

Placecast Episode 23 - Transcript

00:00:06 Nicola Headlam

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

00:00:12 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.

00:00:28 Nicola Headlam

Whether you're a researcher, citizen scientist, an activist, a professional in the public sector,

00:00:33 Nicola Headlam

civil servant, a politician, analyst, a new prime minister or entrepreneur.

00:00:38 Nicola Headlam

We think that it's through our networks that most solutions can be assembled, tested and the learning shared before we go again.

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And that universities can act as the repositories and observatories of these efforts.

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We're based at 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 impact

00:01:03 Nicola Headlam

decisions that shape our society.

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

00:01:11 Nicola Headlam

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

00:01:22 Nicola Headlam

Please contact us with 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

00:01:33 Nicola Headlam

connect with neighbourhood, local, city, regional and national missions.

00:01:38 Nicola Headlam

I am joined today with Deryck Irving from the University of Stirling.

00:01:42 Nicola Headlam

Hello, Deryck.

00:01:43 Deryck Irving

Hi there.

00:01:44 Nicola Headlam

So you work on the FORTH20 Project, which is one of the arms of the LPIP.

00:01:49 Nicola Headlam

Can you tell us how you became engaged in that work?

00:01:52 Deryck Irving

I should start by correcting.

00:01:53 Deryck Irving

It's the FORTH20 project.

00:01:55 Deryck Irving

So it's H2O for water.

00:01:57 Nicola Headlam

That shows I've learned that only by reading it.

00:01:59 Deryck Irving

My involvement comes 60% of my working week.

00:02:02 Deryck Irving

I work for a programme called the Hydration Chair based here at Stirling, which is working with Scottish Water as our major water utility in Scotland on their net zero agenda.

00:02:12 Deryck Irving

And I was brought in to work on place-based innovation, which has a small technological component.

00:02:19 Deryck Irving

But actually as largely as you've already outlined in the introduction, about partnership, about collaboration, about ways of working, about cross-cutting messages.

00:02:27 Deryck Irving

And that's been the primary focus of my work across the last 4 1/2 years.

00:02:31 Deryck Irving

Prior to that, I worked in the third sector in community-based place work, but with a lot of policy links as well.

00:02:36 Deryck Irving

Hydro Nation Chair, we recognised about three or four years ago that there was a significant mismatch between policy and expectation when it came to water.

00:02:46 Deryck Irving

We have a water sector which has a clear vision

00:02:49 Deryck Irving

of what it needs to do between now and mid-century to become resilient.

00:02:52 Deryck Irving

And at the same time, we have a set of policies which ignore water, assume water is not an issue, or are very implicit rather than explicit.

00:03:02 Deryck Irving

So we flagged this up and purely by chance, the UKRI push towards local policy innovation partnerships came along at a similar time.

00:03:09 Deryck Irving

So that's where the FORTH2O project came from.

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It was this feeling that actually

00:03:13 Deryck Irving

policy was not keeping up with practice and that there were gaps and misunderstandings in the system.

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So that's where it really came from.

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My background is an ecologist, so I'm a systems thinker.

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I think by nature and personality I'm a connector rather than a leader, but sometimes that's what's needed to get these things to work.

00:03:32 Deryck Irving

So that's kind of where I came from.

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We're looking with a place focus on the eastern half of central Scotland around the Firth of Forth and looking at the role of water in the wider

00:03:43 Deryck Irving

suite of agenda areas.

00:03:44 Deryck Irving

So it's water as a resource we all use, water as an asset upon which several different economies are based.

00:03:51 Deryck Irving

So you've got tourism, recreation, you've got food and drink, you've got development and property values being interconnected with access and view of water.

00:04:00 Deryck Irving

So it was trying to say, okay, water does all these things that are positive, but at the same time we're looking at a situation where water scarcity and flooding are also challenges for many businesses and communities.

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So it was trying to capture a value position for that, then trying

00:04:13 Deryck Irving

to understand how that informs greater policy cohesion and more effective place-based activity.

00:04:20 Deryck Irving

So that's the long story of how I got here.

00:04:22 Deryck Irving

It was my fault we're doing this, I guess is what I'm saying.

00:04:25 Nicola Headlam

Having been a citizen connector but also having a strong background in ecology, so those two things, obviously it's slightly sort of citizen science but more citizen engaging with policy

00:04:36 Deryck Irving

Quite a lot of work over the last three decades, it's possibly nearer four now, working to connect policy makers, those who

00:04:44 Deryck Irving

who were tasked with implementing policy and those who were impacted by policy.

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So working bottom up and top down.

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So there's a lot of work around place at all its different scales.

00:04:54 Deryck Irving

So from the hyper local right through to Scotland wide and potentially UK wide.

00:04:59 Nicola Headlam

My background is much more governance of economic development, but I am slightly fascinated by the governing as if the watershed was a real unit in general, I think.

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Certainly in the English context, if you look at the ways in which the water

00:05:14 Nicola Headlam

drains in the hydrology system.

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It can give you a really fascinating, so partly my work's about institutions that are missing in the middle, you know.

00:05:21 Nicola Headlam

And I've always found it incredibly useful as a method, like fluvial governance, like imagine if we were able to govern ourselves as if the watershed were a real thing.

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And I find it really fascinating because it's almost like ecology and water management.

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It becomes like such a powerful metaphor for the ways in which things can pool and flow and it's amazing how

00:05:44 Nicola Headlam

many of the terms that we lift, really, isn't it, from your kind of area of work.

00:05:47 Deryck Irving

It's also remarkable, the moment you start working in water, which I did about five years ago, you suddenly find that every single conversation you're having to apologise for the unintended pun that you've used, whether it's ripples or pooling or...

00:05:59 Nicola Headlam

Yeah, exactly.

00:05:59 Deryck Irving

It's constant.

00:06:00 Deryck Irving

So you're absolutely right.

00:06:01 Deryck Irving

The other thing that was very interesting, I'd love to say it was deliberate, I don't think it was.

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We chose our geography based on a large river system that was closely adjacent to the central university and the partnership.

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But we've chosen a geography that isn't associated with any one of the stakeholders, which means that if you start to talk to people about something, the first thing that most bodies and individuals will do is they'll try and point to whose job it is.

00:06:27 Deryck Irving

Oh, that's the council's job, or that's Scottish Water's job, or that's SEPA's job.

00:06:31 Deryck Irving

And actually the catchment as we've selected it really doesn't overlap with any of those.

00:06:36 Deryck Irving

Everyone is having to think slightly differently and to think about connections and up and downstream impacts.

00:06:44 Deryck Irving

In a way that perhaps would be skipped if we were to say, right, well, let's look at Stirling as a council area, or let's look at Southeast Scotland as an area that's currently covered for climate resilience.

00:06:54 Deryck Irving

I think getting people to think in a place geography that isn't the standard one that they've addressed is always really interesting.

00:07:01 Nicola Headlam

I couldn't agree more and I think partly that is what the element of surprise in a way is the bit that helps to shake people out of, well, "this is my green and blue planning for this.

00:07:11 Nicola Headlam

I am the lead on it.."

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The space is never contained.

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It doesn't matter.

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We pretend it is, of course, but that's why I think it's quite interesting from a, as an imaginary, waters are kind of, they do bring imagination, don't they, to the piece in a sense, and that's useful.

00:07:26 Nicola Headlam

The other thing I was thinking of coming to the end, inshallah, of the heat wave, but my sister lives in Whitstable and wowsers they've had.

00:07:33 Nicola Headlam

Talk about bringing home to you some of the challenges of resource management in a grand scale when you cannot flush your own loo in your own home.

00:07:41 Nicola Headlam

It's so amazingly confronting for people.

00:07:44 Deryck Irving

Actually it's one of the things that's been interesting because I suspect, although I don't think we can prove, that part of the reason why water was largely invisible in a lot of chunks of the policy suite that we looked at early on is because there's a perception that Scotland's wet.

00:07:57 Deryck Irving

But we're sitting at the moment with major wildfires destroying huge sections of the Cairngorms.

00:08:01 Deryck Irving

That's not because it's wet, that's because it's dry.

00:08:04 Deryck Irving

And actually I think we're at a point where public understanding is beginning to catch up with the realities of water challenges.

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And we have a situation in Scotland where

00:08:14 Deryck Irving

we have a west to east flow of people.

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So we're still in a situation where, with the exception of Glasgow, the west of the country is losing population to the east.

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We're looking at aligning key new industries with the decline in the old petrochemical industry, if you like.

00:08:31 Deryck Irving

So we're starting to talk about data centres and hydrogen production, but with an idea that might replace the industries that are currently sitting in the Forth along the northeast coast around Aberdeen, all of which are the areas that are most likely

00:08:44 Deryck Irving

to be short of water.

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And these are water hungry industries.

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So it's a really interesting time to be using waters as a route into this idea about place and regional priorities.

00:08:53 Deryck Irving

And it's everything from the how do I make sure my village or my neighbourhood works through to how do we make investment decisions and spatial planning decisions in a way that actually is going to be sustainable into the future.

00:09:06 Nicola Headlam

And are you somebody that comes from a background of sort of blue planning as in resource management, that kind of thing?

00:09:14 Deryck Irving

Not originally, but increasingly over the years, yes.

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Most of my work prior to coming to the university was in urban and peri-urban environments.

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So looking at surface water management as a challenge for cities, looking at post-industrial land as a potential resource, but also as an asset of biodiversity.

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So there's a lot of blue-green infrastructure, nature-based solutions work in the latter years.

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And a big chunk of what I was doing, I was asked to talk to a group of high school pupils probably about four years ago now.

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I said, I trained as an ecologist and then realised I was interested in people.

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So what I took was my mindset into a situation where we were talking about communities and particularly communities of deprivation in urban areas.

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It was a lot of what my work was on.

00:09:56 Deryck Irving

So trying to get that idea that anything you do for a single purpose is likely to be suboptimal.

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What we have to be doing here is delivering blue-green systems that manage surface water, but also create local assets for people to use, or also enhance the biodiversity of that part of the city or

00:10:14 Deryck Irving

So trying to find ways that you're delivering multiple benefits.

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And that very much underpins what we're doing with the FORTH2O LPIP, is trying to say, okay, well, where are the synergies?

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Where are the trade-offs?

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And quite interestingly, I don't think we set out for this to be a core driver, although it was part of the picture.

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What are the narratives and stories that can allow people to think in this way and create traction in as many of the different audiences of stakeholders as possible?

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And I think that's become more and more interesting.

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We've been specifically asked by Scottish Government to work on what are the stories about water resilience moving forward because we're needing to build that into the decision-making system.

00:10:54 Deryck Irving

And the fascinating thing from my perspective, although it shouldn't be a surprise, is that those stories are as important for senior politicians as they are for local residents.

00:11:03 Nicola Headlam

I think that the notion that you do a community process, you're supposed to be learning and changing everybody below a certain income bracket and everybody above a certain income bracket doesn't change their view, you're not doing it right!

00:11:14 Nicola Headlam

I think that's what's good about being able to use both an innovative scale and an innovative policy hook in a way.

00:11:28 Nicola Headlam

Because again, you're unsettling a lot of established power bases and all those kinds of things just by existing.

00:11:33 Deryck Irving

There's also something because we're looking at it in a system change way, there's that understanding that the bits that we focus on aren't necessarily the whole system.

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We're reverting back two jobs ago in my history.

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But I did quite a lot of work on green space and public health.

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And one of the things we did there is we did some work on logic models with what is now Public Health Scotland.

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And what became evident in that process was if we want to have green space that's good for health or blue space, which is what we're now talking about in one of our research projects, we need to have it.

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So that's a sort of a spatial planning question.

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It needs to be managed.

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So that's a parks and recreation type question.

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But actually, if we don't promote it

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and support those in greatest health need to use it, not only is it not working, it's actually likely to increase health inequalities because the capable, enabled and committed will benefit from it and those who are disconnected won't and you widen the gap.

00:12:27 Deryck Irving

So something exactly true with blue space both as a health promoter, a salutogenic agent is the phrase I learned over the years, or blue space as an economic opportunity.

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Wherever the communities that are on paper or on map have access

00:12:42 Deryck Irving

to something which is an asset, but in practice for cultural, social, historical reasons are not able - or do not view themselves as being able - to do that.

00:12:51 Deryck Irving

So we're doing quite a lot of work on that at the moment about opportunities mapping with some key communities in central Scotland and saying, what would you like to be able to do and why are you not doing it?

00:13:00 Deryck Irving

Because that's the sort of thing that can be fed back to the local authority and beyond the local authority back to government to say, it's all very well creating these physical assets, a new wellbeing hub and

00:13:12 Deryck Irving

enhanced blue space, but actually without the support mechanisms built in here, all the conversations that are missing currently, it's not going to be as effective as you think it is.

00:13:21 Nicola Headlam

And in terms of the political economy of water in Scotland, please excuse my ignorance, I'm sitting in South Manchester and there's a debate raging at the moment about water companies.

00:13:30 Nicola Headlam

Please don't tell me that as usual Scotland have kept a fully nationalised water industry, I'll be so jealous.

00:13:36 Deryck Irving

One single nationalised public body.

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Well there we are.

00:13:39 Deryck Irving

It's an interesting public agency because it is tasked with operating on a

00:13:42 Deryck Irving

commercial model.

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So it's not like NatureScot or the Scottish Land Commissioner.

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It has to operate as a business, but it is wholly owned by the public.

00:13:50 Nicola Headlam

So water companies are kind of public enemy number one in England, as you all know, for very good reasons.

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I have a continual kind of frustration that very often there are elements within the UK where there are better and more innovative ways of doing things, in this case, i.e.

00:14:06 Nicola Headlam

having an agency that functions in the way that does.

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But what is so odd is that there seems to be the learning loop back

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back to the centre from the periphery is non-existent.

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And I think a lot of the ways in which devolution was kind of set running, I mean, there was a certain amount of sort of central arrogance about difference kind of at the periphery wouldn't affect the core.

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But I think in this and in so many policy areas, the core is behind the periphery, but there's better resource management in the corners of the UK than there was.

00:14:33 Deryck Irving

It's interesting because the Welsh model is different again, but the Welsh model again is closer to the public ownership side of things.

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So I think you're right.

00:14:40 Deryck Irving

I think there was a degree of arrogance

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In that early stage, I think there's also a tendency, and I've seen it in multiple layers and multiple audiences over many, many years of saying, "that's all very well, but it's special.

00:14:52 Deryck Irving

We couldn't do that."

00:14:53 Deryck Irving

The classic one is if you're talking about the sort of area I came from, we talk about blue-green infrastructure and surface water management, or it's all very well the Scandinavians can do that because they're different.

00:15:01 Deryck Irving

And you think it's the same rain, it's the same urban structure, but we have a tendency to look for exceptionalism with others as a reason for not doing things.

00:15:08 Deryck Irving

I think the other thing that is a challenge for England when we come to water and many of the other things that the new Prime Minister will be looking at is that the current system is so deeply invested and so deeply embedded that the unpicking of it is a massive change.

00:15:24 Nicola Headlam

I don't really buy that though when it comes to water companies.

00:15:26 Deryck Irving

Well, I think there's all sorts of things you can do with water companies, but that's a very good question.

00:15:31 Nicola Headlam

Thank you very much.

00:15:32 Nicola Headlam

That was so interesting.

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You're right to mention Scandinavia and we may return to them in a little while.

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Let us not forget that the reason that the Scandinavians are able to have their sovereign wealth as the way that they do is because of resource management of

00:15:42 Nicola Headlam

a different type.

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There is something so interesting about if we think that culture is resource management.

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There's a lot of work on governability, so looking at fish stocks and governability is a lovely phrase from Dutch political scientist.

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And I really view that resource management isn't outwith the notion of what it means to be able to govern ourselves.

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Actually, it's a much more fundamental that actually political cultures and policy cultures have kind of grown up around.

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Again, very interesting.

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Okay, moving

00:16:12 Nicola Headlam

swiftly to question two, ahahah(!).

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The power of place is what I'd like to talk about first.

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As you know, the LPIP, it's all about varieties of place leadership, place management all over the place, pulling together some common threads that we've already thought about, such as interface between expertise and governance and all those kinds of things.

00:16:31 Nicola Headlam

From the perspective of your work on this project, what do you see as the potential for the work reaching maturity and becoming fully embedded?

00:16:40 Nicola Headlam

What could change as a result and what the size of the prize is and that is really about the FORTH2O project.

00:16:46 Deryck Irving

I think it's a very short program to be trying to reach maturity and have impact, to be honest.

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I think impact will occur.

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We set out very mindfully at the beginning to say we're not seeking to influence new policy because the time frame just doesn't fit.

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The policies are all at different stages of maturity.

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What we're seeking to do is to inform policy interpretation and implementation and to provide a bedrock for the next round of policy which comes beyond us.

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So I think we have traction in some places.

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I think we have a significant lead into Scottish Water because Scottish Water is about to start its next big five-year

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business and investment programme.

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There will be other points in the system where things will happen quite quickly.

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I think in a political sense, what I hope we're finding, because actually, we're coming towards the end of most of what we've resourced.

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We've outsourced around about 30 or 40 partners to take leads.

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So some of those are civil partners, some of the third sector bodies, some of them are universities to take leads on specific research ideas and some internalised.

00:17:46 Deryck Irving

Most of that will be reporting this autumn.

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So everything's coming to this massive tidal wave that's going to hit us in August, September time.

00:17:53 Deryck Irving

One thing we will be able to take back is the fact that, as anybody who works in place knows, but not necessarily the way this policy thinks, place operates at so many scales.

00:18:01 Deryck Irving

It's a fabulous tool for allowing people to step out of their own boxes and look for shared priority,

00:18:06 Deryck Irving

because you can always refer it back to the place need.

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So as long as you start, as the Scottish Futures Trust model relates to, with an understanding of place need, you can constantly come back to that and say, do you know what, that's not normally where we would go, but we understand why we're talking about it.

00:18:20 Deryck Irving

So place is a very powerful tool for bringing together collaboration.

00:18:24 Deryck Irving

When I went to school, I lived in a village that was in a district, that was in a county, that was in the north of England.

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But really I lived in one particular housing scheme on the edge of that village.

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So all of those were places and all of them have a value.

00:18:36 Deryck Irving

And actually the solutions to what we do in place innovation are different if we're talking about your street through to your country.

00:18:43 Deryck Irving

And trying to get the policy agenda to realise that connection is there at all those levels and that the role of policy at the top is to set agendas and set regional priorities, but actually to create a system which enables all the tiers below that to take place-based decisions.

00:19:01 Deryck Irving

And I think that's the thing that worries me most about devolution and regionalism

00:19:07 Deryck Irving

being the driver for place thinking, because that's not getting to where place functions for most people.

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It's breaking down big agendas into slightly less big agendas, but they're still huge.

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And I think that's where we're trying to get to with some of the stuff we're feeding back into a governmental sense at the moment, is to say - place is absolutely essential, but you've all acknowledged that.

00:19:27 Deryck Irving

But you're all talking about it in different ways.

00:19:29 Deryck Irving

And actually, these are the ways that you can start to bring these themes together and knit them into something that's an enabling system rather than a dictating system.

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Because place doesn't work completely top down.

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Bits of it do.

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Bits of it are necessary.

00:19:41 Nicola Headlam

I think part of the reason that national devolution took hold faster than English regional devolution is that Scotland is demonstrably a place.

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It might not be a nation.

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It's not a state, but it is a place.

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Alistair Rae put on LinkedIn the other day a point

00:19:56 Nicola Headlam

more or less next to my house, saying that there were 17 million people in a doughnut around.

00:20:02 Nicola Headlam

And he said, what would you call this geography?

00:20:03 Nicola Headlam

And I said, it would be a heartland doughnut because it came kind of round through the kind of core cities, Liverpool, Manchester, down to Birmingham.

00:20:11 Nicola Headlam

And I think you're right.

00:20:12 Nicola Headlam

I think that whilst policy can be top down, I don't think a sense of place can be imposed ever.

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And I think so much of it is about a scale at which you can imagine how things might be different.

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And again, that would be my south of the border very ignorant view.

00:20:28 Deryck Irving

I think there's a lot of truth in what you said.

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Devolution was possible in Scotland because we recognised a boundary within which we exist

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And that was a greater identity than the difference between the cities.

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Even though Glasgow and Edinburgh are constantly banging heads against each other and calling each other for all sorts of things, there was a clear understanding of this.

00:20:48 Deryck Irving

It probably existed in Wales as well, although the Welsh devolution never quite got so far.

00:20:53 Deryck Irving

But you're right, I think the challenge, as somebody who grew up in, I grew up in Cumbria, we don't even get talked about as the northwest of England.

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The northwest of England is actually south of us, so that doesn't make a lot of sense.

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It's harder to get those supra-council geographies

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in a way that actually makes sense to people.

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And I think there were probably some quite visionary and committed politicians behind the process as well.

00:21:16 Deryck Irving

Having done a little bit of work with the Scottish Labour team that pushed through the devolution stuff at the time, they genuinely believed that it was the way to do things.

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And I think that can be quite a rare thing in politicians at that national level where you've got a lot to lose if things don't go right.

00:21:31 Deryck Irving

They've pushed and pushed.

00:21:32 Nicola Headlam

You've got a place activist Prime Minister, just a different scale.

00:21:37 Deryck Irving

You've got an awful lot of things that I am pointing at in Scotland and, having said that Scotland and the other Celtic nations are doing things better than England, there's a lot of things happening in Greater Manchester around water that I'm actively pushing point and point towards for colleagues in Scotland.

00:21:50 Deryck Irving

So, you know, there are things happening at that sort of place scale with that sort of thinking of joined up and collaborative working that are prevalent in big chunks of the English regions.

00:22:01 Nicola Headlam

And further, I think as well as we're describing this great hot summer has really lit a fire – you don't realise you're doing it...

00:22:07 Nicola Headlam

We do speak so much in these sort of hydrological systems and natural systems when we're trying to talk about very human processes.

00:22:17 Nicola Headlam

It's a very interesting thing.

00:22:18 Nicola Headlam

But yes, so Number 1 - if the system that we're changing is the UK in all its kind of amazing diversity, then we can share knowledge in much more smart ways across the place.

00:22:30 Nicola Headlam

But further, if there are lessons and solutions that can be shared more easily, I don't think that the UK feels like

00:22:37 Nicola Headlam

a place where you can pick something up in one place and drop it down in another and give it a go.

00:22:42 Nicola Headlam

I think that's what we need to move towards.

00:22:49 Nicola Headlam

In terms of having a portable solution, can you describe something that has worked well for you that you'd be like, right, FORTH2O says this worked well.

00:22:58 Deryck Irving

I'm very wary of portable solutions, if I'm absolutely honest, because what usually you need is the reasons that were explored before the solution was selected.

00:23:09 Deryck Irving

And very often if you look at solution A and you move it to point B, it fails.

00:23:12 Deryck Irving

Because actually all the context has been taken away from it.

00:23:15 Deryck Irving

I think we have got some really interesting and exciting findings about different leaders moving forward around our agenda.

00:23:24 Deryck Irving

So we've got projects which are working very closely with landowners and land managers.

00:23:29 Deryck Irving

We've got projects that are working very closely with residential communities.

00:23:32 Deryck Irving

We've got projects which have been driven forward by local government.

00:23:35 Deryck Irving

They all use a similar way of thinking, even though they come from a separate place.

00:23:40 Deryck Irving

Back in the early days of my career, I watched a school using a model for a school wildlife garden that had been developed in urban Birmingham

00:23:47 Deryck Irving

and wondering why it failed.

00:23:48 Deryck Irving

And the reason it failed is it was on peat in what is now the Loch Lomond National Park.

00:23:53 Deryck Irving

And we were trying to say to the school, why didn't you just build a gate and let the children out into this incredible wildlife?

00:24:00 Deryck Irving

The desire was right.

00:24:01 Deryck Irving

The model wasn't explored and investigated.

00:24:04 Deryck Irving

And I think that's something we are able to bring to the table is how do you look at these things collectively and understand their strengths and weaknesses?

00:24:12 Deryck Irving

Several of the pieces of work we're looking at are going to be creating some sort of decision framework that allows you to select your solution.

00:24:18 Deryck Irving

But there's a central quandary, is that a right word?

00:24:21 Nicola Headlam

Yeah, that's a good word.

00:24:23 Deryck Irving

In what we're talking about, because what we're saying is we want to move closer and closer to place-based decision making.

00:24:30 Deryck Irving

But whenever possible, we want to find solutions that will apply everywhere or in more than one set of places.

00:24:35 Deryck Irving

There's a conceptual tension between the two that I think occasionally just stops people in their tracks and they don't do anything or they don't change anything.

00:24:43 Nicola Headlam

I think if you have a slightly more nuanced approach to policy mobility, so you aren't just cutting and pasting and denuding things of context, but you might be trying to graft and grow something.

00:24:54 Nicola Headlam

It's a really good point that you make that, yeah, nobody wants a toolkit that's denuded of all context.

00:25:00 Nicola Headlam

But then equally, if it was presented as more of a menu and then you can kind of get to a solution.

00:25:06 Nicola Headlam

In some ways, we do need to do that piece of work for ourselves to believe that change is possible, I suppose.

00:25:13 Deryck Irving

One thing we can share or we will be able to share by the end of the project is that piece about what is water for.

00:25:19 Deryck Irving

Why is water important?

00:25:20 Deryck Irving

And that will have traction and value across the whole of the UK.

00:25:25 Deryck Irving

And it will be prioritised.

00:25:27 Deryck Irving

If you're in Calderdale, you're going to be worried about flooding.

00:25:31 Deryck Irving

If you're in the southeast of England, you're going to be worried about drought.

00:25:34 Deryck Irving

But actually, the principles and the understanding of multiplicity, we can certainly bring that to the table.

00:25:38 Deryck Irving

I think that adds nuance, which is the word you used.

00:25:41 Deryck Irving

I think the other thing that is possible and has happened through the work of the Hub is there's a chance for the four LPIPs to say, this is what we tried that didn't do what we expected it to do.

00:25:52 Deryck Irving

And that's the type of learning that rarely gets shared.

00:25:56 Deryck Irving

We tend to share our successes, often with none of the context or little of the context.

00:26:01 Deryck Irving

We don't often share the things that we say, okay, do you know what, we tried that, didn't work.

00:26:05 Deryck Irving

In hindsight, we might have done this instead.

00:26:07 Deryck Irving

Or we tried that, it worked a bit, but there were three or four other options that we discarded before we got to our actions.

00:26:14 Deryck Irving

And that type of deeper sharing of process is really, really important.

00:26:20 Deryck Irving

The challenge then, and it takes me right back to what we're saying about narratives and stories, how do you take that degree

00:26:26 Deryck Irving

of nuanced concepts into a discussion with a community under pressure or into a group of decision makers who are looking for something short snappy that stands up against "we need more jobs" or "we need more houses".

00:26:39 Nicola Headlam

And that I think is always the thing.

00:26:41 Nicola Headlam

If the purpose is to make visible the trade-off, then you have done a good service.

00:26:47 Nicola Headlam

But we're not good at that either.

00:26:48 Deryck Irving

That's certainly at the heart of a lot of the work we're doing at the moment that says, okay, do you know what?

00:26:53 Deryck Irving

It's a truism, but a partnership is only a partnership if all of the players occasionally take a hit.

00:26:58 Deryck Irving

If everybody's doing what they would already have done, it's not a partnership.

00:27:00 Deryck Irving

It's just people agreeing to talk to each other.

00:27:03 Deryck Irving

And it's trying to understand that trade-off process that says, okay, do you know what?

00:27:08 Deryck Irving

That's 80% as efficient in terms of our priority, but it's delivering on four or five other sets of priorities and therefore we think we should do it rather than digging our heels in and saying, no, if you don't do it our way, we don't do it at all.

00:27:20 Nicola Headlam

I think it's a very profound point.

00:27:22 Nicola Headlam

And it's back to your point about generalisable or purpose-built solutions.

00:27:26 Nicola Headlam

At the beginning, you were talking about if it only works for children, it probably doesn't work.

00:27:32 Nicola Headlam

If we accidentally built our cities to be accessible and age-friendly, then they'd probably be better for everybody in the end.

00:27:39 Nicola Headlam

I mean, it's like how many hits do you get with the same kind of...

00:27:42 Deryck Irving

And there are examples that we've managed to surface of practice locally, wider Scotland and

00:27:49 Deryck Irving

internationally of people doing just that, about sitting out and saying, what, we have a set of priorities, we understand they have a spatial element, what else fits into that spatial priority?

00:28:00 Nicola Headlam

Well done, you have disciplined me.

00:28:02 Nicola Headlam

My next question, as written on the sheet, says, where else has a good international lesson to import or steal?

00:28:10 Nicola Headlam

So you've led me there naturally.

00:28:11 Nicola Headlam

Where would you suggest?

00:28:13 Deryck Irving

Aware there that we're running on the clock, I can give you the glib answer, which is if we're talking about water, let's look at the Netherlands.

00:28:19 Deryck Irving

In terms of the technologies and the thinking, the University of Stirling here, we work quite closely with colleagues in the Netherlands on a number of projects.

00:28:28 Deryck Irving

They have a really good grasp of this sort of multiplicity of solutions.

00:28:35 Deryck Irving

And they build water into the regeneration of vacant and derelict land in their cities.

00:28:39 Deryck Irving

They build water management to a large extent because they exist as a nation because of water management.

00:28:44 Deryck Irving

So there's strong reasons.

00:28:46 Deryck Irving

I had a lovely example in a European project I was working on a couple of years ago where we had people from all over Europe and we were asking them about what their priorities were to get their research into practice around water.

00:28:59 Deryck Irving

And the two Dutch colleagues in the room came back to me and said, our first priority is to make water more sexy.

00:29:05 Deryck Irving

And I thought, "yes, those are the people we need to listen to."

00:29:08 Deryck Irving

So I think there's definitely good practice out there.

00:29:11 Deryck Irving

There's good practice in places like Singapore as well, all of which are facing fairly extreme challenges, whether that's flooding or whether that's water scarcity.

00:29:21 Deryck Irving

I think the other thing is there are global

00:29:24 Deryck Irving

economic sectors that are worth us looking at.

00:29:27 Deryck Irving

The interesting one from a Scottish perspective is the whisky distilling, because they are dependent not just on having water, but having water that has an attached value identity.

00:29:38 Deryck Irving

There's a lot of work being done globally by the big players, by the Diageos, the Beam Suntories of this world, that is streets ahead of anybody else in terms of how they want to manage the catchments that their water comes from.

00:29:51 Nicola Headlam

Sure, because it is essentially, it is value very directly.

00:29:54 Deryck Irving

They're one of the

00:29:55 Deryck Irving

industries where their perceived quality is actually part of their business model.

00:30:00 Deryck Irving

They're viewed as being about naturalness and wildness and so on.

00:30:03 Deryck Irving

So I think there are some really good examples there.

00:30:05 Nicola Headlam

So the interface between place branding and marketing and product branding and marketing and whisky is a kind of amazing, it's so embodied with the land and all the rest of it.

00:30:18 Deryck Irving

It's interesting because one of the very early discussions we had putting together the initial bid to become the LPIP was with a

00:30:25 Deryck Irving

community group in the national park, which sits within our catchment.

00:30:29 Deryck Irving

Anyway, we've got a national park as well in the upper region.

00:30:32 Deryck Irving

And we were speaking to a community there and their summing up of why water was important to them was the most systems based and holistic I've heard.

00:30:40 Deryck Irving

They said, we choose to live here because it's a beautiful place.

00:30:42 Deryck Irving

It's partly a beautiful place because of the river and the lochs.

00:30:45 Deryck Irving

We have a strong tourism industry because people believe that it's beautiful.

00:30:50 Deryck Irving

We have significant problems with flood risk in the town centre.

00:30:54 Deryck Irving

We have challenges around water quality because of upstream land uses and private sewer systems.

00:31:01 Deryck Irving

And if we don't capture this right, we lose all of the value and maximise all of the problems.

00:31:09 Deryck Irving

And we've sat back and went, that's the summary we need to hear at the top as well.

00:31:13 Deryck Irving

It's the people who have the closest visible relationship with water, the ones who are taking this forward fastest.

00:31:19 Deryck Irving

The challenge then is to make sure that doesn't become, "Oh yeah, it's water, so it's just about the water sector, or it's water, it's just about the food and drink sector or whatever."

00:31:27 Deryck Irving

It's that constant reminder that, you know what, it does have an impact on your industrial investment.

00:31:32 Deryck Irving

It does have an impact on

00:31:34 Deryck Irving

the social equality of our towns and cities.

00:31:37 Deryck Irving

It does have an impact on our transport infrastructure, and so on and so forth.

00:31:41 Deryck Irving

So there are lots of good places to look, but part of our job at the university sector is to keep saying, but the evidence tells us it's not just there, it's in other places too.

00:31:57 Nicola Headlam

So the LPIP has managed to catalyse all these interesting conversations.

00:32:02 Nicola Headlam

Obviously it's finite.

00:32:03 Nicola Headlam

I know that you're going on for a little bit longer for various reasons.

00:32:05 Nicola Headlam

You're running through next year, aren't you?

00:32:07 Nicola Headlam

So how are you going to take the lessons and port them into your next incarnation?

00:32:13 Nicola Headlam

What are you working on next, Deryck?

00:32:14 Deryck Irving

Some of the learning will come out back into the hydration chair team where I work already.

00:32:19 Deryck Irving

I will work with Scottish Water in the next phase will not be purely focused on net zero.

00:32:24 Deryck Irving

It'll be focused on the wider resilience.

00:32:26 Deryck Irving

So it will be embedded there.

00:32:28 Deryck Irving

It's being fed back through partnership working and membership

00:32:31 Deryck Irving

of the LPIP group into the other public agencies.

00:32:34 Deryck Irving

We're supporting some pilot work at the moment the Scottish Government's doing to try and look at public service reform using

00:32:41 Deryck Irving

water and river catchments as a starting point.

00:32:43 Deryck Irving

So we're trying to feed as many of these processes across the next six months so that they're still running.

00:32:48 Deryck Irving

We've designed some of our commissioned work to try and maximise legacy as well.

00:32:54 Deryck Irving

So I've got a project that's currently up and running looking at water and blue space opportunities for communities.

00:33:01 Deryck Irving

We're doing that with a third sector community facing partner.

00:33:05 Deryck Irving

With a view that we're actually leaving them at the end of the process with an action plan for what happens next.

00:33:10 Deryck Irving

We're trying to seed as many of these things as possible.

00:33:12 Deryck Irving

And aspects of the work will continue on into new funding bids and into new pieces of work.

00:33:18 Deryck Irving

We'll be putting out

00:33:19 Deryck Irving

academic papers.

00:33:20 Deryck Irving

We'll certainly be putting out policy papers as well.

00:33:24 Deryck Irving

But we're also trying to find ways to use the creative sector to create things that are going to have a bit more immediacy.

00:33:30 Deryck Irving

I'm not naive enough to suspect that civil servants read things that arrive on their desk.

00:33:35 Deryck Irving

But if you've got something that's much more visible and much more interactive, you've got a chance at least of getting people to think about why they should go back and read the thing that's sitting on their desk.

00:33:43 Deryck Irving

We've got a big event later in the year which will launch a lot of the film-based stuff.

00:33:48 Deryck Irving

We've got a PhD

00:33:49 Deryck Irving

student doing some fascinating stuff about archive film as well.

00:33:52 Deryck Irving

I need to see more of, to be perfectly honest.

00:33:55 Deryck Irving

So there'll be strands of it moving forward.

00:33:57 Deryck Irving

I've come from a third sector background, which is very unlike the academic sector.

00:34:01 Deryck Irving

So we're focused on impact, but some of our greatest impact is people taking things away and not realising it was us that gave them to them.

00:34:09 Deryck Irving

And I think we'll see a lot of that across the next business cycle for both

00:34:13 Deryck Irving

politicians and key agencies, that people going away with contacts, messages and learning that perhaps they don't realise they got directly from FORTH20.

00:34:22 Nicola Headlam

It's always the who funds the bees, all the connecting, all the cross-pollination.

00:34:28 Nicola Headlam

Everybody needs it, but the people want to buy the

00:34:32 Nicola Headlam

barley for the whiskey or the flowers for the shops or the actual bees themselves.

00:34:37 Nicola Headlam

Sounds like you've been very busy bees.

00:34:39 Nicola Headlam

So as you've worked quite clearly, very embedded, can you think of a specific person.

00:34:45 Nicola Headlam

And you don't need to name them, it's not a naming thing, but can you think of somebody who's a really good broker?

00:34:51 Nicola Headlam

Again, in the whiskey context, you'll know the word broker comes from broaching the barrel.

00:34:56 Nicola Headlam

and uncovering what was already there.

00:34:58 Nicola Headlam

But I think in our terms, it's the characteristics and the kind of embodied nature of people that are willing to travel across sectors, across spaces, across all the rest of it.

00:35:06 Nicola Headlam

So what makes a good broker in your view?

00:35:09 Deryck Irving

I think there are probably multiple answers to that question.

00:35:13 Deryck Irving

That's like a politician.

00:35:15 Deryck Irving

There are some people who are the active connectors who can have those discussions and say, "oh, I heard somebody over there say this, you really should be talking to each other.

00:35:24 Deryck Irving

I'm a huge believer in actually getting people to accidentally hear each other's comments, deliberately and accidentally.

00:35:29 Deryck Irving

So people hearing their own perspectives is useful.

00:35:31 Deryck Irving

So there are people who do that and do that well.

00:35:33 Deryck Irving

I think that's probably the one real job skill I've got across a whole career.

00:35:36 Deryck Irving

But there are others out there that we've got organisations in Scotland that are designed to do that sort of knowledge brokering type thing.

00:35:43 Deryck Irving

But I think actually effective brokerage is often more

00:35:48 Deryck Irving

most dependent on individuals who act as nodes in a much smaller sense.

00:35:54 Deryck Irving

So there's somebody in Scottish Water who's really good at working with three or four different people in the local authority and those people know who they need to work with next.

00:36:01 Deryck Irving

And it's much more a system brokerage thing rather than an individual player.

00:36:05 Deryck Irving

Both of those models depend on having a manager who allows you the time to do it.

00:36:11 Deryck Irving

And where I'm seeing good practice when I go and look at it, it's very often a combination of some very committed, knowledgeable

00:36:18 Deryck Irving

culturally sensitive often as well, individuals, with line managers who say, "Do you know what?

00:36:23 Deryck Irving

I know that doesn't look like your job, but keep doing it."

00:36:25 Deryck Irving

And that's a microcosm, I guess, of what I was saying earlier about policy, which is we need the big system stuff at the top to create the space and enable the things that have to happen lower down to happen.

00:36:37 Deryck Irving

It's acutely difficult in the public sector these days.

00:36:41 Deryck Irving

I've worked with local authorities in Scotland since the mid 1980s and every single year of my career I've been told there's no money and it's really true now.

00:36:50 Deryck Irving

It probably wasn't for 35 of the 40 years but it certainly, so that ability to step out of the tightly defined role out far enough to go do you know what if I speak to them and they agree with me something can change and when it changes my job gets easier.

00:37:06 Nicola Headlam

I think people have realised, I mean I wrote at the beginning of austerity about creators, no blank space is going to really affect everything.

00:37:13 Nicola Headlam

The other thing is it's about surfacing the resource, isn't it?

00:37:16 Nicola Headlam

I mean it's amazing how we've all been on partnership boards where you think to yourself, how much is this costing an hour compared with its kind of efficacy?

00:37:24 Nicola Headlam

Very interesting.

00:37:25 Nicola Headlam

And according to our very Topsy and Tim, version that you'd have a broker would be like a piece of Lego and then a good place leader would slot neatly into a good broker.

00:37:35 Nicola Headlam

Can you think of a really good place leader?

00:37:36 Deryck Irving

I had to think about this before I came on.

00:37:39 Deryck Irving

I've got two different answers, I guess.

00:37:41 Deryck Irving

The first one is nice and clippy.

00:37:43 Deryck Irving

And, you know, I think have a look at New York City at the moment.

00:37:46 Deryck Irving

You've got Mayor Mandani there who has used a place identity to generate change, but more importantly to generate hope.

00:37:55 Deryck Irving

And I think that's an incredible example and an amazing turnaround in a relatively short period of time.

00:38:00 Deryck Irving

So at a political level, there are people like that.

00:38:02 Deryck Irving

There are people who have inspired me across the piece.

00:38:06 Deryck Irving

And the person that came to my mind first up was Professor Brian Evans at the Glasgow School of Art, who is there.

00:38:13 Deryck Irving

He's a professor of urbanism and landscape there.

00:38:15 Deryck Irving

But he's been involved.

00:38:16 Deryck Irving

He was a partner at a landscape firm.

00:38:19 Deryck Irving

He's been involved in academia in lots of different ways.

00:38:21 Deryck Irving

He's done work with the UN Economic Commission for Europe.

00:38:24 Deryck Irving

He understands place from the hyper-local single building impact right through to pretty much global.

00:38:32 Deryck Irving

And he lives it, absolutely lives it.

00:38:34 Deryck Irving

And he came up with

00:38:36 Deryck Irving

This is going to sound really geeky, but he came up with the best quote I've ever had for what place-based working is.

00:38:42 Deryck Irving

And he said, this is a conference I ran a few years ago.

00:38:45 Deryck Irving

He said, place-based working or placemaking is combining the *genus loci* with the *zeitgeist*.

00:38:50 Deryck Irving

As he's saying, so basically it's the spirit of the place.

00:38:53 Deryck Irving

So the solution is place specific, but it's about the big issues.

00:38:56 Deryck Irving

So that's why it's about climate resilience.

00:38:58 Deryck Irving

It's why it's about inequalities.

00:39:00 Deryck Irving

It's why it's about economic development.

00:39:02 Deryck Irving

And he has probably inspired me more than anybody else across my, certainly the latter two-thirds of my career.

00:39:08 Nicola Headlam

I will definitely be stealing that, *genius loci* plus *zeitgeist* equals place leadership.

At least he's been quite honest about his aspirations.

00:39:25 Nicola Headlam

Nothing wrong with a bit of judicious satire to kind of remind us about the possibility of power.

00:39:31 Nicola Headlam

We've done all right.

00:39:32 Nicola Headlam

We've kind of sneaked in a little bit longer than I'd hoped, but we'll cut this out, but yes.

00:39:36 Nicola Headlam

So lastly, in that vein, we will have some foolishness to finish.

00:39:40 Nicola Headlam

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

00:39:44 Nicola Headlam

Careful with it, can grant a wish.

00:39:46 Nicola Headlam

You can have absolute power to do one of these things, but you must

00:39:50 Nicola Headlam

use your power to make a tangible change to a specific place.

00:39:53 Nicola Headlam

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

00:40:03 Nicola Headlam

And also, of course, any magic that you come up with, you need to close off something else in another part of government, as we've seen from cleverness around VAT and fuel bills this morning.

00:40:12 Nicola Headlam

You can have

00:40:13 Nicola Headlam

Ten million pound, half an hour with the cabinet and a slide deck, editorial control of the front page of a tabloid, a clause into a bill, something simple that will go viral on social media, anyone as an advocate for your work that you think would bring focus, or, and this is for the real uber nerds, the answer to something that's always bothered you.

00:40:32 Nicola Headlam

Which would you like?

00:40:33 Deryck Irving

I think if you'd asked me this question three months ago, I wouldn't have been able to answer it.

00:40:37 Deryck Irving

I think it's a no-brainer at the moment.

00:40:39 Deryck Irving

Half an hour with the cabinet as a critical friend, and that's the magic is to say

00:40:44 Deryck Irving

yes, you're right, but yes, that's good, and if that's sort of 30 minutes of time to just say what you're telling me about place is valid, helpful, but it's not the full picture, and what are you going to do about it?

00:40:56 Nicola Headlam

Well, I tell you what, from your definition of good place leadership, if we are going to look at the power of the place and then certainly the current politics is bringing a certain amount of zeitgeist onto place-based working, then we'd all have it more of a chance.

00:41:09 Nicola Headlam

I do feel quite hopeful, not just because I've worked with Andy in Greater Manchester

00:41:14 Nicola Headlam

But I do feel quite hopeful that we're in a bit of a period where there is, sometimes in history, talking to the Cabinet with a slide deck, it would have been a pointless exercise for all concerned.

00:41:23 Nicola Headlam

But you're right, there seems to be a real hunger for doing things differently, for making sort of cases predicated on the kind of learning and knowledge that we're talking about.

00:41:34 Nicola Headlam

So yes, and maybe we're finishing despite ourselves on a really interesting note and point for the work.

00:41:41 Nicola Headlam

Thank you so much for joining us.

00:41:42 Nicola Headlam

We set out to mine insights from experts, that was Deryck.

00:41:46 Nicola Headlam

Real world case studies, which is water north of the border.

00:41:49 Nicola Headlam

Practical tips, not sure I never think we get anything practical.

00:41:52 Nicola Headlam

Career advice, God forbid, follow what's interesting.

00:41:54 Nicola Headlam

And to spotlight some solutions as well as wave the place-based innovation magic wand, and we have.

00:42:00 Nicola Headlam

Thank you, Deryck.

00:42:01 Deryck Irving

Thank you.