Placecast episode three – Abigail Taylor talks Chris Naylor and Jamie Ounan about place leadership

Transcript

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Welcome to Placecast, a Local Policy Innovation Partnership Hub production based at the University of Birmingham. Placecast is essential listening for those keen to explore the ins and outs of knowledge mobilisation for influence in central and local government, based on the view that is only through animating the power of place-based leadership. The wicked problems of 2025 can become more manageable.

Whether you're a researcher, citizen scientist and activist, a professional working within the public sector, civil servant, politician, analyst or entrepreneur, we think that it is through our networks that most solutions can be assembled, tested in the learning shared before we go again, and that universities connect as the repositories and observatories of these efforts. We're based in City-REDI and rooted in the LPIP program, funded by the ESRC AHRC and Innovate UK.

This podcast aims to highlight knowledge and evidence based ways of working, and the strategies needed to make a real impact on the decisions that shape our society. Our guests are changemakers from across the UK with stories about the way in which influence can be achieved. We focus in particular when some of the connective tissue within and between sectors. The clues as how to animate, place-based leadership as innovating is a team sport best done in the open. Please contact us for feedback on the episodes, or if you'd like to be a guest or have strong views on the processes of advocacy, lobbying, public campaigning and more. Unpacking how research and evidence connects with neighbourhood, local, city, regional and national missions.

In today's episode, Abigail Taylor is in conversation with Jamie Ounan and Chris Naylor, partners in the LPIP program. And I think you'll find these insights absolutely fascinating. Welcome to Placecast.

Abigail Taylor

Hello, I'm Doctor Abigail Taylor, and I'm a research fellow at City-REDI. I'm also one of the team leads on the Local Policy Innovation Partnership program, the LPIP Hub. I lead the Place Leadership workstream, which is designed to reflect on current challenges and opportunities for place leaders to pursue inclusive and sustainable economic growth. In order to identify what makes for good place leadership, we want to develop insights for how place leaders can work in partnership to break down silos within and between institutions.

I'm delighted to be joined here today by Chris Naylor and Jamie Ounan. Chris is a Managing Director at Inner Circle Consulting. He was previously Chief Executive of the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. In 2020, Chris was named Municipal Journal's Chief Executive of the

year. He was also seconded to Birmingham City Council to be the CEO, supporting, amongst other things, with their response to the Covid 19 pandemic and preparations for the Commonwealth Games.

Jamie, you are the Executive Chair and founder of Inner Circle, which helps leaders across the UK to reform public services. You've been a public sector reformer and transformer for over 20 years, supporting senior leaders within the public sector to prepare for change within complex systems and then enabling them to deliver the mission critical elements of this. You are also part of the LPIP hub leadership team.

So first, if I go to you, Chris, how did you get into this area of work?

Chris Naylor

That's a very good question. I think there are sort of two broad answers to it. First of all, I think many public servants, particularly those that are drawn to working in local government, will have an innate sense of purpose and direction and a sense that what their job is really about is helping people in a particular place to live the best possible lives that they can, and whether or not we always describe that as kind of sort of place leadership to some extent is neither here nor there. But I think for a lot of people, that's their core motivation. And I suspect it probably was for me, too. If I think back to sort of early career choices, I then think the sort of post-crash period austerity of the 2010s and what is then felt like a very profound period of kind of fiscal restraint, alongside a number of other kind of existential challenges for local places like kind of requires you to think about the lives of people in your place, the role of public services in supporting them. And so, inevitably, I think there hasn't been and can't really be a version of public service leadership that doesn't pivot pretty heavily into an understanding of place.

Abigail Taylor

Thanks, Chris, and I think it's fair to say that when I was reading in preparation for our discussion today, it's very clear that you are extremely well known for your work within the public sector. Regarding how the public sector can be reformed from within, and you were an early embracer of the shift to preventative models and a big advocate for place led growth. So I hope we'll be able to get into some of that during our discussion today. Jamie, perhaps you could say something now about how you came to be involved with the Hub and how you got to know Rebecca Riley, who is the director of the hub?

Jamie Ounan

Yes. Thank you. Abi. So how did I get involved with the hub? I have been a practitioner for quite a few years now, and at the beginning of my career, I remember deeply studying the academic evidence that was going into the policymaking. This is around 1998, 99, 2000, and there was a high degree of regard for thinking through policy quite carefully and really trying to get some better outcomes for the folks that live in the various places around the country.

And I guess over the last ten years or so, I have felt that the need for well-thought through policy and practice has got greater with the challenges that we face globally and as a country. But yet, perhaps there's been a bigger divergence than ever between the tactical practice of the of the government and the and thinking through what is actually needed and required to achieve to support communities to achieve a positive change.

So it was great when Bec called me up and said, we're looking at a program to bring together practitioners with academics. And could you be can you play a role of being a bridge between the two, given your backgrounds? So with much delight, I said, absolutely, count me in. And so ever since then, I guess I've been working with you and colleagues and trying to build that bridge and trying to understand what evidence we've got and how can we and what do leaders need, and how can we bring those things together?

Abigail Taylor

Thank you. And it's a pleasure to be able to work with you on this leadership workstream. Chris, based on your experiences of leading local authorities, what would you say a place leader is for you and how, if at all, is it different from other types of leaders, say an entrepreneurial leader or an NHS leader?

Chris Naylor

I think there is leading complex organisations. I think is a particular discipline that probably is reasonably transferable between sectors. And I think for many years, actually, curiously enough, the role of being a local authority chief executive probably didn't feel significantly different to or had the potential not to feel significantly different to a senior NHS figure or senior civil servant, or for that matter, someone who's running a dynamic private sector organisation.

So to some extent, I'll be talking about place leaders as individuals or place leadership as a proposition. Perhaps we'll come back to that a few times during this conversation, because it doesn't necessarily follow that the task of place leadership is best fulfilled by the person who's also got the job title chief executive, although sometimes that is the case and it's often manifest as I partnership of individuals or organisations.

The obvious example that's often cited in relation to that is the long term partnership between the leader and chief executive of Manchester over the period of 20 years, where between the two of them they exhibited very strong place leadership, and they each brought some aspects to that. But it was their commitment to the place of Manchester and to the lives of people living in that city. And I think seeing a particular opportunity as a particular moment in time, that they collectively seized and really to look backwards in a kind of academic way you can discern from what they were doing. So attributes of place, leadership. So the sort of long preamble, a thing to unpack, like just what we mean by this. You don't generally get jobs in local government or in the public sector that are described as be a place leader, although I would say it's pretty difficult these days to sort of be a senior local government person, be that either a politician or an officer, without at least having a thought about what that means.

So let's just unpack that just a little bit more then. So I think and I said a little bit about this in masses of introductory preamble about why I was interested in this world. And I think the short

answer to that question is that place leadership essentially is about the task of understanding what needs to happen in a particular place to ensure that the people who are living there are able to live the best version of their lives, and to define for themselves what the good life means for them, and to then be in a position to pursue that, whatever that might mean.

And therein there's a quite a big question about personal agency and creating the conditions with which individuals are free to make choices about their lives and genuine choices. And then when you start to unpack that, a sort of whole universe of things kind of open up, doesn't it? So there's a kind of economic dimensions to economic power or economic dis power, I suppose.

There's a whole set of questions about other barriers that people face that quite often will manifest themselves in places, and the role of the states to kind of, kind of systematically remove those barriers or to understand them and to form the necessary interventions to ensure that people are as unfettered as possible. So that might sound like a slightly academic or theoretical answer to the question about sort of place leadership, but I think you almost need to start at that kind of like super strategic level. And then I think and keep asking that question and see, you've got a kind of workable theory or understanding of what it means in any particular place. That sort of is the starting point for place leadership.

Abigail Taylor

Thank you. That's really helpful. And it reminds me some discussions that I've had with Professor Will Rossiter at Nottingham Trent University about the importance of looking at both leaders of and in place. I think having that theoretical understanding is a good starting point for our discussion, and then maybe throughout the next half an hour or so, we can move on to talk about what that means in practice and what we can take from the experiences of you and others in this space. Jamie Inner Circle obviously specialise in advising local authorities.

What would you say then? What advice would you give for someone who's a senior local authority leader in terms of place leadership?

Jamie Ounan

We work up and down the country, and I suppose what there are a few characteristics I see of sort of place leaders who are who are making some progress. And I would amplify the deepness of the local knowledge of some of those leaders.

You know, they really immerse themselves in that place. They care about that place. I don't think you have to be from that place. That helps as the story. But I think you've got to have a a care for the community and a love of that place, and it needs to get under your skin. So I see a lot of place leaders feeling very attached to a place and very passionate about their place.

And then I think they as part of that, they quickly discern, of course, they're not the only person who's a leader in that place. You know, they happen to be a label of a CEO, but they spot some leaders everywhere, at all levels, in all, in all guises, and they tend to gravitate towards those characters and work out a way to collaborate deeply with them or enable them, or get out of the way and allow those people to do what they're brilliant at.

So there's definitely about local knowledge, like I see the place leaders really think about the assets of a place. I don't just mean a physical property asset, I mean the rich assets of a place. They quite often don't get too hung up on the deficits of a place, although one has to understand the conditions of a place, but they're very often trying to work out how to get the best out of that, whether it be the physical space, the landscape, the attributes, the humans, the assets, the institutions, and so on and so forth.

So that's all part of the sort of deep local knowledge. And then underpinning that, I would say most chief executives or place leaders not using those interchangeably, they are optimists here, incorrigible optimist. They are always, always looking for the positive in that place. And what that does is people coalesce around them. They gain a followership for their they bridge silos naturally through that optimism for that place.

And I suppose a fourth or final bit which tries to link to the academic work that we're doing, I think they tend to be good at reading the data and reading the signs and reading the information about the place, but they read very subtle signs. Emotional information is as important as hard data from a peer reviewed academic report.

In fact, potentially more important or certainly more more in the forefront. So they work really hard across all of that information. And in a sense, they then tend to bring people along with stories around that. And that is a skill in its own right that that is not to sort of bend the truth of data and information and research findings, but that is to try and weave into the local context, to try and understand what it means for that place, humanise it, localise it.

And at that stage, they are then working with a brilliant team to make great decisions, to invest their time, energy and effort in amplifying what the great bit is about their place. And that tends to be the way you start to get towards your mission and begin to help the people that you are aiming to help and support.

Abigail Taylor

Thank you. Some really important points that you raised that I was particularly struck by how you talked about the importance of, in some cases, having local knowledge, but where that doesn't come from, growing up in the place, how people can develop that knowledge and the time you used about the place getting into someone's skin and make. And that's what makes leaders passionate about their place and using that to drive forward the place. You started there getting into my next question, which is about a spotlight on solutions and the skills that are needed to be a leader of an in place and of an organisation. You mentioned the importance of being optimistic and also being collaborative. Chris, do you believe that being collaborative is enough to shift the system, or to what extent is it important to design that system to get the best out of the talent within a place?

Chris Naylor

Well, I definitely think that sort of that collaborative spirit combined with a lot of what Jamie was saying there, which is you could sort of summarise is kind of extreme ambition is necessary and I don't think I've seen versions of it work where you've got someone unambitious who works in a deeply uncollaborative way, being successful as a place leader. Right. So is the counterfactual.

So it's necessary, but it's not sufficient. And I think we need to recognise that leadership is imposing itself onto a set of institutions. And I mean that both in the kind of literal sense of the word and in the sociological sense of the word that were designed by our great grandparents generation to respond to the problems of probably the late 19th and early 20th century that have been in place for the best part of 80 to 100 years. And they are in many respects not fit for purpose for the profoundly different contexts of the early to mid 21st century. And to some extent, you can have all the ambition and collaborative zeal and, you know, work every minute of the day. But the problem is that those institutions will constrain the ability of a place leader to, to maximise the outcomes that they want.

So let me just unpack what I mean by that. So I think the sort of postwar settlement, which actually was kind of didn't really say a lot about place, actually. But as I say in the second, made a series of assumptions that no longer hold. Right? So it kind of assumed you'd have a growing industrial economy that could fund the public services it just created. It assumed that there would be full male employment, and that employment would pay a decent enough wage for people to live a half decent life, that the state would kind of provide basics in terms of housing and education. It assumed that women would look stay at home and look after the kids they would provide. Social care essentially is a free good into the economy. And then insofar as kind of consumption of public services was concerned, the kind of prevailing assumption was that people would use public services episodically and not for very long. So you'd have a short term problem, maybe a bout of ill health needing an operation or a sort of an issue that led to a sort of temporary lapse in employment. But essentially the state was there to kind of just help them get through this bit and carry on. And, well, none of those things hold in the 21st century. We don't have a growing industrial economy. We don't have full make employment. The basics aren't being met by the state and women, fortunately, are not consigned to a life of domestic servitude, although they are continuing to share the majority of the burden of that. And of course, there are huge numbers of people who are completely embedded and knitted into the fabric of public services in a way that isn't great for them and isn't sustainable for us.

So the reason why I say a lot of it, which is why it's a bit of a tangent, is going on there, because I think what we have is a set of public services. So it is not clear, like what is their role in growing the economy and particularly growing the economy in a way that benefits those that needs the economy the most. Like we all talk about prevention being an important ingredient in a place. So how people live in a way that is sustainable and enriching, rather than, as Jamie put earlier, kind of a deficit to them and then a burden on the states. What we have is a set of public services designed to respond to the consequences of those things, rather than from first principles to prevent it.

So the reason why I'm saying all of this is because it's absolutely vital that you're as a place that you are able to tell the story of where this place could and should be over the medium to long term. But we will often, Jamie, won't we, at Inner Circle talk about a sort of a 20 year understanding of where you want your place to be, and then what that means has to be true in the next two years if you've got a fighting chance of hitting that 20 year vision and what needs to be true in the next two months, if you're gonna right. So think you're in that sort of timeline, but a fundamental part of that, then has to turn to the reform of those local institutions so that they are pivoting to growth so that they are designed from first principles to prevent rather than treat and I think increasingly, it's interesting that we're recording this podcast the day after the local elections, where there's been a seismic shift in some parts of the country in terms of how people have voted, the ability of public services to build and rebuild trust between people,

because it's those three things in any given place that enable people to live the good life. Trust between them and their neighbours and between themselves and the state. A growing economy that meets their needs and is and pivots towards those that need to growth the most, alongside a state that's designed to prevent harm taking place in the first place. All those three things need to be in the mix, and that requires institutional reform as well as to answer your question, ambitious leadership and a kind of spirit of collaboration important those as though they are.

Abigail Taylor

Thank you very much. And could you say a bit about how you tried to balance ambitious leadership, institutional reform to move from focusing on treatment to prevention, when you were at Barking and Dagenham?

Chris Naylor

Well, I think the starting point was we didn't really have any choice because we were at that. I mean, I joined that council in the back end of 2014 and 2015 so we're sort of half a decade into austerity. They were facing very, very significant financial challenges in the coming 5 to 6 years. I think pretty much everyone was of the view that a sort of strategy that said, what we need to do in response to this context is gets a bit smaller every year, was not going to be a winnable well, it was just wasn't going to work, you know. And so we had to sort of think quite big and we had to think quite boldly about what that would look like. And I suppose I think where that takes you to is we spent a good, I'd say, nine months to a year developing a very, very clear vision that was both place based, but alongside that had an eye to the institutional reforms that would need to take place inside the council to make that happen. And so, in other words, we were kind of very clear about the end state. I think we called it something like ambition 2020, which when you look at it now feels a bit cringy that we called it that. But particularly when it was five years ago. But from the perspective of 2015, it felt like sufficiently far enough away for us to be able to think boldly, but not so far away that we kind of lose the thread and start imagining that we'd all be flying around with jetpacks on my back, something, and and that then sort of liberated us to start to ask the big questions and then answer them.

Abigail Taylor

Jamie, can I bring you in now? How deep do you think leadership needs to run to address some of these play space challenges? By that I mean, how do you think leaders should work together across silos, both, as Chris was really referring to within a council and across organizations towards greater outcomes?

Jamie Ounan

Gosh! You know this is a real big question. Every leader of every organisation that is based in the place knows that their true success is both a combination of the many facets that are an organisation working harmoniously towards an outcome, and the many other organisations and individuals and people in a place and businesses in a place working together. And some of that

is serendipitous, but a lot of it does come from collaboration. And I guess there's always a judgment to be made in how much time one spends working with your own organisation versus enabling and collaborating. I think leaders tend to just have a really innate instinct of how to balance their time in that regard. They tend to be pretty good at seeing this talent in their team and enabling that and spotting the right person for the right job. And sometimes the right person won't quite be in the right role at the right time. But, you know, they find a way of maneuvering that around, you know, having the right conversations to get the right people in the right place. So they tend to have a good sense of that already, really. And sometimes the work that I do can be a bit of a coach, and they usually have the answers and they ask you the questions, but ultimately, you know, you holding up a coaching mirror.

I think some of the really powerful changes in a place, some of the innovations can come from when maybe a handful, two, three, four really aligned leaders or people with a leadership mentality come together. Chris and Darren in Barking Dagenham were a great example of two people who aligned around a common mission, and they see some great things that you had a really good balance of risk that they were prepared to take, and how to see that through with great attention to detail and to look at across a portfolio of activities. They were reforming activities, knowing that not all of them would happen exactly how they thought it would. None of that would happen exactly how they thought it would. But not all of them would be a true success and then get too hung up on the ones that ended up not being as successful as one hoped, and just adapting and focusing on the positives.

I think you see some great collaborations around places like the Olympic Park Legacy Planning, which I've been involved with. Again, I don't think there was some interesting challenges dropped into that place around the how to maintain the scale of endeavour that comes alongside an Olympics, whilst also maintaining the scale of participation from across the world, as it were, from across a diverse group of people, and that those challenges were put to those groups of leaders. And those leaders have come up with some great legacy plans and are continuing to ensure that East London communities truly benefit from that legacy. So again, that was a group of smart people coming together around a common mission and people dropping in challenges to them and then standing up and saying, yes, you know, I got a mission accepted. And then again, a heck of a lot of commitment to the place and detail, attention to detail as they ran through the delivery. And I think that is not to be underestimated as we talk about having a common North Star. And that's powerful. And that takes a while to create in some places, it's then how determined one is, and the group of people are to see that through and how resilient they can be, that when they do try and it fails, pick themselves up, have another go, because it was failed with good intent and it was failed with skill and but it just couldn't work in that instance.

So they adapt. And like a entrepreneurs in the, in the private sector or like we characterise entrepreneurs in the private sector, they bring those kind of adaptive skills. And at certain points I think they do stop seeing the boundaries of their organisations for large parts of their day. And they do start looking at the collaboration across an, an area as a whole. And some of that can be learned and practiced and watched when you're in a space. And I think some of that is down to character and of just certain humans coming together.

Chris Naylor

Abi, can I just amplify what Jamie just said there? Because I think reflecting back on that time in Barking, which was, I think, probably a good example of successful place leadership, there's like a whole set of things that are being held in tension. So on the one hand, you've got to be in that kind of creative, inspiring vision space. And but then, as Jamie says, and then the next literally like the next minute, you've got to be right in the detail and, you know, if I ever wrote a kind of management book, which I never works, I haven't got the predisposition to sit down and concentrate long enough. If I wrote a management book, it'd be called something like the Detail Never Looks After itself by Chris Naylor, or problems never solved themselves by Chris something uninspiring that nobody ever want to read. But the truth of the matter is, it's a heady mix of vision and detail and and similarly kind of taking a long term perspective and a short term perspective.

So I guess the point I'm getting to here is that there's a lots of things that needs to be held in tension. And I think what enables you to kind of just kind of stay resilient through managing those tensions is being clear about the goal. And it's interesting that Jamie's example of the Olympics, I mean, know that's an example of like, you can't mess that up, can you? I mean, it's like there's it's on whenever it was in the July 2012 that day ain't shifting and then but you've got to be both visionary and like detail focused kind of get yourself there. And I think that's important.

Abigail Taylor

Thank you. Really interesting. Great to have those practical examples that I think you both talked about how we're in this incredibly turbulent policy environment, both globally, nationally, often regionally, locally with institutions constantly changing.

A lot of the things we took for granted changing seemingly on a daily basis. I was wondering, do you think that the skills needed it by a place leader now are different to those that were crucial 5 or 10 years ago?

Chris Naylor

I don't know if they're different, but they're definitely necessary in a way that I think it was possible to play to a different set of strengths, potentially. Whereas I think with very, very few exceptions, there isn't a version of local government sustainability that doesn't interface very closely with a medium to long term understanding about the resilience and wellbeing of the wider place. I mean, I think in other parts of the world there's a very, very direct relationship, particularly where local taxation is the principal funding source of funding for local.

In the US, for example, the symbiotic relationship between the success of a place and the policy of public services to do their job, which is less clear in England and Wales. But almost all of the big profound problems and demand for public services, the building of trust between individuals and each other, like trying to kind of get from underneath this kind of stagnant growth that we've descended into, climate change will ultimately play itself out as a set of local conversations. None of these can be tackled without a quite profound understanding of place leadership and what that means.

Abigail Taylor

Thank you. Jamie, did you want to come in as well?

Jamie Ounan

Yes. Well, I for one, I've got a huge amount to add from what Chris has said, but, you know, it's a heck of a job being a very senior person in a local public sector organisation. It's a huge responsibility. Chris, what you famously said to me, you must edit this one out. but the famously says when you need to know three things about everything. And the only other thing I need to know is whether they're the right three things, because you're across thousands of topics, and in many ways, the buck stops with you.

In many ways, and you're both being a very innovative, creative, risk taking, entrepreneurial character. And you're being a very, very responsible steward of vast amounts or a lot of public money under the highest scrutiny that one can get, because it's public life and quite rightly so. So it's a heck of a job. I think it's a very fulfilling job. I would encourage many people to walk towards the job and the role, but I could understand why you wouldn't. And in some instances it's a bit like being a modern politician. And I think that's one of the things that we can do as a, as a sector is to make sure that we are creating the right conditions to support the full range of people, no matter what their life circumstances are, to to be that leader and to take on that role and give them space to learn that that role and to flourish. I think that is important. It's all the more important, whether it's harder or not. Now, I don't know, it's all the more important. But it's certainly it's certainly a critical role and we need as many people as we can.

So this is what, again, why the LPIP work is so great. If we can, the more we can gather information. And that supports future leaders, but also the more we can create a community of practice, if you like, of those leaders working together and learning from each other. I think that's very helpful.

Chris Naylor

Do you know, I think that's bang on. Yeah. There's a phrase easy. You got to know three things about a thousand things. But the problem is you work with people who know a thousand things about three things. And this is quite stressful. And as Jamie says, you've got to do the right three things. If you know 6 or 7 things and you become an expert and then you get if you don't care if you end up chairing some bloody, you know, regional thing, it's just that's another layer of complexity to a complex life.

Do you know the only thing I think, let's just say it for the sake of like not assuming that people know this or believe this. Place leadership is deeply political, and if it's not, then it's not place leadership. It's just sort of performative musing. Because ultimately, what we're talking about here is like the future of a place and the lives of the people in it. Well, if that is not a set of political questions and I don't know what is there not necessarily party political questions, although sometimes they might be, but they are often about a sense of purpose and trade off.

And there are decisions and choices and they are all very, very political. And almost going back to the question at the top of the podcast, which was about, you know, what is it to be a place leader? I think it is about very, very strong partnership between professionals who can then deal

with the thousand things, having heard the three things that the politicians really want to really want to to drive at, but also that politicians is a sufficient level of trust with the people who are supporting them, that they themselves can be influenced by the other possible and and understand the risks and trade offs.

So it's very political, and I think having that recognition of that as we're in a period of deliberation around local government reform and devolution, particularly in England, is definitely worth dwelling on. The interrelationship, I guess, between the sort of political economy. I don't mean that in the kind of economic sense the word, but sort of a relevant economic geography and the political leadership of that. You get that wrong at your peril. And I think that is becoming an increasingly important part of the conversation around LGR, for precisely the reasons that we've been talking about in this podcast.

Abigail Taylor

Thank you. We're going to start wrapping up shortly, but just before that, I'd really like to take this opportunity to pick up on this point about the decisions and choices that senior local authority leaders need to make on a daily basis, balancing the short term, the medium term, and the long term.

Jamie, you talked about the importance of humanising stories. Chris, you mentioned how vital it is to have goals that are clear and ambitious, but focused so that the mission doesn't get lost, and using stories to bring people along the way. How do you both think that leaders should use evidence and co-create evidence?

Chris Naylor

Well, I don't think you can do place leadership without evidence and creating that evidence. I don't mean manufacturing it now. I mean sort of ensuring that the right information exists. Let me give you two examples.

So in Barking we have a mission to significantly increase the pace and scale of housing development in the borough. We had space for 70,000 homes, 25 minutes from central London, and the market and the public sets were building at the rate of about 700 a year. So it's going to take a century to build out, which is absolute madness when you think about it. And so in order to kind of like understand what the interventions, where we need to make sure the local authorities to kind of change that we needed. And this, this comes back to that kind of strategy point of a real bold vision to build more homes quickly became very, very quickly a conversation about detail around land ownership, land availability, the affordability of that land, the propensity or otherwise to invest in that place, to build the homes and make a returns. And it was kind of curious, really, that the that information was in that people's fingertips and often in many places isn't. And yet if you think about sort of basic market economics, it's sort of predicated on the notion that people are rational, when we're not, and that this perfect knowledge of the market and local authorities, like they have perfect knowledge of the market, right, because they know stuff before anybody else does. That was one important set of information. And so sort of knowing the value of it, both commercially and in terms of that kind of mission.

The second data point, I mean, these are all worthy of a podcast in their own right, right. But if you ask the question, how do you prevent people coming into expensive care? Then you can start to do some root cause analysis based on who has come into care. And what we found in Barking was that if you were living a household, was in the private rented sector, if it was in debt and if that debt was rising, if that household was in low income or intermittent employment, and if something else big was going on, like domestic abuse or a mental health issue, then that household was eight times more associated with a child coming into the care system. And if those factors weren't in place now, this is not causation. It wasn't cause and effect, it was association. But once you know that, you can't unknow it. And then you can ask the computer, well, how many households in Barking and Dagenham have those attributes? To which the answer was 3500. Then you say, okay. And how many of those households are known to the early help early intervention teams at Children's services? Answer about half of them. Right. Okay. Go knock on the doors of the other half. Right. Because they're the people that are probably most at risk of experiencing some form of preventable harm.

So the point I'm getting into here is that I think I mentioned earlier, political leadership absolutely imperative to place leadership, keeping an eye on long term strategy and the detail that doesn't look after itself underneath it. All of that is underpinned by you've got to have fantastic data that helps you build a theory of change and validate that theory of change, and check the extent to which the changes that you're putting in place are having the desired effect.

Jamie Ounan

And Abi, if I can add to that, I think herein lies the biggest opportunity to build bridges between the academic university sector and local authorities or, you know, mayors. I think local authorities have had to make cuts in every department that has included strategy departments or policy teams or research teams. There's some brilliant people out there doing some brilliant things, but they're pretty limited in their capacity. And you've got this huge capability within universities that are looking to have local impact or are assessed on local impact.

So this is this is where the the game is. This is where the partnership is not. And I don't think it's about commissioning small one off projects. I think it's about deep partnership over many years and both seeing themselves as stewards of that of that place, leaders within that place, sharing their rich assets as much as they can and really, really informing some brilliant decisions.

I think that takes a little bit of adjustment from the academic world to consider the everyday life of decision making in less government, for example, the LPIP group it's called Local Policy Innovation Partnerships. Well, you don't often talk about policy at a local level. You often see you talking about strategy. You talk about action plans. We really are often talking about the thoughtful distribution of shared resources and investment in the of scarce resources.

That's where the informed decisions can have hugely powerful payback. I don't mean in cash terms, I mean in social and economic and environmental terms. So again, there's a little bit of adjustment of language there. And then local authorities are extremely busy in their annual cycle and their daily cycle. And that is a little bit out of kilter with the pace at which academics work.

But I think some patience of local authorities to engage and understand the research process, understand what will what needs to happen over five years or two years or two months and then

work with those. I think there you've started to have some very actionable things to do there to to improve public policy outcomes. And, you know, the lives of thousands of people. And local government reform might just be another important generational moment where we bring the local players together.

Abigail Taylor

Thank you for a really important challenges and lessons I think have come out of our discussion. and it will be exciting to see where we take this over the LPIP program for the next 18 months to so. Just before we finish. Final question for you. Can you think of a specific person who's a really good broker or place leader? And why?

Chris Naylor

Where should I start? Well, I think he has recently stepped down as leader of Barking council, but I worked with Councillor Darren Rodwell for seven years, and I think Darren embodied a number of the things that we've been talking about today. So he happened to be from Dagenham, lived there all his life. Very passionate about the place was sort of personally triggered by the election of British National Party councillors in 2006. That kind of activated his sort of pride in place politically. But what was what Darren was very good at doing was sort of setting, what do they call them, BHAGs big, hairy, audacious goals.

Well, so it was Darren who sort of looked at the sort of housing situation and thought to himself, well, they built the Becontree estate in 12 years, you know, the largest public sector estate in the world at one point, 40 odd thousand homes cracked out between 1920, in the mid 1930s. And he was, like baffled as to why it was so difficult to get other houses built. So he was just like, we're going to sort this out. You know, Darren is there was a guy who said, you know, we're going to build the largest film studios inside the M25 in a in a generation, or who talks about bringing the first university to Barking and Dagenham. So and quite often we have people sort of look at him like he was bonkers. And every so often it was a bit bonkers. But the point was that he was unashamedly ambitious for the people in the place, and then he trusted people like me around him to kind of get the job done, and it was remarkable working with him. I'm not sure I'll ever experience that again in my professional life, which is a shame because it was great.

Abigail Taylor

Thank you very much. Darren Rodwell sounds inspiring and like he's had an enormous impact on Barking and Dagenham alongside you work, of course. I think we'll need to end it there. Thank you so much Chris and Jamie for your time today. It's been a pleasure to speak with you. I find the discussion really interesting, and I think you've identified a lot of lessons and challenges that will continue to address to through the Place Leadership workstream on the LPIP. We set out to mine insights from experts, real world case studies, practical tips and career advice and spotlight solutions for place-based policy innovation. And we have.

Jamie Ounan

Fab. Thank you.

Abigail Taylor

Thank you.