical, for example, the purchase of white goods.
4. Connected to preventative services – the transactional provision of cash in a crisis should be an entry point for people into a wider ecosystem of public and community services – such as income maximisation - to prevent crises from spiralling further.

To test these principles, we surveyed the LGA's cost of living network. Of the 43 local government respondents:

- 95% agreed that local crisis support should be available in all parts of England.
- 77% agreed that local government should have a statutory responsibility for providing local crisis support, provided it is backed by a multi-year funding commitment from central government.
- 77% agreed that local crisis support should be available to everyone, regardless of their migration status.
- 96% agreed that local crisis support should serve as a gateway to other preventative services and holistic support.

The Government's commitment to a new multi-year funding settlement is recognition that local crisis support is an important tool in councils' kitbag for tackling hardship. Embedding these four principles in the new Crisis and Resilience Fund would further redesign the system to be available everywhere, be open to everyone and be truly preventative.

Tied to the City, Driven by Purpose: Leeds' Anchor Network Leads the Way

By Amy Beswick

Amy Beswick is the Leeds Anchor Manager in Leeds City Council's Economic Policy team. Amy supports the development of Leeds Anchor Network as a partnership, including supporting delivery of the network's priorities, and building connections with local community organisations to increase the role of the network in improving outcomes in disadvantaged areas of Leeds. Amy also supports Leeds Business Anchors and helped to establish the network in 2023 by bringing private sector businesses on board with the city's Anchor approaches.

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Leeds Anchor Network has been going since 2018 and is, we think, one of the longest-established and most mature place-based anchor networks in the UK. For the council, the network is amongst our most important partnerships in delivering for the city. The Leeds Best City Ambition centres the concept of 'Team Leeds'- that making Leeds the best city to live, work and grow up in needs the collective efforts of everyone from big civic institutions and businesses to local community groups and individual acts of neighbourliness. Over the four years since launching it, we've endeavoured to make this a shared ambition, with the anchor network helping us to embed a sense of shared mission across the largest and most influential organisations in Leeds.

Being an anchor is about an organisation taking deliberate decisions to increase their contribution to the place where they operate. The name 'anchor' refers to the strong roots that large organisations, particularly in the public sector, have in the places where they operate. In Leeds, the origins of the network started with research commissioned by the council and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation into the potential economic impact of anchors in Leeds City Region. It identified 70 potential anchors and found that if ten of these shifted just 10% of their spend to local suppliers, this could contribute up to £196m to the city region economy (2017 prices).

"If ten of these anchors shifted just 10% of their spend to local suppliers, this could contribute up to £196m to the city region economy."

Having engaged local partners around the concept, the next step was to define in practical terms what being an anchor means. The Anchor Progression Framework was developed to support organisations through a journey of change with a set of clear practical steps. It covers five dimensions: how organisations act as an employer; how they increase local procurement spend and social value through contracts; their environmental contribution and use of buildings; how they deliver services for the benefit of local people; and how they embed anchor principles in strategy and develop local partnerships. Neither an accreditation nor an audit, the framework is designed as a tool for honest self-assessment and to stimulate internal discussion about how organisations could go further.

The fourteen members of Leeds Anchor Network, which include education, health, utility and cultural organisations, have each completed the Progression Framework and update it every few years. The findings help the network identify common strengths, opportunities for peer learning, and areas for collective attention.

Being part of an Anchor network requires both humility and trust from its members, with a willingness to share with, and learn from, each other. It works in Leeds because we have very senior buy-in to the concept - every three months anchor leaders get together in person to talk these things through. Over time we've seen relationships flourish, not least during the pandemic when rapid collaboration was needed to safely manage the return of 70,000 university students and to deliver the city's vaccination drive in a way that put health equity at the forefront.

It has helped immeasurably that anchor partners take on the leadership of the network. We never want it to feel like a space where asks from the local authority are pushed out in a one-way dialogue - there needs to be collective ownership of both the challenges being addressed and of driving the solutions.

We're fortunate to have a great anchor advocate in Professor Peter Slee, Vice Chancellor of Leeds Beckett University, who has chaired the anchor's executive group from the start. It is also the responsibility of these executive leaders to ensure that anchor principles are embedded in their organisations and supported by the colleagues who will be 'doing the doing'. Reporting into the executive group are working groups that mirror the themes of the Progression Framework: Employment, Procurement, Climate and Communications. These are attended by subject experts from each anchor, and leadership of these groups is similarly shared across the members.

Often the hardest aspect of local anchor networks is delivering joint initiatives, and this can be where they lose momentum. Anchor networks are a long-term game and the foundations of strong organisational commitment and trusting relationships between members need to be built first. It can take years. Finding joint action areas means identifying the 'sweet spots' where city priorities align with organisational priorities (the progression framework helps us to do this), plus dropping the expectation that all members can be involved in every project or programme. Often it can simply come down to opportunity and timing. There are quick wins too, though: bringing together workplace health and wellbeing resources into one cost of living support offer for the collective 60,000 anchor workforce is an example from the employment working group.

Proper resourcing ties this all together, ideally with a full-time programme manager or small team to hold relationships with member organisations, spot opportunities, make connections, and drive programmes of work. Like Leeds, many networks start with bits of staff time taken here or there while the concept is proven, before making the case for additional capacity. After six years as an informal partnership, Leeds Anchor Network recently introduced a formal agreement and annual subscription to fund a programme team and operating budget for the network to deliver its shared goals.

We're ambitious for the future of the anchor journey in Leeds. Our next priorities are to support more organisations to adopt anchor approaches, testing the model across different sectors and sizes of organisations. In 2023 we launched Leeds Business Anchors, a parallel network for large businesses with established roots in the city. That group has navigated how being an anchor works for the local office of a national or global firm, and this year is delivering its first initiative- a joint work experience offer ringfenced for young people who might not otherwise have the opportunity. Equally important for us is strengthening connections between anchors and the city's voluntary and community sector, who often have their ears closest to the ground on what matters to communities. There is still much more to be explored, but we're confident this way of working embodies what we mean by Team Leeds: valuing the contribution of all our rooted local organisations and helping to make their contribution greater than the sum of their parts.

Vacant to Vibrant: Place-making Beyond Pure Economic Success

By John Walsh

John Walsh is the Chief Executive of Belfast City Council and has over 30 years of dedicated experience in local government, having spent his entire career serving communities and shaping public services.

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"Vacant to Vibrant has brought derelict spaces back into diverse and productive use."

Helping local businesses, revitalising unused spaces and delivering economic benefit – a winning combination you might say. Of course, you'd be right – and it is exactly what our Vacant to Vibrant scheme has been achieving for Belfast.

Just a glance at our £1m city centre funding scheme outputs tells a story of success. Investment in 48 grants will generate over £3.5m in rates – a return of almost £4 for every £1 allocated. And those awarded grants will generate £23m in sales over the lifespan of the scheme. Vacant to Vibrant will also help to create 139 jobs, with a further 34 indirect employment opportunities across the supply chain.

But this initiative has gone far beyond pure economic return. Vacant to Vibrant has brought derelict spaces back into diverse and productive use, supported local businesses, entrepreneurship and creativity, and contributed to a more vibrant, dynamic and thriving city centre – boosting footfall and strengthening Belfast's attractiveness as a place to visit, live and invest. It's placemaking at its best.

As civic leaders, we set out in our community plan 'the Belfast Agenda' to achieve a vibrant, attractive, connected and environmentally sustainable city. To help us do that, we launched Vacant to Vibrant in 2022 to incentivise take up of empty units and revitalise and animate the city centre, in response to challenges including a major fire at the Bank Buildings in central Belfast, the impact of online retail and COVID.

Diverse businesses and organisations benefitted from capital funding, a match-making scheme to help them find suitable premises, as well as wrap around support and one-to-one mentoring from our enterprise and business growth team to develop business plans and marketing.

Twenty-three of the grants have helped or are helping to regenerate a historic building or building of interest. Of course, much of the initiative's success is thanks to a combination of the applicants' energy, vision, hard work and pride in their city.

Their stories speak for themselves. Round House Bakery, for example, will use their funding to bring artisan sourdough breads, pastries, and pizza to a unit in Cathedral Buildings, after it was almost destroyed by fire three years ago.

Jonathan, Curtis, and their grandfather John at Sloan's Gym expanded and diversified their city centre gym offer by creating Ireland's only open-air roof-top training facility, in addition to their café and thriving online protein ball business.

Working with Bywater Properties, Hannah of independent barbers High Society Cut Club used the grant to bring a Smithfield property back into use after 20 years of vacancy. The area will be transformed by landmark visitor experience, public space and creative hub Belfast Stories opening just across the way in 2030.

Hannah said: "We can't wait to see what the future holds for us as city-centre living continues to grow." They plan to repurpose the first floor of the property to develop a training academy, offering a beginners' training programme, creating additional employment opportunities and pathways to employment.

Bodega Bagels used their Vacant to Vibrant grant to set up in a prime location near the Ulster University campus. Husband and wife team Steven and Kirsty started their business in their garage and now three years later their city centre outlet is queued out the door each lunchtime.

Peter, Sarah and the Golden Thread Gallery team have developed a creative urban haven, welcoming everyone to experience and enjoy visual arts – and it's one of only five UK attractions to have been shortlisted for the Art Fund Museum of the Year Award 2025.

Marie, owner of Verona Bridal, used the grant to help her relocate her bridal wear store to city centre, where she now welcomes brides-to-be from all over the UK and Ireland – and as far as Bermuda, Dubai and Florida - to choose their dream wedding dress in a state-of-the-art setting.

James from Skull and Bones Tattoo Society said: "The council's help was instrumental in helping us double the size of our shop – without it, there's no way we could have done this."

Neal, General Manager of Vault Artist Studios commented: "Securing Vacant to Vibrant funding for Spencer House is the first phase of our fundraising towards taking on this iconic and historic city centre building and providing a new home for over 30 multidisciplinary artists.

"Vault is passionate about advocating for the importance of arts and culture within sustainable regeneration, and we're very excited to do this in the heart of the city centre on Royal Avenue, where we can facilitate new conversations about how we reimagine and reactivate Belfast's heritage buildings."

The Vacant to Vibrant scheme has been a massive boon to our city centre and our local independent business sector.

Although the city centre scheme is currently closed, we're seeking further investment to reopen it. And Vacant to Vibrant's success is now being replicated citywide, thanks to £500,000 backing from the Department for Communities and UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

For a city to truly thrive, it needs to offer a distinctive, authentic experience that includes retail as well as welcoming, engaging spaces and opportunities for leisure, culture, living, studying, working, visiting, and socialising. That takes investment, partnership, energy and commitment – but perhaps most of all, it takes belief in people to deliver.

Where Did All the Aldermen Go?

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By Henri Murison

Since his appointment as Chief Executive in 2017 Henri has established the Northern Powerhouse Partnership as the business led organisation which convenes the North together. From making the case for significant investment in key transport priorities and further devolution deals for the North, to challenging for a better deal for the most disadvantaged from the education system, his team are focused on how government, business and partners can drive the North's ambitions. Before joining the Partnership, he worked in senior research and policy roles in policing and financial services, and, as a former senior local government figure in Newcastle upon Tyne, remains a commentator on regional and wider industrial policy. Since 2020 he has also served as a member of the Royal Society Science, Industry and Translation Committee, is a member of the Council of Newcastle University and is a board member of Future Humber.

The history of local government is populated by businesspeople – Jospeh Chamberlain in Birmingham might be the best known, but is far from the only example. Despite this, relatively few senior business figures have gone on to be elected to Mayoralties.

Andy Street was the notable exception; but it has been Labour most recently fielding those with such experience including Jason Stockwood in Greater Lincolnshire, a serial tech entrepreneur and now investor who was unable to withstand the Reform surge, and Helen Godwin, who co-owned a company before her most recent stint at PWC and went on to win.

A Metro Mayor, although working through a cabinet of local council leadership figures, undoubtably needs executive experience of running something - whether in business or public service. That could be through political experience, such as being a Cabinet Minister, as with Andy Burnham, or holding executive office in the region, as Kim McGuiness did as a Police and Crime Commissioner. However, the appeal of a businessperson lies in the assumption that they may be more inclined to the now famous Burnham political philosophy of 'place before party.' This is the idea that although one's values are rooted in politics, devotion to the economic and social interests of Greater Manchester, or the wider North, should and does, trump party loyalty.

Andy Street, despite not having coined the phrase, was an exemplar of putting this to the test at the highest of both political and economic stakes. I worked alongside him to seek to save HS2 from his own government - undoubtably protecting the Euston terminus from the same fate as the remaining leg to the North, which despite our best efforts was still cancelled in the autumn of 2023 at the Conservative Party Conference. Ironically, of all places, held in Manchester itself.

Street used his influence to literally re-write whole sections of Rishi Sunak's speech; the only issue being that any of the original speech, or the ideas behind it, were delivered at all. He then brought together a coalition of business leaders, including Arup, Mace, EY, Addleshaw Goddard, Arcadis, and others, to develop an alternative proposition alongside Andy Burnham. This would aim to replace the connectivity benefits of HS2 between Birmingham and the North, including Manchester, as well as West to Liverpool and East to Leeds. It would maximise the benefits of Northern Powerhouse Rail – part of which from Manchester Airport to Piccadilly, is originally part of the HS2 line and still being pursued by the design and consenting team within HS2 Ltd.

The reason I worked with both Andy's was not only because I supported their effort, but that their approach was an exposition of the raison d'etre of the Northern Powerhouse Partnership itself. When George Osborne left his office as Chancellor he went to see his longstanding collaborator in the North – Sir Howard Bernstein. Sir Howard was a model public servant. He served his city for over four decades and made not only a huge contribution

"Modern day aldermen, or women, belong at the table and at the heart of decision making."

economically but also in terms of the very fabric of the British constitution. He fostered a dialogue with investors and major businesses committed to Greater Manchester, transforming the city centre and surrounding areas in the aftermath of the IRA Bomb in the 1990s. He had also laid the groundwork for devolution which has now extended far beyond the region and is set to become the universal model of governance for the North by next year.

Sir Howard and George agreed to set up the Partnership between business and wider civic leaders to protect and promote the Northern Powerhouse ideas from a government who have not always shared their commitment. Although most of our board is made up of those in business, which is also the source of our funding, both civic leaders and wider figures from across the North also sit within our governance and convene with us. The business view of how devolution should evolve, staying true to its purpose, is not unlike how Jospeh Chamberlain ran Birmingham: one step removed from the political sphere, but of equal value in public debate and decision-making.

In the Humber, devolution deals were a compromise – putting cultural and social identity above economic geography. That is why the government agreed structures to lock the councils and new Mayors together with business led institutions, notably the Freeport and Humber Energy Board. Working with those institutions, I have been seeking to deliver an 'Invest Humber Estuary' approach to get the economic decision-making right for the region. Business will be part of the decision making and prioritisation - building on the approach of business boards with empowered figures like John McCabe in the North East who is working alongside his Metro Mayor showing the value of modern day aldermen, or women, when they are rightly at the table and central to decision making.

From the Ground Up: Working with Residents to Shape Great Places

By Rachel Rowney

Rachel is Chief Executive of Local Trust and joined in 2012, originally as a programme manager, and joined the senior leadership team in 2016. Previously, Rachel worked as a consultant and researcher at Shared Intelligence, where she worked on neighbourhood renewal, community engagement, and social housing projects. At the same time, she was also a programme manager for the National Association for Neighbourhood Management, where she designed and delivered learning and networking programmes.

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Big Local is a resident-led funding programme that has given 150 areas in England over £1 million each to spend over 10-15 years. The aim is to give communities power and control over resources so they can transform their area. Our programme encourages local people to identify their own needs and channel their energy, passion and local expertise into addressing them. Over a decade and a half, we have learned a lot about what makes community-led regeneration work — including how communities can get the most out of their relationships with local authorities.

But first, a caveat: it is difficult to generalise about local authorities' partnerships with Big Local given the extraordinary diversity of those partnerships and places. Local authorities were sometimes advocates, using their influencing power to win support for Big Local projects. Other times they were direct partners who worked alongside residents to deliver and implement the programme. They were also, at various points, funders, landlords, service providers. Each Big Local area faced its own challenges and dynamics as it confronted the vast array of layers, levels, departments, roles and responsibilities that make up local government. Still, some clear guiding principles have emerged over the last 13 years.

The first is that everything is so much easier when you have a shared purpose. Common goals breed trust. And trust allows for better communication, which gives everyone room to work through conflict. The most successful projects tended to be those where the local authority and resident-led programmes were closely aligned on a clear set of objectives. Establishing a process to decide on those objectives often allowed communities and local authorities to come together and get past historic differences.

This is one of the many ways we were helped by the Big Local programme's long term approach. Prolonged exposure helped resident-groups and local authorities to gain a clearer and more sympathetic understanding of the other's motivations. It gave everyone time to find common ground. In lots of cases, community groups, residents and local authorities were more aligned than they realised.

The second principle is the importance of clearly delineated roles and responsibilities. This often flowed from the first point. When partners are aligned on the overall goal, we found this encouraged open discussions about each partner's respective strengths and specialisms, and how these best served the interest of the neighbourhood. Clear demarcation of roles also prevents duplication of effort, reduces misunderstandings and allows for smoother communication. Knowing who to contact for a specific issue not only streamlines communication, it also boosts accountability, which was important where there were feelings of distrust in communities toward statutory services.

But there are also times when flexibility is important. Clarity shouldn't mean rigidity. Circumstances change, especially when you're working together over

"While local government and local residents can achieve some things on their own, to really make a place flourish, they need to work together."

the long term, as was the case with most Big Local projects. Again, trust is important here. Knowing when a dynamic needs to shift, and being able to say so, was a vital part of the most successful working relationships with local authorities.

The third principle is that relations between communities and local governments benefit hugely from adequate funding and resources. It isn't surprising that better resources generally led to better working relationships. And we realise it isn't always possible, especially in the current fiscal climate. But where there were more resources, we found this made a big difference in two significant ways.

First, it meant local authorities could employ dedicated people who understood how to work with resident and community-led schemes. These teams helped bridge the gap between councils and communities, preventing misunderstandings and keeping channels of communication open. Of course, the same is true of our own Big Local partnerships: where they could call on dedicated workers as well as volunteers. Second, councillors and officers in well-resourced local authorities were able to devote more time to community relations themselves and it was important for decision makers to be actively engaged with what residents are trying to achieve.

The fourth and final principle is the importance of measuring and celebrating progress. Seeing tangible results is a huge morale booster for all parties. It reinforces the value of the partnership and encourages everyone's commitment to carry on working well together. Noting and celebrating shared success was especially important in areas where there were historic tensions or mistrust between local governments and communities. One of the simplest yet most effective steps local government could take to improve relations with resident groups was acknowledging the contribution of community led activity, either in person or publicly through branding and marketing campaigns.

Trial and error and a lot of good will and cooperation went into learning these lessons over the last decade and a half. But there was one other experience that was hugely influential in crystallising these insights: the Covid-19 pandemic. The intensity and urgency of this time shifted a lot of resident-council relations in a positive direction. Where there were differences, these were often set aside and subsumed into the effort of survival. New frontiers of collaboration were opened up. Thankfully, many of these positive developments have left a lasting legacy. The pandemic confirmed something everyone at Big Local has known since the launch of the programme — while local government and local residents can achieve some things on their own, to really make a place flourish, they need to work together.

Welcome to a Valley of Sanctuary, Where Hope Lives

By Elli Free

Elli has worked with refugees and people seeking asylum for 25 years in various roles, mainly in London. She recently moved to Calderdale to join St Augustine's Centre as the new Director. Prior to this appointment, she was the Director at Room to Heal and has also worked at The Refugee Council, Save the Children, The Children's Society, Refugee Legal Centre and her longest job so far was as Legal Manager at Bail for Immigration Detainees.

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“Everyone deserves to feel they belong.”

When someone new to the UK seeking asylum arrives in Halifax, quite often the first thing they’re told is, “Go to St Augustine’s.” That word-of-mouth matters. It tells us that the people we’ve helped feel safe enough to send others our way; that they’ve found, however briefly, a place they can start again.

Our first job is to provide the basics: a warm meal, clothes, and a listening ear. This is when trust starts to build. And that trust is the foundation for everything else.

We meet everyone individually, listen to their story, and work out what support they need - legal advice, health care, housing, English classes. But at the heart of it is treating people with dignity and helping people to feel human again. From that starting point, people can begin to feel like they belong.

But belonging isn’t something you can fast-track. It’s complicated, especially when people are still going through the asylum process. It’s hard to feel settled when you don’t know whether you’ll be allowed to stay or whether you will be detained in an immigration detention centre. That uncertainty hangs over everything. We do our best to support people to understand the process. We want people to succeed, but we’re also realists. The system can be incredibly harsh.

Calderdale gets a lot right. There are a whole range of local institutions, organisations, and communities committed to welcome and inclusion who are members of Valley of Sanctuary. It means there’s a common language around sanctuary, and a shared responsibility to create a culture of welcome for refugees and people seeking asylum, making Calderdale a safe and inclusive place for all. This principle doesn’t just sit on a poster somewhere – it lives in the conversations we have, the food we share, the doors we open.

As a result, Calderdale is a place where people often want to stay. People might arrive unsure, but over time they start to build connections, get support, make friends, and send their children to local schools. It becomes a new home. It’s where children grow up and new roots start to grow, nourished by the feeling that you matter here. That you belong and are in a place that not only accepts but welcomes you.

And many people want to give back as soon as they can. Last year, half the nearly 300 people who volunteered at the Centre were current or former

centre members (people who access support). Some are still in the asylum system; others have more stability. But what unites them is that desire to contribute and a sense of responsibility to the wider community. We've helped link people up with other local organisations too, like Overgate Hospice, where centre members can volunteer and gain experience, crucial when people are not legally allowed to work. Volunteering can give people purpose, routine, and dignity. Some people have gone on to set up their own community initiatives in the area.

We also work closely with local partners – the council, NHS, schools – to make the system more accessible and empathetic. For example, some council staff and service providers work from our building. That means they get to meet centre members, hear their stories, and understand the realities they face. It's more than just practical. It helps shift attitudes. For example, missing an appointment doesn't mean someone doesn't care – it might be due to miscommunication, a crisis, or the effects of trauma, like memory issues or exhaustion. A trauma-informed, person-centred approach can make a real difference.

But there's more that needs to be done. More joined up working to ensure people who have serious mental health issues do not slip through the net. And nationally, addressing the shortage of legal aid solicitors. People have the right to legal representation but often can't get a legal aid solicitor. We do what we can with the capacity we have, but people are left unrepresented to go through an intimidating appeals system.

Even so, there are moments that give me hope. I think about a young man who arrived in Halifax and didn't know a soul. He was lonely, spoke little English, and felt completely lost. One day he went to the local football ground hoping to see a match. He couldn't afford the ticket and was about to leave. But a local, older man saw what happened and paid for him to get in. That one small act changed everything. This young man is now the Activities Coordinator at St Augustine's Centre and lead coach of our football team. He's built a life here. Football was his way in. Connection can start anywhere.

At our Refugee Week open day we saw people from all walks of life – centre members, neighbours, school groups, local council teams, funders, and volunteers – sharing food, laughing, chatting, dancing, learning from each other. That day gave me real hope. It was a snapshot of how things could be, not just at the Centre, but across Calderdale.

Sometimes it can feel overwhelming – the policies, the negative media about people seeking asylum, the barriers. But I see people standing up to that every day. People volunteering, donating clothes and money. People sharing stories. People refusing to let fear define their community. That's what gives me hope. Because no one is illegal. Everyone deserves to feel they belong.

From the North, for the World: Place and Possibility in Orkney

By Oliver Reid

Oliver is Chief Executive of Orkney Islands Council having taken up the role in January 2023. He is Head of the Paid Service and principal policy advisor to the Council - working with Elected Members to ensure the effective governance of the Council and the sustainability, quality and effectiveness of its services. Oliver has a key role in representing and championing the Council's interests, and the interests of Orkney - fostering and sustaining effective partnerships locally, nationally and internationally that benefit the citizens and communities of Orkney. He is also Clerk to the Lord Lieutenancy and Returning Officer.

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Off the northern coast of Scotland, where land meets sea in an archipelago of 70 islands, Orkney offers more than a striking landscape. It is a case study in how place is not just inherited but made — through history, culture, innovation, and community. In Orkney, placemaking is both ancient and ongoing: shaped by millennia of human presence, sustained by the rhythms of ocean and wind, and reimagined in response to the challenges of modern island life.

Orkney's relationship to place begins with time. Human settlement here stretches back over 5,000 years, leaving a legacy carved into stone circles, chambered tombs, and longhouses. The Orkneyinga Saga — a unique Norse chronicle — anchors the islands in centuries of maritime exchange, Norse influence, and self-determination. Place names like Stromness ("safe haven") and Hamnavoe evoke not only geography, but memory.

This layered identity continues to inform how Orcadians relate to their land and each other. Today's 21 independent councillors, politically unaffiliated, reflect a culture of community governance stretching back to Viking "ting" assemblies. The islands' coat of arms, bearing both the Norwegian lion and the Sinclair ship, is more than a symbol — it marks Orkney's dual inheritance and enduring autonomy.

While rooted in history, Orkney is no museum piece. Its economy is as diverse as its geography — with agriculture, aquaculture, health, retail, tourism and creative industries interwoven into daily life. This adaptability is a hallmark of Orkney's placemaking. Over 87% of its businesses employ fewer than 10 people, and self-employment remains high. The economy here is personal, relational, and embedded.

Orkney's people have long understood that sustainable places are made through local agency. The Orkney Islands Council runs its own inter-island ferries and airfields, enabling daily life across 17 inhabited islands. The world's shortest commercial flight — just 90 seconds — is more than a curiosity: it's a lifeline, connecting people with services, families, and opportunity.

Infrastructure here is not just about movement. It reinforces cohesion in a dispersed community — binding people together across water, weather, and distance.

Orkney is profoundly shaped by its environment. The land is both resource and responsibility — from 28,000 breeding cows and 100,000 sheep to protected landscapes of international significance. Food production thrives in partnership with place: cheese, beef and lamb reared on ancient grasslands, many within UNESCO and conservation zones.

The sea is equally integral. Scapa Flow, Europe's largest natural harbour, has served as Viking anchorage, naval base, and marine hub. It connects Orkney

to the world — through cruise tourism, aquaculture, fisheries, and renewable energy.

But the sea's role goes beyond economy. It is cultural and emotional. It links Orkney to Arctic cousins and former colonial routes, while reminding residents of both vulnerability and resilience. The sea demands adaptation — and in that demand, it fosters community.

What sets Orkney apart is not just its rootedness, but its refusal to stand still. Since the 1950s, it has led the UK in renewable energy — from the first grid-connected turbine to today's thriving wave, tidal, and wind developments. The European Marine Energy Centre (EMEC), founded in 2001, has made Orkney a global testbed for net zero innovation.

But here, innovation is never just technical. It is cultural. It is about keeping the community in place — literally and figuratively. Projects like the ReFLEX initiative and Sustainable Aviation Test Centre aim to reduce fuel poverty, support lifeline services, and retain young people. Local ownership of infrastructure — including Orkney's Community Wind Farm Project — ensures that investment returns to the community, shaping the future of place on local terms.

Like many island communities, Orkney faces persistent challenges: an ageing population, housing barriers, fuel poverty, and youth outmigration. These

pressures are felt in the everyday — from limited rental properties to rising ferry costs.

Yet they are not simply deficits. They are catalysts for action. The Council has used its Strategic Reserve Fund to invest in harbours, ports, and renewables — linking economic development to quality of place. Publicly owned wind farms are not just about energy; they create conditions for people to stay, return, and thrive.

This is placemaking at its most strategic: using economic tools to secure social and spatial belonging.

One of Orkney's most radical acts of placemaking has been to redefine its location. Traditionally seen as remote from London, the islands now position themselves as central to a northern arc — culturally and geographically closer to Norway, Iceland, and Canada than to southern Britain.

This northern orientation is now formalised through partnerships like the Memorandum of Understanding with Nordic Atlantic Cooperation (NORA) and a twinning agreement with Vestland in Norway. These ties re-anchor Orkney in a wider family of Arctic and sub-Arctic communities, facing shared challenges of climate, connectivity, and community resilience – and shared opportunities of net zero, tourism, heritage and fishing/aquaculture It is a place of stone and sea, but also of drones, data, and energy. Its strength lies in holding all these layers together — honouring heritage while innovating boldly, caring for its environment while supporting growth, and centring people in every choice it makes.

In Orkney, placemaking is not a project. It is a way of life. And in a world searching for grounded, resilient, human-centred ways to face the future, these islands offer a compelling blueprint for how place can be both an anchor and a springboard.

Orkney is not at the edge — it is at the leading edge.

Place is Dead, Long Live Place!

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By Dr Stephen Moir

As the Chief Executive of Cambridgeshire County Council since 2022, Stephen is involved in leading one of the fastest growing places in the country, working with a range of partners and elected members to deliver the Council's vision of creating a greener, fairer, more caring Cambridgeshire.

A proud and committed public servant, Stephen has undertaken a range of leadership roles in Local Government, the NHS, and Policing, at local, regional, and national levels, as well as holding a range of non-executive appointments, including as the Vice Chair of a University Court.

In 2024, Stephen was elected as Vice Chair of the Association of County Chief Executives (ACCE) and previously supported the Leadership and Learning Policy Board Spokesperson for Solace.

"The real opportunity in LGR is not structural change, but behavioural change — resetting how public services work for and with communities."

With many areas, like my own, working their way through Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), whether as part of the Devolution Priority Programme or not, and also balancing wider public service reforms to our partners, especially in the NHS, the issue of what becomes of both the focus upon, and attention to, 'place' in the new landscape of public service that we are heading towards becomes ever more important.

For local government, irrespective of the size, shape, or type of authority, place is at the heart of our role. We work with people and communities; we respond to need and seek to achieve improved quality of life and outcomes for the residents we serve. We also seek to ensure that places have futures that are better, built upon the distinct identities and heritage of areas to create the economic, social and environmental outcomes that will support people, of all ages, to live well. We also do this in an increasingly complex web of partnerships and joint working which at times can become the focus, rather than delivering improved outcomes for people.

In those parts of the country that don't currently have the benefit of a Mayoral Combined Authority, which will ultimately become a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA), this isn't something to fear; it's to be embraced. MSAs will give a focal point for economic growth, infrastructure investment and locally driven public service reform, with the ability to require support from Government departments in a way we've previously been able to only do through specific and often arduous bidding processes. MSAs have the potential to become the real force multipliers for place and of place by being rooted locally, but also by having a national voice in the Council of Nations and Regions and with a level of access to ministers, to the Treasury and other Government departments that was previously the domain of a select few.

So, as many of us think about the role of MSAs, or the reform of council structures from two tier to single tier unitary councils, it's more important than ever that place, place shaping and building futures with communities are central to what we do and how we design councils fit for the future, not just as organisations, but as the convenors of place and the holders of democratic leadership responsibilities for our places.

Helpfully, the importance of place has been recognised by the Government in issuing the invitation for two tier areas to submit proposals for LGR. The fact that economic footprints, travel to work areas and, importantly, local identity matter as much as financial sustainability and service integration in these new unitary councils is helpful. The more recent proposals about expecting new unitary councils to have area neighbourhood committees is also an attempt, in my view, to recognise the importance of place, of locality and of communities being rooted in these new councils. I might not agree with the effectiveness of committees to genuinely enable working alongside and with communities, but the direction of travel and intent is an important signal. The additional emphasis Government has given to the benefit of conterminous footprints for local public services has also been a genuine recommitment to, dare I say, Total Place which should be welcome.

However, the reforms of the NHS need to equally commit anew to place-based working, rather than simply reshaping ICBs in artificial clusters and forms that don't align with local communities. If the three shifts that Lord Darzi's review spoke about, and the expected 10 Year Plan is anticipated to reinforce, then I'm optimistic that the NHS will also pivot towards place in a way that hasn't been seen for a generation. A focus on prevention and neighbourhood health management will be essential for place-based working and improved outcomes and is exactly where new unitary authorities need to be as well.

Of course, achieving real place-based outcomes, approaches and reform is, at its heart, about relationships, power dynamics and forging new ways of working. LGR might be about structural change at one level, but the real opportunity has to be the prize of securing behavioural change, resetting the role of public services in place and working for a place, together with businesses, with the community and voluntary sector, but - perhaps most importantly - directly with, and led by, residents is one we should not miss. Yes, LGR is a process of change, but losing sight of why we need to change, who we need to change for, and resetting place at the heart of future councils and public services would be the greatest example of hitting the target but missing the point. So, long live place - let's embrace the opportunity of reform to really put place to the forefront of all that we do.

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