Placecast Podcast – Episode Five - Bridging the Gap: Universities, Policy, and the Power of Place

Nicola Headlam in conversation with Des McNulty

Transcript

Nicola Headlam:

Good morning and 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 and the wicked problems of 2025 can become more manageable.

Whether you are a researcher, politician, citizen scientist and activist, a professional working within the public sector, a civil servant, analyst or entrepreneur, we think that it is through our networks that the most solutions can be assembled, tested and the learning shared before we go again, and that universities can act 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, Innovate UK.

This podcast aims to highlight the knowledge and evidence base, the ways of working and the strategies needed to make real impact on the decisions that shape our society. Our guests are the changemakers from across the UK with stories about the ways in which influence can be achieved. We focus in particular on some of the connective tissue within and between sectors for clues as how to animate place based-leadership, as innovation is a team sport best done in the open.

Please contact us for feedback on the episode, or if you'd like to be a guest or have strong views on the processes of advocacy, lobbying, public campaigning and more. My guest this morning is Professor Des McNulty, who is the Chair of the LPIP Advisory Board. Des was a sociologist who then took a swerve into politics as a member of the Scottish Parliament for Clydebank and Milngavie.

He was in that role from 1999 to 2011. Some of his jobs included convener of the Scottish Parliament Finance Committee. Deputy Minister for Social Justice and Deputy Communities Minister. It was in 2012 when he returned to academia to establish Policy Scotland with Ken Gibb and to support knowledge exchange within the School of Political Sciences at the University of Glasgow.

Des, we're very happy to have you with us.

Des McNulty:

Thanks very much, Nicola.

Nicola Headlam:

So we were saying the other day that we've probably known 1 to 10 years doing this kind of work, but I think it's even slightly longer than that.

Des McNulty:

Yeah, I think my initial kind of contact with you was around ideas we were developing around the notion of the intelligent city and how universities could engage with making cities more effective in developing policies, particularly evidence led policies. And in that sense, moving towards economic transformation and one of the themes, I think, in that was really talking about what kinds of geographies worked. There's a lot of economic work really about conurbations and natural economic units. And certainly in Scotland, I would argue Scotland is not a natural economic unit, whereas the Glasgow City region is much more a natural economic unit.

So one of the questions that particularly interested me was really about this system that we've got in Scotland, where you've got a national government for a country about 5.5 million people, but a third of that population lives in west central Scotland. So what's the correct relationship between different tiers of government in that setting? Bearing in mind international evidence that actually suggests that the multiplier effects and the dynamic effects of growth are best focused on looking at natural economic units.

Nicola Headlam:

So let's get straight into it. I've always found from local or the place lens is that you make it work, don't you? You make it work no matter what multi layers or agencies or policies or drivers or levers or barriers you need to deploy. Which is why I'm always talking about the notion of scope at scale. You've got to have the right scope that you can put around you at the right scale, and then you're kind of off to the races.

However, I think the feeling is that there are some gaps within the current subnational institutional fix. And I don't know if that's a problem with England, but specifically, I'm very interested in talking to Scotland because we were talking about this recently. There was never a loop back from devolution to the body politic itself.

Des McNulty:

Yeah. I mean, I suppose that I'm perhaps also looking at, you know, how academics and policymakers can work together and thinking about evidence and what that means and whether policymakers really are looking for research, whether they're looking for something else from cities.

I mean, going back to, well, I think there's something else is very often accumulated experience or expertise, which is not the same as a single research project. I mean, the expertise the people can bring to bear as academics is very often not something which is limited to a single set of research findings. It's actually the accumulated knowledge and wisdom, if you can put it like that, that people have has a function of being in a particular policy area of policy space to the most effective contributors, I think, to city-based policymaking.

And I think it actually applies at national government level as well. A people who can deploy that evidence effectively and know how to engage with policymakers on the policy makers own terrain, i.e., dealing with the problems and accepting the constraints and parameters within which policymakers are working. I think academics don't have that. They either don't have the experience, or they perhaps don't have the level of understanding of of how things work in the policy world to achieve that.

Nicola Headlam:

There's very much a rapid turnover rather than anything else. So the key is to be a bit of a time traveller and to be able to bring to bear lessons that you've garnered over a long period of time. But to be able to understand that at a sort of very fast pace and that turnover at the centre, which again, is why your perspective is so interesting.

Des McNulty:

Yeah, policymakers move around a bit. I mean, it's undoubtedly the case that people who've been in, in academia for a considerable period of time will have a longer memory of things that worked and things that didn't. And understanding of the precise policy context. But that's not to say that policymakers don't accumulate knowledge. Quite a lot of them are very experienced and informed in their own fields.

And of course, they have different knowledges. They have knowledge of how a particular policy arena fits within a broader policy context. They have an understanding of how, in a sense, that the system itself works and policies come into being, are implemented, and then can be learnt from and the different processes by which that learning takes place. And these are not things lots of academics actually have. I mean, some do, but not many.

Nicola Headlam:

So if I can start asking you about the LPIPs specifically, what are your hopes within the LPIPs bearing in mind your long experience?

Des McNulty:

I'm really interested in place because I think that place is where different strands of policy come together and also it provides a context in which these strands of policy come together.

So typically, an academic might be an expert in housing or homelessness or a particular strand of economic development, innovation, etc., etc. and if you're an academic, you can specialise in that particular space and map out how that occurs in different kinds of different settings. But a policymaker working in that field is having to deal with contending issues and complexity, and also financial and policy constraints.

A lot of politics depends on it's like reshaping a narrative rather than going for something radically new and different. So in a sense, the ways in which academics or universities and policy makers come together is not a simple, straightforward one. It's sometimes people interpreted as, you know, if only the policymakers would listen to the well-researched findings of academics x, then we would get better decisions.

Well, that may well be the case, but policymaker is taking in all kinds of evidence, not just research evidence, you know, through an RCT trial or something like that. This appears to be highly scientific. They're also having to deal with the people that this decision effects are having to deal with competitive situation in a political environment. They're dealing with other priorities that have to be addressed.

They have to find a solution. So it's not good enough for them just to describe the problem. They actually have to do something about it. So in a sense, a policymaker is dealing with at least as complex a set of parameters as the academics. But in a sense, academics really rarely recognise that. And I think policymakers maybe don't always appreciate the complexity of the understanding an academic can actually bring to the equation.

So part of my role has actually been to broker these kinds of relationships and find ways in which these two groups of people can collaborate in ways that benefit them both. And I do think one of the really interesting things about place is it's where different policy strands come together and people are affected. You can have a theoretical understanding of a policy like child poverty at national level, but when you're dealing with that in a place, you're actually dealing with people and you're dealing with a variety of services and circumstances that people are contending with.

So it all becomes very real, and the choices that you're having to make can no longer abstract choices. They're actually scientifically reducible choices. They're actually very practical choices that they have to make. Now, science can influence those choices. The policymakers have to make, but it can't do it in maybe the laboratory style environment that the academics typically would ideally like.

Nicola Headlam:

So I think that's right. Academics are not strangers to the world of constraints, of course, because they understand the constraints that they operate under. So moving to my next question, which is about the power of place. You've said that you're a place advocate. What are your hopes for work on place reaching maturity and becoming fully embedded? And what could change in your view as a result?

Des McNulty:

I think what we've seen in recent years, so my background goes back to the days of Strathclyde region in Scotland, which was a very powerful, all purpose authority with serious, you know, resources and strategic capacity. It was abolished in 1995 largely because of political jealousies, I suspect, and a kind of sense that had become too powerful, particularly from the point of view, the then conservative government.

I thought that was a process of vandalism, because they took apart something that was working and that lots of people had been trying to construct something similar since think, I think in places like Greater Manchester. I mean, it's quite interesting the way in which Andy Burnham's rhetoric kind of reflects the kinds of powers that Strathclyde region had, or indeed the GLC had, I suppose, although Strathclyde was, I would argue, a much more successful organisation, less limited than the GLC in terms of its powers.

But it was abolished and we got Scottish Parliament in its place is a very different type of devolution, one that has a parliament and therefore legislative capacity, whereas Strathclyde region was effectively administrative unit. One of the things I think is a problem in Scotland is over use of legislative powers. We're actually legislating too much and not kind of governing as efficiently as we might do.

And also, as I said earlier on, I think Scotland is not really a natural economic unit. It's not a conurbation. It's quite a diverse, in fact, a very diverse country in terms of its economic geography and social circumstances. So what we've had to do in west central Scotland is rebuild some aspects of Strathclyde region. I mean, not all of it by any manner of means, but the bits that are really about economic development and economic collaboration at that level, working out how we can match our assets to our opportunities and find ways of driving forward change.

We haven't had the elected mayor or the combined authorities that you've got in England, it's had to be a more voluntary arrangement that's been put in place. But I think it has been done really successfully in west central Scotland, particularly through using city deals. Quite strategically, the resources that came creating an intelligence hub, which actually provides an evidence base to the city region, and a mechanism for developing arguments, not just arguments for resources, but arguments for showing how you can more effectively use resources to achieve outcomes.

And that process of developing data, evidence, knowledge, understanding of what the city region needs has actually been pivotal in the recent success of Glasgow as a city region and boosting its competitiveness with places like Manchester and the West Midlands as comparator regions. What's interesting is to see if you like the different dynamics of change that are taking place in those three places, and then looking beyond them to say, well, what is happening in other places in the UK that are actually coming in the footsteps of this mean in places like Newcastle, Northeast region, Yorkshire, that are beginning to kind of follow in the pathways that others had put in place, but are also working towards their own futures, you know, looking at their own situations and how they're going to be competitive, how they're going to manage the social problems that they've got, how they're going to deal with environmental and other kinds of issues. And that capacity at place level is actually, I think, really vital to the future success of the UK as a country.

We've been far too long, kind of dominated by London in the southeast and the financial sector and the dynamics of being at the core of an international player in the world economy. And

that's been to some extent at the expense of the success of our big cities and our big conurbations. And now, I think partly through the levelling up agenda and what's followed on from that through City Deal and so on, and the policies of the new Labour government to focus on spatial inequalities and driving for economic growth.

If we can actually get place, focus growth strategies in place, I think that's the best dynamic that we can possibly have for change. And in the conurbations, whether it's Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield, Birmingham, etc., the universities play a pivotal role because they are big institutions in these places and that knowledge focused institutions that have an international connection and they can bring things to the cities.

What we need to do is to find ways in which the things that universities can bring on the universities can have, can be most effectively used by partnerships or collaborations based on place that are looking at how you build prosperity and build dynamism into the trajectory of these places.

Nicola Headlam:

Thank you. That's an incredibly comprehensive answer, and I think you're absolutely right. I mean, my own view is that the mayoral experiment is in its kind of pulled focus.

Des McNulty:

I agree with that. I think actually far more important to talk about the combined authority's actually, and the mayor, some of just the figureheads. But is the combined authority is in the collaboration across the city region that that's really important. I mean, that's not to understate the importance of personal leadership.

I mean, you know, you do have, you know, very successful individuals and perhaps also some less successful individuals in these kinds of roles. But personalising it in that way, I think, is the wrong way to say it is really about the partnership and the collaboration, how you create that in a sustainable way, which is really important. Economic change relies on sustainable partnership.

Nicola Headlam:

So that's your solution then city dealing processes and that's brilliant. Can you give us an example of when you've seen those dynamics played out effectively internationally?

Des McNulty:

I think there are a number of international lessons. I mean, I've been really interested in some of the things that happen in Denmark, for example, where I think universities are moving towards really theorising what is a Danish approach to social and economic policy and strategising. In the USA

I think there are some great examples. If you look at the ways in which big institutions like Harvard, Stanford and Yale a kind of beginning to get involved in policymaking and policy thinking at that state level, despite all that's happening, you know, from the federal government and then other big institutions in places like Texas, Michigan, right across the US, I think, you know, some great examples of university, city, university, state collaboration to drive forward getting economic innovation into effect and drawing together the business community through philanthropic community, the university and government in ways that can be quite dynamic.

I mean, probably the place that I think is most interesting in that regard is North Carolina and the impact that the Raleigh Durham Triangle, which is a really interesting collaboration between, you know, the universities, the state business community to really drive forward the economic growth of that area. Great, great. But you can have other examples. The Greater Boston area is a fantastic example of collaboration between universities, the state, the city and all kinds of private sector sector partners.

Nicola Headlam:

So for this next question, we have divided academics and place leaders. So what I'd like you to rack your brains and think of a specific person. More on the academic side who's a really good broker. And then we'll look at place leaders next.

Des McNulty:

Well, I'm really interested in how we support policymakers to use university research more systematically and more effectively.

I think sometimes this kind of this a strange detachment between the kinds of things that university academics do and know and the kinds of things that policymakers need. And what we need to do is find ways in which we can kind of bridge that gap, which is is not just a kind of flow of information. There's also an issue of understanding.

So what is it that other people need to know in order to do what they do better? And I think that it's in order to do that. Universities are going to have to be more demand responsive. They're going to have to listen more to what policymakers priorities are and think about how they can contribute to that, not just to the kind of policy development stage or at the back of it at the evaluation stage.

But the implementation stage, which is complex and difficult and not typically where university academics kind of think their expertise lies, but actually university academics potentially have a lot to contribute to that. I mean, the systematic thinking, the understanding of the importance, the nuances of language that the challenge process, being a critical friend to policy processes, these are things that I think university academics can contribute and maybe not something that they think they can contribute.

But I think many academics have the capacity to be able to do this. And I think it's a really interesting space to work in. And from policymakers side, I think understanding better not just what the latest piece of research is, but what the expertise, the accumulated expertise of people working in a particular field might bring to your the way in which you think about a

problem, the way in which you look for solutions to find a problem, how you evidence whether you're succeeding or failing, and what the outcomes you're looking to get out.

These are really important things that I think that combination of university knowledge and policy knowledge, you know, has a great potential. And the danger is we think that universities have knowledge and policymakers are just users of knowledge. And that's not the way it works. You know, they've both got knowledge and they just need to find ways to work together and to work out what the common language and common purpose might be and how that can add value through collaboration.

Nicola Headlam:

So speaking, as always, of the good brokers, can you think of someone currently operating in this space who's really good?

Des McNulty:

Ken Gibb is fantastic in terms of just being able to work with other academics, but also to work with policymakers on housing issues. And his recognition factor is very high in that regard. Another person who's done similar sort of thing in the skills area is Allan McGregor at Glasgow University.

He's really well regarded by policymakers for being very practical. Duncan McLennan again in housing and the economic space. Those are just three colleagues from Glasgow. People like Mark Shucksmith at Newcastle, I think did a fantastic job in terms of bringing together policymakers and academics, academic knowledge. You know, first of all, in the kind of rural societies area, but then more generally, I think in terms of how you collaborate.

John Goddard done a fantastic job over the years in that space. But there are actually many people who've done this. I mean, I've worked quite closely with Carol Tannehill in Scotland, so Carol is now the chair of Joseph Rowntree Foundation, but she has a fantastic understanding of how academics are, how academic knowledge and policy can actually work together.

So yeah, I mean, there are some really, really good people at the leading edge of this. We've got some of them, I think quite a number of them actually, on the LPIP Board and around the LPIP mean, if you think about Helen from the Young Foundation, you know, chief executive. Kirsten England, who is closely involved with the Yorkshire LPIP, there are some really good examples of people who've actually changed the way people think about this.

And then if you're looking at kind of specialists in bringing together academics and policy makers, I'm thinking about people like Annette Boaz and Catherine Oliver that their work is fantastic. Cat Smith at Strathclyde, someone else who's done some really good work in the health space, thinking together, policy makers and academics. So I think this there's not a shortage of these people.

What I would say is the case though I'm talking in the main not entirely there. About people who are kind of quite well on in their career. So, you know, they're established their professorial level on the challenges I think we have is to how do we empower younger academics or starting

academics or academics who maybe haven't had a kind of a straightforward track in to academia to develop and use those kinds of skills?

I mean, there are people who have got those capabilities, and there are people who are quite strongly motivated towards building up those capabilities. I'm not always sure that the universities recognise the importance of those kinds of skills. So I think in promotion procedures and hiring, universities really need to think that not just in a sense, how many papers people have written, but the kinds of skills that people have got, the listening skills, the capacity to synthesise and to lead, the capacity to engage with people of different types.

These are all skills are not trained when you do your PhD necessarily, but they are vital skills if you want to engage with the policy process. I guess some of these things can actually be trained. Some of them actually, we could get more experienced people to mentor younger people, which again, is something that's happening through the LPIPs. I mean, it's a whole array of of younger people, you know, person in the LPIP Hub itself, but also in the wider LPIPs who are actually learning about how you engage with policy processes and policy with a place focus, which is actually one of the really interesting things about being involved with them.

For me, it's from the more gratifying things is, is working with people to help them develop their skills and capabilities.

Nicola Headlam:

I did say in the introduction that innovation is a team sport, but it is a real collectivity coming through in many of your answers.

Des McNulty:

Well, I think that one of the things you need to do is to build up the skills, if you like, amongst your partners.

So, I mean, one of the great triumphs I think, of the intelligence hub in Glasgow has actually been creating a kind of cadre of people with analytic skills within the city region, and that's made the whole process of engaging with academics and people working in universities much easier because they can speak the same language. They share assumptions about the importance of data and the way analysis should be used.

And they're working towards the same kinds of objectives. So if we are to succeed, I think in kind of binding universities and policy bodies or local government or other policy bodies together, then we need to have more people with academic understanding on the governance side, as well as more people with an understanding of governance on the academic side, in the sense there's a balance process here, which I think is really important.

And those places that that have that capacity are much better placed to benefit from both long term intentions as set out by government in terms of the way in which they're driving change, but also short term opportunities to kind of take things forward, you know, so being agile and strategic and having that dialogue going at a city or place level is actually really beneficial. Those places that are more agile, I think will outstrip the places that lack that agility.

Nicola Headlam:

I think it isn't just about heroic leadership, as it were, but about really good networks and the way that people can influence one another over their whole research career. So finally, I'm going to let you have a wave of my place based innovation magic wand.

You have to be very careful with it, and it can grant you a powerful wish. You need to have absolute power to do one of these things, but you must use that power to make a tangible change to a specific place.

Des McNulty:

I think what I'd really like is for us to think about how people learn and the whole kind of skills agenda. I think that we waste a lot of people's talents by forcing them, you know, through pathways that maybe don't suit them. So if we can actually have a shift towards, for some people anyway, more project based learning and thinking about how you give people the satisfaction of seeing something through from beginning to end. I'm kind of almost a kind of more personalised diagnosis of people's skills, but also how they can advance their skills in a way that would benefit them, but also benefit society.

I think that would be an important space to learn, and I think it would kind of work from school level, you know, right through colleges and then into universities saying, what is it we want people to have in order for them to function effectively? And how are we going to make that happen? So that instead of actually thinking about knowledge, we actually think about skills.

We think about skills in combination with knowledge and the developmental path. And I think that's really thinking about should I change a personal level but also change at an organisational level? What do we need to do? How do we need to change the way universities work or colleges work in order to deliver better outcomes for people in terms of developing their capabilities?

I suppose I'm thinking let's think studio skills rather than classroom approaches. And I think that that would work for whom the classroom system doesn't work, but it also could work for some people for whom, you know, do okay through the classroom system but don't necessarily learn the right things, and in particular, don't necessarily learn the right things about themselves.

So I think what we want to do is to empower people. We need to encourage them to think about what they want to do and what opportunities there are for them in society, and how they can develop their skills so they can do what they want to do and contribute to society more effectively. And I think people do that through studio type learning rather than classroom type learning.

So instead of inductive ways of processing knowledge, you're actually orientate yourself towards experiential ways of doing that. I think taking that kind of approach, which is probably more laborious and it could take longer for some people, but I think it would provide real benefits almost across the board and more satisfaction, I think better outcomes and more satisfaction.

Nicola Headlam:

Thank you very much for your time. Des it's been absolutely fascinating talking to you.

Des McNulty:

Thank you.