

Placecast Episode 20 with Kevin Fenning - Transcript

00:00:07 Nicola Headlam

Welcome to Placecast, a Local Policy Innovation Partnership Hub production based at the University of Birmingham.

00:00:13 Nicola Headlam

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 it is only through animating the power of place-based leadership that the wicked problems of 2026 can become more manageable.

00:00:30 Nicola Headlam

Whether you're a researcher, citizen scientist, an activist,

00:00:34 Nicola Headlam

professional working within the public sector, a civil servant, politician, analyst or entrepreneur, we think that it's through our networks that 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.

00:00:51 Nicola Headlam

We're based in City-REDI and rooted in the LPIP programme funded by the ESRC, AHRC and Innovate UK.

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This podcast aims to highlight knowledge and evidence-based ways of working and the strategies needed to make a real

00:01:04 Nicola Headlam

impact on the decisions that shape our society.

00:01:06 Nicola Headlam

Our guests are change makers from across the UK with stories about the ways in which influence can be achieved.

00:01:13 Nicola Headlam

We focus in particular on some of the connective tissue within and between sectors for clues as to how to animate place-based leadership as innovating is a team sport best done in the open.

00:01:24 Nicola Headlam

Please contact us with feedback on the episodes or if you'd like to be a guest or have strong or strident views on the processes of advocacy, lobbying, public campaigning

00:01:34 Nicola Headlam

And more, unpacking how research and evidence connect with neighbourhood, local, city, regional and national missions.

00:01:41 Nicola Headlam

My guest this morning is Kevin Fenning, who has a long and illustrious career as an economic development consultant.

00:01:48 Nicola Headlam

Morning, Kevin.

00:01:49 Kevin Fenning

Hi, Nicola.

00:01:50 Nicola Headlam

We're here to talk about some work that you've done as part of being an LPIP Policy Fellow like me.

00:01:55 Nicola Headlam

So what you were looking into is the role of AI in kind of enabling everything else that local government does.

00:02:01 Nicola Headlam

What made you interested in that to start with?

00:02:04 Kevin Fenning

So I think as we were starting with the fellowship programme at the LPIP hub, we were asked to think about some of the most pressing issues that were facing local government at the moment.

00:02:14 Kevin Fenning

And it seemed very clear from initial conversations, and this was happening

00:02:19 Kevin Fenning

about this time last year, so about the middle of 2025, that we knew that artificial intelligence was a really big deal for everyone.

00:02:27 Kevin Fenning

We can kind of see it in our everyday lives as much as anything else.

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And we knew it was a big deal for local authorities, but we didn't really know exactly how it was changing them.

00:02:36 Kevin Fenning

There was some really good work coming out of the local government association, but it was really important, we felt, to kind of think about not only what's happening at the moment, although that's a useful thing to capture as well,

00:02:49 Kevin Fenning

to think about where local government was going next and the exciting and very fast moving sort of technology that underpins all of this and just think about what that meant for local government.

00:02:59 Kevin Fenning

So that's really the root of the study.

00:03:01 Nicola Headlam

And just to be clear, a lot of work that you've done has been about finding improvements within local authorities or within delivery contexts.

00:03:09 Nicola Headlam

So that was the link.

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It was doing the business better or were you interested in technology per se?

00:03:14 Kevin Fenning

Yeah, so I've got a kind of economic development background, but this study isn't really focused on the economic

00:03:19 Kevin Fenning

aspects of artificial intelligence, so what AI means for different growth sectors and what it means for the labour markets and so on.

00:03:26 Kevin Fenning

This was really focused on how AI could be used by local government in order to carry out local government services.

00:03:33 Kevin Fenning

And so that was really the focus and just sort of thinking about the operational side of local authorities.

00:03:39 Nicola Headlam

And just been reading through all the recommendations and I would recommend the excellent summary that is on the LPIP website of the project.

00:03:54 Nicola Headlam

One of the things I found really interesting was you talk about there being humans in the loop.

00:04:00 Nicola Headlam

Can you say something about that?

00:04:02 Kevin Fenning

I think one of the greatest challenges and concerns with AI is that you end up with a sort of black box situation where AI is making decisions and it becomes very hard to interrogate.

00:04:14 Kevin Fenning

And I think in the context of local government that could lead to lots of negative outcomes.

00:04:20 Kevin Fenning

But it could be really corrosive in terms of public trust.

00:04:22 Kevin Fenning

And we know that public trust is already an issue.

00:04:24 Kevin Fenning

So being very clear and deliberative in your use of AI when it supports decision making, having humans in the loop to check what AI is doing, to check the decisions that are being suggested, because I think in most cases at the moment, AI is only ever suggesting things.

00:04:41 Kevin Fenning

I've not seen a case where AI is sort of making decisions for local authorities at any level of significance.

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So that human in the loop is really important.

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I think we also

00:04:50 Kevin Fenning

kind of see it in other sectors in business contexts, in wider context, if we're thinking about, for example, the Ukraine war and the use of AI and drones in terms of sort of attacking the Russians, as it were, you know, actually having humans in the loop there is very important.

00:05:05 Kevin Fenning

And local government, clearly a lot of the implications of using AI and what that means for local people, it's really important that there's that sort of transparency there as well.

00:05:14 Nicola Headlam

So having your local government officer in the loop as well as the AI.

00:05:17 Kevin Fenning

Indeed.

00:05:18 Nicola Headlam

I think we're some way off, sort of,

00:05:20 Nicola Headlam

of things becoming autonomous cybernetic decision-making systems.

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When you looked at 101 examples of AI being used, was there any that surprised you about how far it had gone?

00:05:31 Kevin Fenning

I think the most surprising was in terms of the use of robotics.

00:05:35 Kevin Fenning

We found a couple of robotics examples.

00:05:37 Kevin Fenning

So one using AI robots to identify cracks in the road and also to fix those.

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So the AI was built into a robot that was able to travel along bits of roadway, identify cracks and then put some sort of temporary repair in

00:05:50 Kevin Fenning

to stop that crack becoming worse.

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That was really interesting.

00:05:53 Kevin Fenning

You could see how immediately how that was scaled up.

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And the other one was quite niche.

00:05:57 Kevin Fenning

It was a sort of agricultural robot that looked through fields for ragwort, which is a plant that if cattle eat it, they can get very sick.

00:06:05 Kevin Fenning

So it was using AI to identify the ragwort, and then I think it was being removed separately.

00:06:11 Kevin Fenning

We can think of lots of different use cases where we'd want AI to spot things for us or to collect data by going out and looking for things

00:06:20 Kevin Fenning

And so I think this kind of confluence of AI and robotics is really, really interesting.

00:06:24 Nicola Headlam

Well, people sort of, when it comes to any innovation, it's about how absorptive the setting is in which it lands.

00:06:32 Nicola Headlam

Did you find in general that local government was enthusiastic and kind of ready to absorb the innovation of AI or were people a bit more sceptical?

00:06:40 Kevin Fenning

I think there's a whole range of different emotions and reactions to AI.

00:06:44 Kevin Fenning

And I think sort of stepping back, what's interesting on one of the points we make about the context in all of this landing is

00:06:50 Kevin Fenning

We're in an environment where lots of people feel as though AI is a bit scary.

00:06:55 Kevin Fenning

It's a bit scary in terms of labour markets.

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It's a bit scary in terms of the kind of black box that we talked about a minute ago.

00:07:00 Kevin Fenning

It's not been that long since the horizon sort of postal incident, for example.

00:07:04 Kevin Fenning

You know, we can see black boxes going wrong.

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So there is that wariness that sort of sits at the back of people thinking about AI.

00:07:12 Kevin Fenning

At the same time, local government is beset by chronic challenges associated with finances, lack of capacity,

00:07:20 Kevin Fenning

aging populations which increase the demand for services.

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The other side of the coin is that it can feel like the AI can feel like it's the holy grail.

00:07:27 Kevin Fenning

It's the thing that we can do to solve our problems, to give us massively more capacity than we have at the moment and really address the challenges we've got.

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So I think you see a range really.

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You see everything from "This is brilliant, let's do something about it" without always necessarily having a clear vision for what that means.

00:07:44 Kevin Fenning

I think there's a lot of, in some cases, the leadership will be very enthusiastic and then officers are kind of trying to work through what does this actually mean in practice.

00:07:52 Kevin Fenning

At the other end, we've got people that are quite cautious.

00:07:54 Kevin Fenning

And then in the middle, we've got lots of people who are sort of, "Well, we'll use it where it's really clear that it's going to be beneficial."

00:08:00 Kevin Fenning

Because I think the other thing that we haven't quite got onto and sort of touched on yet is that AI at the moment is a cost centre.

00:08:06 Kevin Fenning

And so it's still something that needs conscious investment in to make it happen.

00:08:10 Nicola Headlam

You know, the world of local government and local authorities very well.

00:08:14 Nicola Headlam

Can you imagine that reversing and AI becoming something which had transformational potential

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and was sort of fully embedded within the work of local government, the sort of much more transformational end of local government.

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Can you imagine what the size of the prize might be of fully enabled AI in local government?

00:08:32 Kevin Fenning

It's a very good question.

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That's a very complex question.

00:08:35 Kevin Fenning

So I guess one area where we see particularly sort of dramatic uptake in usage is in the area of social care around social care note taking.

00:08:44 Kevin Fenning

Social workers spend a lot of time with the time that they spend with clients, they're spending having to write

00:08:50 Kevin Fenning

down, fill in information, take notes on their interactions.

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Then they have a lot of paperwork that they have to sort of follow up afterwards.

00:08:57 Kevin Fenning

And the benefit of AI in that context is you can use the AI to take the notes.

00:09:02 Kevin Fenning

That means you as a social worker are more engaged with the person because you're not having to worry about the note being taken.

00:09:07 Kevin Fenning

The AI will fill in any kind of templates and any reporting that you need for you and then you should do a check for that to make sure that it's accurate and correct.

00:09:16 Kevin Fenning

There's several examples of quite dramatic decreases in the amount of time

00:09:20 Kevin Fenning

that that takes, sort of 50, 60% is being claimed in some instances for that particular type of work.

00:09:27 Kevin Fenning

And when you think about the area of social care, this is not necessarily an area of local government where you would necessarily go, oh, that's a very sort of tech savvy part of local government, that's really going to get it.

00:09:38 Kevin Fenning

It's being taken up because it's seen to be working and because it's really helping not only clients and the end user, but also workers to work in a more human way.

00:09:50 Kevin Fenning

that's really been taken up quite enthusiastically.

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I think in that there's a microcosm that sort of speaks to your wider question, what could we do with this?

00:09:57 Kevin Fenning

If we kind of tease that apart, you still need to check the note at the end of the day.

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So you still need to make sure that you're sort of verifying what's gone in there.

00:10:06 Kevin Fenning

We've seen some really good reporting about how that can go wrong.

00:10:10 Kevin Fenning

So simple things like bias.

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So if you take the same case and you've got Mr. Smith who has certain care needs and you have Mrs. Smith with identical care needs, the machine might interpret that in different

00:10:20 Kevin Fenning

depending on just the gender of the person.

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So you need to be really on the ball, making sure that nothing's going wrong.

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So that's really important.

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You've got to work with your residents.

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So residents have to feel comfortable with it.

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It's not going to work in all cases.

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So it may be that there's some people feel uncomfortable about it, and so you won't be able to apply AI there.

00:10:39 Kevin Fenning

I think it's a useful kind of microcosm for some of the issues that local government will have to think about.

00:10:44 Nicola Headlam

Were there any authorities that were particularly leaning towards working well with AI?

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Can you think of an example?

00:10:51 Nicola Headlam

And again, was that about they were particularly future oriented?

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Did they have the resource?

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Was it about necessity at the top?

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We're very familiar with doing more with less, kind of being the sort of permanent state for local government.

00:11:04 Nicola Headlam

Or were there just people that were leaning particularly into, had an interest in what could the tech do for them?

00:11:09 Kevin Fenning

I think you do see a big divide between different local authorities.

00:11:13 Kevin Fenning

I think as we start to look forward, that's one of the things that we'll need to sort of change and to respond to.

00:11:18 Kevin Fenning

So there is a kind of Matthew effect where those who have the most get more, and you see the bigger local authorities with more resource have more ability to invest in this.

00:11:27 Kevin Fenning

It does very much come down to people, and I think two types of people.

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So the technical people and the experts and their ability to try things out, their willingness to take on risk to work with contractors

00:11:40 Kevin Fenning

because that's a big part of the sort of soup of all of this stuff coming together.

00:11:44 Kevin Fenning

And I think also leadership as well.

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So you need a leadership that's prepared to try things that will put the right kind of governance in place that is responsible but not overbearing and sort of prevents things from going as fast as they could do.

00:11:57 Kevin Fenning

But you also need those sort of technical experts as well.

00:11:59 Kevin Fenning

So I think you tend to see it in the larger authorities and those authorities where you've got people who are particularly have those kinds of skills and are prepared to sort of

00:12:09 Kevin Fenning

step up and make things happen.

00:12:11 Nicola Headlam

Can you see a scenario under which an authority would come to you and say, "what can we do about AI?"

00:12:16 Nicola Headlam

I mean, surely it'd be on a use case basis and finding a value proposition within.

00:12:20 Nicola Headlam

It's not going to be general purpose in a way.

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It's much more about specificity.

00:12:24 Kevin Fenning

One of the clear themes that comes out of the report is that you need to see AI as one tool in the toolkit.

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Even before you get to open the toolkit, you've got to be thinking about what's the challenge that we're responding to here?

00:12:37 Kevin Fenning

What's the issue? And one Officer put it to me

00:12:39 Kevin Fenning

really well, if somebody comes along with an issue, you've got to start by questioning the process.

00:12:45 Kevin Fenning

"What do you need this for?"

00:12:46 Kevin Fenning

So in the example of, well, we want AI to take minutes of this meeting.

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As much as do we need this meeting?

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Who's using, what is this for?

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What's it achieving?

00:12:55 Kevin Fenning

Assuming you do need the meeting, do you need the minutes?

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Who's reading these minutes?

00:12:59 Kevin Fenning

What are they used for?

00:13:00 Kevin Fenning

What do you actually need to record here?

00:13:04 Kevin Fenning

Embedding AI within a reflective process where you're looking at what you're actually doing and sort of able to sort of strip away elements as much as add them, that's really important.

00:13:13 Kevin Fenning

And then of course in some cases you might not need AI at all.

00:13:16 Kevin Fenning

You might need simpler automation, which is more rules-based because the value of something like an LLM technology is it can be creative, which can be useful in some cases, but not in others.

00:13:26 Kevin Fenning

So really using the right AI or the right digital tool for the job if you need to.

00:13:31 Nicola Headlam

That's the fascinating part is that it

00:13:33 Nicola Headlam

redefines business as usual in a much more kind of rigorous exactly why do we have this area committee because we've always had an area committee or is it actually improving our decision making?

00:13:50 Nicola Headlam

I tell you what the thing that really occurred to me was - this point about interpretation, because as you'll know, so much of the work of planning committees, for example,

what is grounds for a planning appeal or what isn't, you would think is a fairly rule oriented set of things.

00:14:04 Nicola Headlam

But as everybody that's ever been involved in the planning process, there is so much interpretation around rules as written.

00:14:11 Nicola Headlam

I'd be really interested to see how far AI could help with the local plan making process as well as kind of examinations in public and things like that.

00:14:18 Kevin Fenning

Yes, we've seen examples of it.

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and we refer to them in the report around AI being used to assess planning submissions.

00:14:27 Kevin Fenning

So there's lots of high volume of paperwork that comes in for plans and local plan making.

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How do you use AI to go through and assess those?

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And there's some really interesting kind of time saving examples of that.

00:14:39 Kevin Fenning

But I think it also sort of touches on another aspect of this, which we bring up in the report, which is about the fact that this isn't just a local authority technology, it's not just a supply side technology

00:14:50 Kevin Fenning

It's also a consumer technology as well.

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And the consumer technology that residents have is as good, probably, as what local authorities have.

00:15:00 Kevin Fenning

And so there's the case of planning is really interesting because what we're starting to see is that residents are using AI to draft planning objections.

00:15:10 Kevin Fenning

There are services online where you can get the AI to draft a planning objection for you.

00:15:15 Kevin Fenning

And that is a sort of a negative of AI, I guess, from a local authority perspective is that you're now seeing quite

00:15:20 Kevin Fenning

large volumes of AI written planning objections, complaints, things like that, some of which refer to legislation correctly and some of which do not.

00:15:28 Nicola Headlam

We talked about the social care use case, we talked about the planning use case.

00:15:32 Nicola Headlam

Is there any other corners of local government activity that you'd like to mention as honourable examples from your research?

00:15:39 Kevin Fenning

So I think we're seeing it used on quite a wide range.

00:15:43 Kevin Fenning

What we've described in the report is a long tail of uses.

00:15:46 Kevin Fenning

So there's a kind of core of uses which are LLM based.

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So some of them are kind of fairly obvious in terms of using things like Copilot, typically, because many local authorities have access to the Microsoft Suite products.

00:15:59 Kevin Fenning

So that's a sort of natural add-on for them.

00:16:01 Kevin Fenning

So lots of LLM usage and sort of various ways in which that's being used for sort of transcription, note-taking, and so on.

00:16:07 Kevin Fenning

There's also quite a lot of chatbots. So text chatbots, sort of customer-facing chatbots in particular, but also voice-based chatbots.

00:16:17 Kevin Fenning

And then there's a long tail, as we put it, of different things.

00:16:20 Kevin Fenning

So I've mentioned kind of robotics so far.

00:16:22 Kevin Fenning

We've got some examples of kind of predictive analytics.

00:16:26 Kevin Fenning

So if you've got partial EPC information for your area, you might use a sort of predictive analytics type AI to fill in the gaps based on what you know about the remaining properties.

00:16:36 Kevin Fenning

We've had one example of fraud detector.

00:16:40 Kevin Fenning

So kind of looking at using AI to look at citizen records and sort of understand where people might be fraudulently claiming local benefits or using a house that they're not entitled to.

00:16:50 Kevin Fenning

So that's quite interesting.

00:16:51 Kevin Fenning

We've got an example from Westminster where they have looked at advertising hoardings which weren't paying business rates.

00:16:59 Kevin Fenning

So they've used a kind of combination of Google Maps to see where the advertising hoardings are and looking at the VOA data and seeing is there a gap there between what's actually there and what's in our data, what we're collecting business rates for.

00:17:11 Kevin Fenning

And there's quite a few examples of care setting technologies, so various kinds of sensor technologies which either use audio

00:17:20 Kevin Fenning

or visual cues to pick up if someone's had a fall or if they're in trouble in some kind of distress.

00:17:25 Kevin Fenning

So there's lots of interesting examples.

00:17:27 Kevin Fenning

And I think one of the things that's sort of tantalizing for me is these will tend to be sort of passion projects, either from a commissioning perspective or a development perspective from a local authority angle, but they have a huge amount of relevance for other local authorities.

00:17:40 Kevin Fenning

So one of the things I think that's really important is that we look at these passion project applications and think about how we scale them up, because if you multiply that across 300 local authorities.

00:17:50 Kevin Fenning

and that you start to get some real strength and power to this.

00:17:53 Nicola Headlam

So you mentioned working with the LGA at the beginning.

00:17:56 Nicola Headlam

Is that a good way of taking the work into that learning?

00:17:59 Nicola Headlam

You know, the learning loops and the feedback within local government can always feel slightly haphazard, I think, but there are good organisations that can help to share good practice.

00:18:09 Nicola Headlam

Are you continuing to work with the LGA on this?

00:18:10 Kevin Fenning

I'm hoping to have a conversation with the LGA very soon, actually, about this.

00:18:14 Kevin Fenning

And I would say that the LGA's research and its survey of members has been invaluable.

00:18:20 Kevin Fenning

definitely cite it in the research.

00:18:22 Kevin Fenning

It's the best objective measure of how use is changing overall.

00:18:26 Kevin Fenning

I would say alongside the LGA, you've also got other industry sector bodies in terms of Stock and Tim and Lottie and others that are doing some really important work to think

about AI and the practical application of it, to share best practice and to share that sort of networking approach.

00:18:43 Kevin Fenning

And I think also government is doing a really important job.

00:18:46 Kevin Fenning

We've got sort of GDS local, we've got local AI within MHCLG.

00:18:51 Kevin Fenning

There's lots of important work that's coming together.

00:18:53 Kevin Fenning

I think what will be really important is looking at how we create that loop and that join up between what are the challenges and what are the issues that we need to address that AI could potentially address and thinking that through carefully, developing solutions that are mindful of what local government actually needs and then also sort of taking solutions that arise organically and thinking about how we scale them up and how we sort of package them up so that they can be

00:19:20 Kevin Fenning

used across the sector reasonably easily.

00:19:24 Kevin Fenning

Joining all of those things up will be really important to maximising the benefit from this.

00:19:28 Nicola Headlam

And I guess also I think it's fair to say that you've done an excellent state-of-the-art as of now.

00:19:34 Nicola Headlam

It'd be really interesting to revisit 18 months, two years, three, five years out to see how far the adoption is moving.

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I guess the concern is always, and you mentioned the Horizon scandal and the Post Offices, that wasn't even, that was a computer system

00:19:50 Nicola Headlam

sort of had bugs and had errors in it.

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The worry is that shadow is cast over the ability to use tech for good.

00:19:57 Kevin Fenning

Yes, and I think those concerns should always be in our minds.

00:20:02 Kevin Fenning

You know, I don't think that any of these challenges are going away.

00:20:04 Kevin Fenning

I think it's possible that AI becomes more accurate and better at guessing what we mean when we say things.

00:20:11 Kevin Fenning

But I think we can get quite philosophical about this.

00:20:13 Kevin Fenning

You know, there are some fundamental challenges around communication

00:20:16 Kevin Fenning

that's human to human communication or human to AI to human communication.

00:20:21 Kevin Fenning

How do I communicate what I think?

00:20:23 Kevin Fenning

I have to be able to articulate what I think.

00:20:25 Kevin Fenning

I have to be able to communicate to you in a way that you understand.

00:20:28 Kevin Fenning

You have to understand it.

00:20:29 Kevin Fenning

And I think those are just fundamental challenges and I think they change when we add AI into the picture.

00:20:35 Kevin Fenning

They can get more complicated.

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So I think we always need to be looking at what is AI producing and making sure that we have an appropriate range of checks given the potential for things going

00:20:46 Kevin Fenning

wrong.

00:20:46 Kevin Fenning

I think as we go forward, we will always be kind of torn between this is a very, very powerful technology that can do a whole range of very good things and yet it can go wrong and we'll continue to navigate through that path.

00:20:59 Nicola Headlam

We've been watching the Grayson Perry series and some people that have been involved in the early development of AI, I mean they really were kind of, you know, off-grid hiding on compounds, you know.

00:21:08 Nicola Headlam

The reason I think it's interesting in the local authorities are service providers of many, many things, but they also have their democratic anchorage

00:21:16 Nicola Headlam

And the way that we are using technology changes some of our notion about ourselves as citizens and all that kind of thing.

00:21:22 Nicola Headlam

I think it is nothing but interesting stuff to come.

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It would be interesting to revisit how far local government is able to adopt for good, but as well as keeping some of those guardrails up, as you say in the report.

00:21:35 Nicola Headlam

Now in terms of any change, I was wondering, I say you have a long experience of working with local government in all its incarnations.

00:21:43 Nicola Headlam

One thing that you really need to make things change are really good brokers on the ground, so people who are able to advocate not necessarily for the technology but for the kind of change process that you've described.

00:21:54 Nicola Headlam

Can you think of any specific people in the sector that are really good brokers that you've come across?

00:22:00 Kevin Fenning

That's a really good question.

00:22:01 Kevin Fenning

I suspect there are some really good brokers in place and I think

00:22:05 Kevin Fenning

I think a lot of that work is happening in terms of the organisations that I've sort of touched on already.

00:22:11 Kevin Fenning

So you could think about brokerage in a few different ways.

00:22:14 Kevin Fenning

So you can think about brokerage as between the sector.

00:22:16 Kevin Fenning

And we've talked about the kind of local government associations, Socitm, LOTI, others.

00:22:21 Kevin Fenning

And I think the central government agencies in terms of GDS Local and Local AI within MHCLG, they are doing that work as well.

00:22:30 Kevin Fenning

And they are consciously encouraging the networks that they need to succeed.

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And that's already positive.

00:22:35 Kevin Fenning

I think there's brokerage happening there and that's really positive.

00:22:38 Kevin Fenning

I think there's also a kind of brokerage with society and kind of work that's happening with groups of residents, with communities to think through what this means.

00:22:49 Kevin Fenning

And I think there's some really interesting work that's happening in Liverpool, Camden, in Manchester, and probably lots of other places as well, where we're seeing different kind of councils, different kinds of engagements with society.

00:23:03 Kevin Fenning

And I think one of the other things that's interesting is it starts to come together with the use of AI itself, because we also have seen a really interesting example of how AI is being used to support citizen engagement, managed and supported by humans.

00:23:19 Kevin Fenning

But enabling you to do much wider sort of consultation than you might otherwise be able to do.

00:23:24 Kevin Fenning

So these things start to come together.

00:23:26 Kevin Fenning

But I think that kind of brokerage with residents and sort of working through how do we use this, how could we use this, what would be beneficial is also a really important part of the puzzle as well.

00:23:37 Nicola Headlam

Then of course there are the brokers that need to liaise between local government and then the commercial contracting side and that obviously and again a large guardrail is going to be around local government getting

00:23:49 Nicola Headlam

good value for money when it goes out buying these kind of things at scale.

00:23:54 Nicola Headlam

Procurement process has always been a kind of core strength of local authorities, but if they are having to enter into this very leading edge kind of commercial space with tech companies and goodness knows who, then I guess procurement will become a key brokerage between the purchaser and the provider.

00:24:11 Kevin Fenning

Yeah, there are a few kind of, not warning signs, but there are a few things that local authorities that we spoke to were very kind of conscious

00:24:19 Kevin Fenning

sort of having to negotiate through.

00:24:21 Kevin Fenning

So a lot of the technology is very new.

00:24:24 Kevin Fenning

It's changing very rapidly.

00:24:26 Kevin Fenning

You've got lots of people in the market who are trying to represent their products or their technology in one way.

00:24:31 Kevin Fenning

Some of them are essentially selling kind of tech demos.

00:24:34 Kevin Fenning

Some of them are selling a process whereby they use the local authority's own data to create things, which can be beneficial.

00:24:42 Kevin Fenning

But there also is a huge risk in giving away your data or access to data over anonymized and protected.

00:24:49 Kevin Fenning

to a private company to make something happen.

00:24:52 Kevin Fenning

And I think local authorities are rightly deeply wary of that.

00:24:56 Kevin Fenning

So I think another challenge for local authorities, as you say, is how do we kind of get the right partner?

00:25:00 Kevin Fenning

How do we make sure we procure or work with them in the right way?

00:25:04 Kevin Fenning

Particularly, how do we avoid technological lock-in where actually things are going on around us that mean that our solution is now obsolete or you can do it much cheaper than we've been sold.

00:25:15 Kevin Fenning

And I think local authorities are used to this challenge, but it is a big challenge for

00:25:19 Kevin Fenning

to buy large-scale IT contracts at any time, IT products at any time.

00:25:25 Kevin Fenning

So I don't think this is a, in a sense, this is not a new thing.

00:25:29 Kevin Fenning

It's just even more complicated than it's always been because the technology is moving so fast.

00:25:42 Nicola Headlam

Philosophically speaking, I suppose local government in some ways is a generalised broker of various types, in terms of what it buys, how it provides services.

00:25:51 Nicola Headlam

And I guess it is just another way in which you emphasise how it sits at the intersections of so many different complex systems.

00:26:00 Nicola Headlam

And then by the actual subject being about IT systems, it serves to highlight some of that complexity and some of the trade-offs within local government and makes it more visible

00:26:11 Nicola Headlam

how to move forwards.

00:26:13 Nicola Headlam

And I was wondering also if your 101 examples, if they are sort of first movers in a sense, and if there is some risk in being first to the party in that way, as you say, later sort of iterations.

00:26:25 Nicola Headlam

I guess in a sense, AI serves to interrogate everything that we do as local government in a way that maybe the sector isn't entirely prepared for.

00:26:35 Kevin Fenning

Yes, so I think there's definitely, as you say, your first attempt at something, and these are, in many cases,

00:26:41 Kevin Fenning

If we're not talking about sort of co-pilot or established technology, we are talking about things that are probably being done for the first time.

00:26:49 Kevin Fenning

There's a certain experimental quality to them.

00:26:51 Kevin Fenning

But even where you establish a solution that uses AI, I think there's something really important about not just resting on your laurels or it's really important that doesn't become the end point.

00:27:01 Kevin Fenning

It's a solution in time.

00:27:03 Kevin Fenning

And local authority officers said this to us, that one of the challenges for IT and transformation specialists within local authorities is

00:27:11 Kevin Fenning

It can take a long time to get a new solution in place, but then everyone sort of gets happy with it and it becomes the end thing.

00:27:17 Kevin Fenning

And then something better comes along, something that can improve productivity more or can help in another way.

00:27:24 Kevin Fenning

And then you've got to go through, rather than sort of having that sense of transiency or that sense of, this is that flexibility, you can get quite stuck on what is clearly just another solution at a given point.

00:27:37 Kevin Fenning

And so I think that's quite important.

00:27:38 Kevin Fenning

I think you also touched on the complexity of local government.

00:27:42 Kevin Fenning

And in regards to IT systems and AI systems, the risk is that you end up with lots of different things.

00:27:48 Kevin Fenning

So you end up with a chatbot over here for your rubbish service and a chatbot over there for your benefits.

00:27:54 Kevin Fenning

And actually this multiplicity of different systems is part of the challenge for local government.

00:27:59 Kevin Fenning

How do you get things to join up in a way?

00:28:01 Kevin Fenning

Because some of the benefits of AI and sort of really deep analysis of data that the local government holds that would provide solutions require

00:28:11 Kevin Fenning

you to join that data together requires you to be able to have different systems to speak to each other.

00:28:17 Kevin Fenning

There are a whole host of challenges that local authorities are kind of having to navigate through just around those system interoperability issues, data cleanliness issues, data speaking to each other and so on.

00:28:29 Nicola Headlam

Absolutely.

00:28:30 Nicola Headlam

And the challenge of interoperability across used to be seen as a coordination and a political and administrative challenge.

00:28:37 Nicola Headlam

But then not having solved that side of the challenge, you then suddenly then end up in tech.

00:28:41 Nicola Headlam

We worked for a couple of years for a data company and interoperability with public service was, it was a major break actually on our public market mobility really.

00:28:50 Nicola Headlam

Imagine we've got then our really good brokers, human and non-human working effectively.

00:28:56 Nicola Headlam

They need somewhere to dock and in local government of course the place leadership role is kind of increasing in visibility and more people talking about this kind of, and certainly LPIP is associated with place leadership of a certain type.

00:29:09 Nicola Headlam

Can you think of a place or a

00:29:11 Nicola Headlam

place leader under which... where the brokerage works well and docks effectively with good place leaders.

00:29:18 Kevin Fenning

I don't think there's a, it's always tempting when you write a policy report to sort of the one group to bind them all or whatever the Lord of the Rings reference is and you know it's always tempting to kind of go with that.

00:29:28 Kevin Fenning

I think we've got an ecosystem which is doing quite a lot for local government.

00:29:34 Kevin Fenning

I mean I would say one of the things that was really pleasing to experience is local government is on top of this despite all

00:29:41 Kevin Fenning

of the challenges that are going on.

00:29:43 Kevin Fenning

There's lots of really impressive work going on in the sector, across the sector.

00:29:48 Kevin Fenning

And I think central government is making the right moves to support the sector as well.

00:29:52 Kevin Fenning

So I think there's a really good ecosystem of organisations.

00:29:56 Kevin Fenning

I think the test or the challenge for central government is to make sure that the very clever people who are putting together these different kinds of systems at a central level are actually, genuinely engaging with and not just sort of

00:30:11 Kevin Fenning

talking to but actually engaged with and working with people from local government because that will be important not only to ensure that their solutions genuinely work but that they're actually adopted because they've already been on, they've taken people on that journey already.

00:30:26 Kevin Fenning

I think it will be important for central government to make sure that they're able to scale up local solutions and I think that can be hard sometimes.

00:30:33 Kevin Fenning

It's always nice to work on your own thing and it's messy to work with somebody else's solution and you know you might think it's always got problems here and there but

00:30:41 Kevin Fenning

It's going to be really important to identify good stuff that's going on and think, oh, actually, how can we make this work so that it's easy to kind of copy and paste it across 300 authorities?

00:30:50 Kevin Fenning

Because that's where a lot of value will be.

00:30:52 Kevin Fenning

I think for local authorities, it's about having a mindset of where are there solutions that kind of work within the context of what we're trying to do?

00:31:01 Kevin Fenning

Where can we learn from other places?

00:31:04 Kevin Fenning

I think that touches on a point that we've not really explored so far, which is about evidence.

00:31:10 Kevin Fenning

So I think one thing that we talk about in the report is the need for stronger evidence.

00:31:14 Kevin Fenning

So there's really big claims, big percentages, big numbers being thrown out in some case studies, but there's still to speak to that point about local authorities that feel less confident, how do they know where the actual use cases are that really make a difference?

00:31:27 Kevin Fenning

And so I think one role, to go back to your question, one role for, I think, particularly central government, but working in partnership with local

00:31:34 Kevin Fenning

is to do some really robust studies of how this stuff adds value and where it adds value.

00:31:39 Kevin Fenning

And we talk about that in the report too.

00:31:41 Nicola Headlam

Wouldn't it be awful if all the first mover early in interests, you know, people that were really putting time and energy and effort into it, ends up being that their projects are not the ones which end up really making the big savings or shifting the dial.

00:31:57 Nicola Headlam

I guess that's part of the thing as local government officers, you're very adaptive to kind of what comes next and having to view it.

00:32:04 Nicola Headlam

My concern would be that, again, learning loops are quite often quite ruptured sometimes, and people do complain about a lack of institutional memory from one set of projects or place-based initiatives to another.

00:32:17 Nicola Headlam

Seeing the whole thing as a system-wide challenge that we try to trap the learning and the evidence and the story, as it were, because you can imagine everybody starting again in a different place with a different set of actors over and over again.

00:32:29 Nicola Headlam

I guess that would be the main downside, despite the warnings of the sort of tin hat brigade.

00:32:34 Nicola Headlam

This is kind of

00:32:34 Nicola Headlam

with us and we have to make the best of it.

00:32:36 Nicola Headlam

And I guess seeing the kind of world of transformation that local government is in, I think always because necessity being the mother of invention, local government is quite inventive in that it's been strapped for cash as long as I've been alive really.

00:32:50 Nicola Headlam

So austerity wasn't a specific set of policies, it was that as need rises and capability kind of remains the same.

00:32:59 Nicola Headlam

So I can see how it would be incredibly attractive for some people within local government to see it as a

00:33:04 Nicola Headlam

very useful horizon that they'll be moving towards.

00:33:07 Nicola Headlam

I find it really interesting and it does feel to me like you've kind of definitely established base camp for AI use, but where it goes next, you know, there's more than one way up the mountain, isn't there?

00:33:16 Kevin Fenning

That's absolutely right.

00:33:17 Kevin Fenning

I mean, I think articulate that the sector has established what the base camp is, and you know, there's loads of interesting work that's going on.

00:33:24 Kevin Fenning

and loads of really positive work.

00:33:26 Kevin Fenning

I mean, I have worked a lot with local government.

00:33:29 Kevin Fenning

I guess one fear going into this was that we'd have conversations, sometimes you have conversations with local government offices, "oh, we know we need to do this, but we haven't done it because of time and money and whatever, and it's slightly cheap."

00:33:40 Kevin Fenning

And everyone feels bad about talking about that.

00:33:42 Kevin Fenning

This isn't that.

00:33:43 Kevin Fenning

There's some really good stuff going on.

00:33:45 Kevin Fenning

We just need to think about how we scale up more.

00:33:47 Kevin Fenning

Your point about that sort of political economy of how do you do rapid change in organisations that are often sensible

00:33:54 Kevin Fenning

and reasonably quite risk averse.

00:33:57 Kevin Fenning

I think the best way is to get that infrastructure that I've talked about working in the right way.

00:34:01 Kevin Fenning

So if you've got the evidence, if you've got the trust between central and local, if you've got people who are sort of experimenting and have the time and space and brain space to experiment, and then something changes and you've got that environment that sits at the heart of local authority that allows you to do this stuff,

00:34:21 Kevin Fenning

then the case that you're making back to home base is, well, "it's already been used here.

00:34:26 Kevin Fenning

It's this much better than this. I know we changed six months ago, but this is actually better.

00:34:30 Kevin Fenning

We can implement it in three weeks. And we know that because it's documented here."

00:34:33 Kevin Fenning

And so the case that you're making becomes that much easier to make back to politicians and leaders and senior officers who might otherwise feel, oh, didn't we just do this a few months ago or whatever.

00:34:44 Kevin Fenning

So I think that's probably how you manage it.

00:34:46 Nicola Headlam

And I think viewing local places as kind of continual test beds for adapting and experimenting and iterative learning, I think is, that's the bit that really excites me is that with or without the technology itself, it's partly about a mental shift away from a risk averse kind of computer says no sort of attitude into a sort of quite, it's quite exciting, isn't it?

00:35:12 Kevin Fenning

Yes, I think it's really exciting when you consider the challenges

00:35:16 Kevin Fenning

that local authorities face and the service provision and the importance of the work that they do.

00:35:22 Kevin Fenning

The work that they do sort of touches directly on the lives of individuals and communities.

00:35:28 Kevin Fenning

And so there's something really powerful about this.

00:35:30 Kevin Fenning

And I think we should all be kind of really invested in wanting this to work.

00:35:33 Kevin Fenning

I think one thing that you just sort of touched on that we haven't talked about too much here about that confidence bit comes from knowing that you have a team that understands AI.

00:35:45 Kevin Fenning

And I think if there was a

00:35:46 Kevin Fenning

gap or challenge at the moment, it's that AI is not necessarily universally understood, or people don't always have a good understanding of what AI is good for, what it's not so good at.

00:35:57 Kevin Fenning

And so I think that sort of staff training piece is really important.

00:36:01 Kevin Fenning

That point was made to us really from several different organisations is a real challenge to sort of making this work.

00:36:07 Kevin Fenning

And local authorities can feel more confident about trying things out when they know that they've got a team that really understands what AI is for and what it's not for.

00:36:21 Nicola Headlam

Thank you very much, Kevin.

00:36:22 Nicola Headlam

I've really enjoyed this genuinely mind-expanding conversation.

00:36:25 Nicola Headlam

I was thinking about millions of areas at once.

00:36:28 Nicola Headlam

However, the technology that I have for you is a little bit more lo-fi.

00:36:31 Nicola Headlam

I'm going to let you have a wave with the place-based innovation magic wand.

00:36:36 Nicola Headlam

Careful with it, it can grant a wish.

00:36:38 Nicola Headlam

You have absolute power to do one of these things, but you must use your powers to make a tangible change to a specific place.

00:36:46 Nicola Headlam

Your change must be specific, measurable, actionable, recordable and transferable, SMART. Magic is hard to get hold of at the moment and is subject to a 20% reducing multi-year budget settlement.

00:36:54 Nicola Headlam

You may have £10 million project fund, half an hour with the cabinet and a slide deck, someone did suggest half an hour with the cabinet and a slightly more threatening thing than the slide deck, but yes.

00:37:05 Nicola Headlam

Editorial control of the front page of a tabloid newspaper, a clause to insert into a bill, you can have your own, since Parliament's proroguing today, you can have a whole new bill

00:37:16 Nicola Headlam

for the King's Speech of the end of the year.

00:37:18 Nicola Headlam

You have a simple message to go viral on TikTok.

00:37:21 Nicola Headlam

Anyone as an advocate work or, and this is one for the real mega nerds, you can have the answer to something that's bothered you forever in this area.

00:37:31 Nicola Headlam

What would you like to do?

00:37:33 Kevin Fenning

So it's a tantalising menu that you set out, Nicola.

00:37:36 Kevin Fenning

I think the sort of points that we've already discussed are really the thing that we need.

00:37:40 Kevin Fenning

So I'd probably take the money.

00:37:42 Kevin Fenning

I would think about a really clever way of working with GDS Local and Local AI and making sure that we have the money to bring local authorities into that conversation space to make sure that the work that's being done centrally and what's happening locally really does genuinely come together.

00:38:01 Kevin Fenning

Because I think if we do that, that's going to be

00:38:03 Kevin Fenning

because there are lots of interesting stuff going on.

00:38:05 Kevin Fenning

We've got, we haven't even had a chance to touch on, local authorities coming up with their own sort of chatbot technology, voice chatbot technology using what's out there.

00:38:13 Kevin Fenning

I'm sure there's other really interesting examples as well.

00:38:16 Kevin Fenning

So I just feel that would be the thing that's really important.

00:38:20 Kevin Fenning

And I'm actually sort of hopeful that some of that is already happening.

00:38:24 Kevin Fenning

So I think this is one where it's slightly boring use of the magic wand.

00:38:30 Kevin Fenning

But I think that's why I would do it.

00:38:31 Nicola Headlam

The secret is nearly everyone actually takes the money.

00:38:33 Nicola Headlam

This is basically the secret.

00:38:35 Nicola Headlam

Although some people do take legislation.

00:38:37 Nicola Headlam

But I think actually in your case, it wouldn't be beyond the wit of man to develop that because you'd be partnering with commercial entities, it would be an endowment rather than a fund.

00:38:48 Nicola Headlam

You could probably make a reasonable case that there would be money coming in as well as money going out of this ecosystem that you've described.

00:38:55 Nicola Headlam

So yes, you can have £10 million, cheque's in the post.

00:38:59 Nicola Headlam

So thank you so much for joining us, Kevin.

00:39:00 Nicola Headlam

We set out to mine insights from experts, that's you, real world case studies.

00:39:05 Nicola Headlam

I really recommend the report with its 101 examples, practical tips, not sure about that, and career advice.

00:39:11 Nicola Headlam

We've certainly pointed out some of the challenges for people that are minded to work within local government over the next generation and spotlighting AI solutions as well as waving the place-based innovation magic wand and we have.

00:39:23 Nicola Headlam

Thank you.

00:39:24 Kevin Fenning

Brilliant, really good to speak to you Nicola and really good to be on Placecast.

00:39:28 Nicola Headlam

Thank you.