Place Leadership in English Local Authorities

A critical success factor for vital and viable high streets

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HIGH STREETS TASK FORCE

About the High Streets Task Force

The High Streets Task Force is an alliance of placemaking experts. Commissioned in 2019 by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (now Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities), the Task Force provides the encouragement, tools, skills and training that communities and local government need to transform their high streets.

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Executive Summary

This research aims to understand the role and methods of local authority leaders in the successful regeneration of high streets and town centres. The research focused on seven place leaders, based within local authorities, who have a strong track record of place transformation.

There is an extensive body of literature examining institutional and political leadership in local authorities, but little examination of *place leadership*. High streets and town centres matter, but they face complex challenges and need leadership if they are to adapt to the changing needs of their communities

1. Local Authorities are seen as *the* responsible body for high streets but this is an oversimplified view. High streets and town centres are made up of a plethora of occupiers, owners, users, residents, visitors, organisations and networks. **When individuals and groups act collectively, through collaboration and partnership working, the evidence shows that high streets and town centres can be revitalised**.

2. **Collaboration and partnership needs to be catalysed, bringing capacity and capability for place transformation from across boundaries** – be they internal (silos) or external (other organisations or cultures). Place leaders have the skills and knowledge to do this. They have the trust and respect of a wide range of local stakeholders, who they work closely with, towards the common aim of making a better place.

3. **Place leaders in local authorities have a common set of traits and behaviours.** They have a strong belief in their purpose, they are driven, they are passionate, courageous and bold. They are also very resilient because leading change in places is complex and contested.

4. **A range of factors impact on local authority leaders' motivation to drive change in places. These factors can be personal, civic or professional.** They relate to their individual connection to the place and people (personal), duty to use their council role to the benefit of the places they work in, and the communities they serve (civic) and their skilled performance of their place leadership role (professional).

5. **Nurturing collaboration is key to the place leaders' role.** This involves convening stakeholders and partnership development. Whilst collaboration can be challenging to facilitate, leaders draw on both formal and informal sources of power to overcome such challenges. Some traditional council procedures, structures and resources are adopted (e.g. committees, plans, regeneration funds etc.) but adapted to facilitate place change and collaboration. The respect and trust local authority place leaders have outside the council is a source of informal power, encouraging fresh and creative thinking to drive transformation by overcoming the barriers to place leadership commonly identified in this research.

6. **Six common barriers to effective place leadership were identified:**

   a) Reticence towards adopting of/ignorance of a place leadership role
   b) Lazy paternalism and institutional statutory regulatory/operational drag
   c) Overreliance on masterplans and external consultants
   d) Lack of capacity, resource and expertise place management
   e) Politics
   f) Negativity/apathy

Recommendations

A new conceptualisation of place leadership - **the Collaborative Cycle of Place Leadership by Local Authority Leaders** - incorporates the findings of the research. The inner circle represents the characteristics and drivers of the individual council place leader. The blue/grey circle represented the sources of power they draw from. The grey circle represents the positive force of collaboration that the place leaders develop, this drives transformation. The final circle represents common barriers that work as a force against collaborations and transformation.
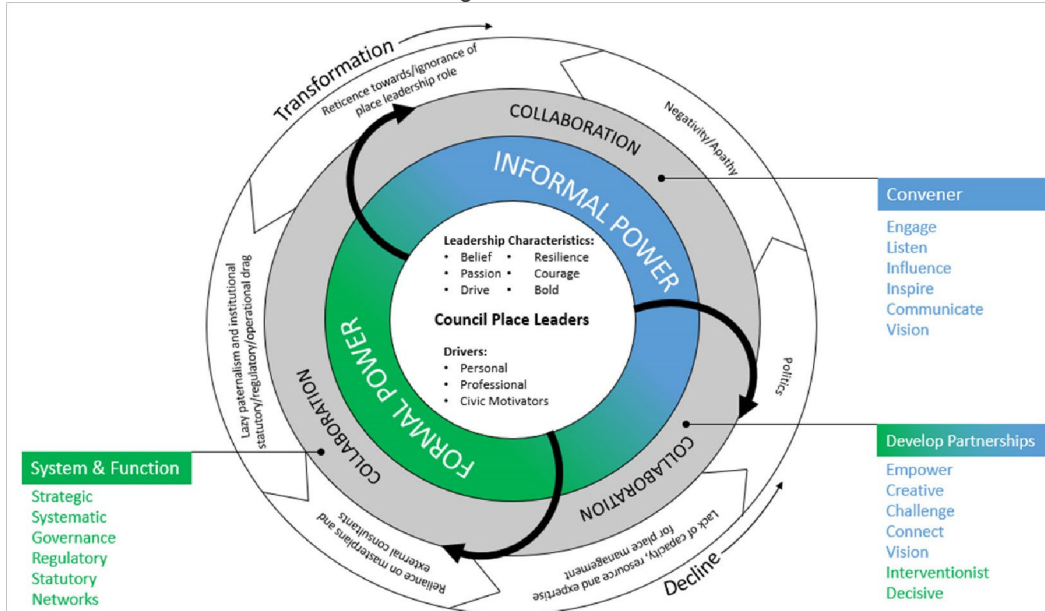

Figure 1: Collaborative Cycle of Council Place Leadership

Recommendation 1

Raise awareness of place leadership as a key part of council leadership

Place leadership is not just *desirable* for local authority leaders, it is *essential*. Place leadership must be recognised as a key part of the council leadership function. Ideally, council leaders or CEOs should also be place leaders, but the study shows that place leaders can operate at any senior level of council. When they are not the leader or CEO, it is important that they are recognised and supported from these offices. Standards for place leadership and an appropriate code of conduct need to be widely adopted. The Local Government Association, and similar bodies, could raise awareness of the importance of professional place leadership with their membership. Likewise, the national government department that oversees local government, DLUHC, should also set an expectation on councils to discharge place leadership, in a professional manner.

Recommendation 2

Improve recruitment of place leaders by aligning person specifications and role descriptions

To help recruit, promote or realign people to place leadership roles, template job descriptions and person specifications should be developed that define the role, the behaviours expected, and the skills, knowledge, competencies, qualifications, experience and characteristics needed.

Prioritise new place leadership training for local leaders

Allied to the above, further training should be provided to enable leaders to be equipped with the tools and techniques to discharge place leadership and to maximise the opportunities to support and then transform our towns and cities. This training should be provided to both officers and elected members that have professional or portfolio responsibilities for place.

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Terms of reference

The High Streets Task Force, a government-funded programme of support for high streets across England, has committed to an annual research study, to focus on a specific issue that is perceived to be a barrier to high street sustainability and transformation. This year (2022) the focus of the annual research study is place leadership in local authorities, as the Task Force has discovered that the quality of place leadership in many locations (as opposed to institutional or political leadership) is low. However, there is little published evidence on high quality place leadership in the context of local authorities. This makes it difficult to be articulating to leaders in local authorities what skills and knowledge they may be lacking – or even assess whether local authorities have the right people in place leadership positions.

Key informant interviews were carried out with seven respected local authority place leaders (both councillors and officers) to develop an understanding of place leadership - the skills, knowledge, behaviours associated as well as their perception of the barriers to effective place leadership and how they have overcome these. Our sample was drawn from local authority place leaders that have a strong track record of effecting place change. The results of the research have led to the development of a simple model of place leadership as well as job descriptions and person specifications for place leadership roles in local authorities.

Context

For some time, the high street has been on a path of decline. Online retail sales have been on the rise, reaching an all-time high of 37.8% during the pandemic in January 2021 (ONS, 2022), and the national high street vacancy rate is currently at 14% (BRC, 2022). Despite the struggles faced by town centres and high streets, the changing demands on them are evolving them into multifunctional community hubs (Grimsey et al., 2020). To facilitate this change, Government has launched the Future High Streets Fund, the Towns Fund, and the Levelling Up Fund. These funds are largely aimed at supporting this transition and encouraging partnerships to drive change locally.

In a piece of research that underpinned Sir John Timpson's review of the high street, and a pre-cursor to the High Streets Task Force, the High Streets 2030: Achieving Change report recognised the importance of place leadership in catalysing this change, stating that 'place leadership needs to be conceptualised as a source of energy and the capacity to bring about change in a collaborative fashion' (IPM, 2018:9). However, the report concludes that effective place leadership is lacking in many locations, inhibiting change from happening.

To support the development of effective place leadership, The High Streets Task Force delivers a range of support, from helping leaders to understand how they can affect change, to bringing stakeholder groups together with the local authority to develop the groundwork for a shared vision of their place. The work of the Task Force has reinforced previous findings that effective place leadership is lacking in places as limited networks and partnership with local authorities, closely followed by weak vision and strategies, were identified as the main barriers to transformation in the local authorities that have so far received HSTF support.

Hambleton (2015:21) says 'the way leaders of local authorities see their role and the ways in which they think and behave are critical' and he suggests more widely that they can have a key role in getting people from different backgrounds to contribute to local, place-based leadership. If, as Hambleton asserts, local authority leaders have a 'key role' in place leadership, then it is surprising that relatively few undertake this role. From the experiences of past and present local authority leaders, chief

executives and directors who have undertaken a successful place leadership role, it has been possible to devise a model of local authority place leadership as well as identify the barriers that stop local authority leaders taking on a place leadership role and transforming their places.

The Collaborative Cycle of Place Leadership by Local Authority Leaders - Summary of findings.

Through undertaking a literature review and through seven in-depth interviews with key informants, we have developed a new conceptualisation - the Collaborative Cycle of Place Leadership by Local Authority Leaders. This model highlights the local authority leaders' role, methods and characteristics within the context of place leadership to overcome the identified place changing barriers. It also provides an indication of where they draw their authority from and how they utilise their power.
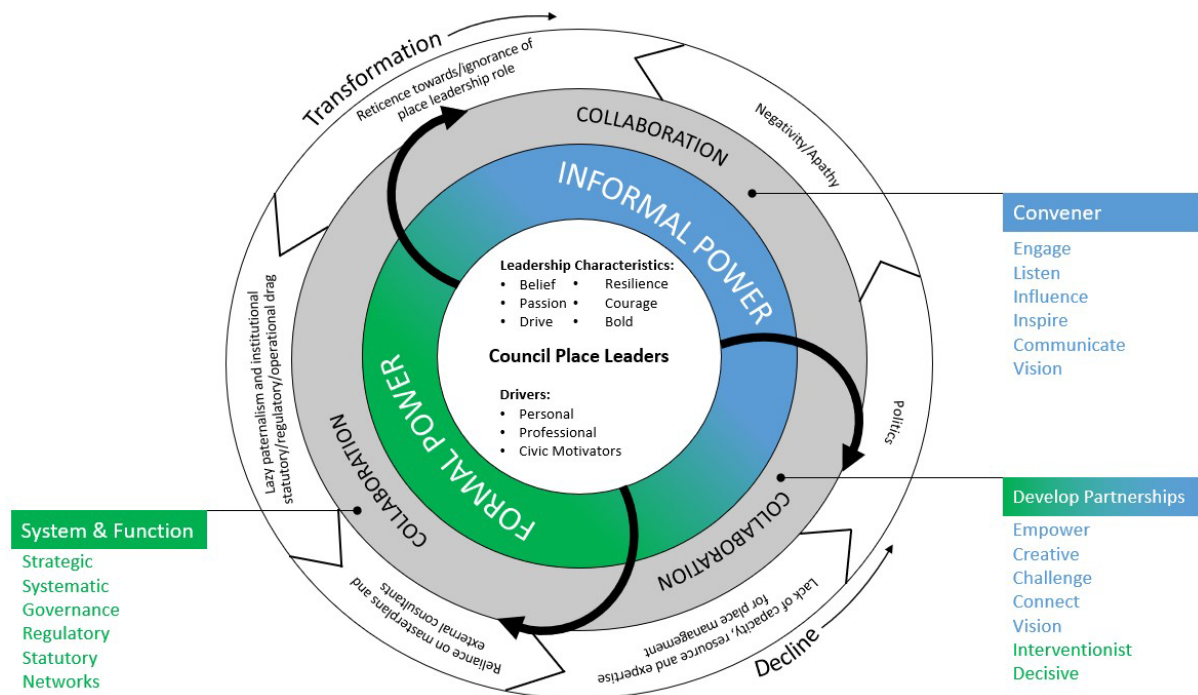
Collaborative Cycle of Place Leadership by Local Authority Leaders

The term Collaborative Cycle of Place Leadership is used because the research has shown that the process of collaboration is cyclical. For example, acting as a convener is a necessary function of recruiting to a partnership, but the methods used to convene must continue throughout the partnership if the partnership is to be effective. Likewise, if the partnership is to be sustainable will require some formal aspect of governance, which will need to be maintained beyond physical terms.

The model identifies that, firstly, the leaders are supremely motivated by a number of factors to drive change. They recognise in their role and responsibility to put themselves at the centre of this work, and display a number of personal characteristics, presented below, that helps sustain them in pursuit of their aim. These findings are represented in the Council Place Leaders part of the model.

Secondly, the way collaboration is nurtured is key to the leaders' roles in order to convene stakeholders and curate partnership development. Whilst collaboration can be challenging to facilitate, results from this research corroborate existing literature that states leaders draw on both formal and informal aspects of power to overcome such challenges. Whilst some traditional council approaches are adopted in order to provide systematic and structured partnership development, place leaders exhibit encouragement for fresh and creative thinking to drive transformation by more informed means, building trust and relationships with stakeholders aside of the council

Finally, part of the cycle is also the barriers that have to be overcome, that act against the Collaborative Cycle of Place Leadership, providing resistance. This research does not present an exhaustive list, however it represents the main common themes that repeatedly emerged throughout the course of the research. The barriers identified are:

- Reticence towards adopting of/ignorance of a place leadership role
- Lazy paternalism and institutional statutory/regulatory/operational drag
- Overreliance on masterplans and external consultants
- Lack of capacity, resource and expertise in place management
- Politics
- Negativity/apathy

If the barriers are too strong and the Collaborative Cycle of Place Leadership too weak, then places do not transform. And if leaders only focus on a part of the cycle, as is often the case where a formal process is the usual way of operating, the cycle is broken, and place-based transformation is not achieved. Instead, we may see more traditional 'place' activities being undertaken such as a new masterplan being commissioned, or even a new development built – but often this, by itself, maybe suboptimal compared to what could have been achieved through collaborative working

The rest of this document expands on the model, demonstrating how its components are supported from data collected for this study. The document follows the colour theme used in the model, where blue signifies informal power characteristics the leaders utilise and green represents formal power

Method

To achieve our aims, knowledge was gathered from the perceptions and experience of those who served as council leaders. Therefore, we followed a qualitative approach as there were not sufficient numbers of effective place leaders in local authorities to warrant quantitative research. This led us to using interviews in a semi structured form, which allowed some focus to the information gathering process, without rigidly constraining the ability to probe more deeply. It also allowed the interviewee to expand on areas and provide insight into aspects that would not have been revealed otherwise.

The themes that were asked in the interviews were as follows; the problems and issues that the place was facing; the motivators and drivers of the leader; how they perceived their role; how they undertook the role and also the role of the council more widely, their role with regard to the level and breadth of collaboration and partnership working, governance considerations and what specific actions they took, or they encouraged others to take; and the outcomes. The interviews were also used to help understand obstacles faced and overcome as well as any perceived wisdom that could be used to help others. The council leaders who took part in this study were identified through the IPM's network or through snowball sampling. All those interviewed gave their consent and an Ethos application form was completed in line with Manchester Metropolitan University requirements. As we were looking for experienced and collaborative work the sample size was limited to seven individuals as seen below.

Name	Position	Authority
Sir Howard Bernstein	former Chief Executive	Manchester City Council
Cllr Mike Jones	former Leader	Cheshire West/Chester Council
Neil Schneider	former Chief Executive	Stockton Council
Ms A	Chief Executive	A Council
Mr B	Leader	B Council
Michelle Sacks	Deputy Chief Executive	Boston Council
Michelle Percy	Director of Place	Newcastle City Council

Council Place Leaders

Council place leaders display common leadership traits but are motivated by a personal connection to place, believe they have a civic responsibility to it and have professional skills and knowledge to undertake their job with a high degree of competence.

Council Place Leaders have a strong belief in their purpose, they are driven, they are passionate, courageous and bold. They are also very resilient, because leading change in places is complex and contested. Every participant made the point that place leadership is not easy. Sir Howard said it is mostly "blood, sweat and toil", Neil Schneider said it is "emotionally draining" and Ms A that it is "very difficult". It is unsurprising then that six of the seven participants aligned with Cllr Jones' view agreed, saying, "You need to be resilient, bloody hell, you're wasting your time if you're not resilient". This is probably why four of the leaders specifically mentioned the need for courage or bravery if you are a local authority place leader. These words are illustrative of the sheer determination the place leaders had to achieve change.

Our leader cohort allude to three key motivational factors that drive their local authority *place leadership* roles and all have their roots in propinquity, that being a state that comes from a proximity to something.
- Personal motivation: a social or geographic connection to place.
- Civic motivation: a connection to place/communities by virtue of their council role and responsibilities.
- Professional motivation: professional pride, and the pre-requisite skills and knowledge, to transform places

Three of the seven participants had a deep personal connection with the place they were involved in, and Cllr Jones' personal motivation is captured when he said, "I love Chester" and "I'm a Chester boy, that's my desire". This was mirrored by Neil Schneider when he said that "this (Stockton) is my hometown" and relayed a charming anecdote that upon retiring from his job the entire council stood in the chamber to sing 'Stockton Boy' to him. Similarly, Michelle Sacks spoke of Boston and her connection, "I have a passion and enthusiasm for my place. If I can't exhibit this, how can I enthuse others. You have to feel your place". This sense of passion came across in the interview with Michelle Sacks when she said, "I get out of bed every day to make a difference. Genuinely, to make a difference".

The data also show that all of the participants suggest there is a degree of civic motivation that drives their place leadership role. This aligns with Sir Howard's comment, that he did not view himself as chief executive of the council but chief executive of Manchester itself. What potentially differentiates the place leaders from other (non-local authority) place leaders is the civic and democratic mandate and responsibility, conferred by the office, to undertake a place leadership role. Mr B said that "the office of leader of the council does lend you a legitimate platform for place leadership and a mandate to bring people together" born out of being a 'custodian of place'. Michelle Sacks echoes this and underlines what she sees as a function of local government when she says, "I am privileged to do a job that can improve a place. This is the role of local government".

The heads of paid service equally felt that place leadership is, or should be, an inherent part of the role. Sir Howard said that chief executives should take place leadership as seriously as social services, Neil Schneider spoke of a "deep sense of responsibility for the economic and social wellbeing of an area" and he expressed his surprise that some chief executives do not use their office to discharge place leadership roles. Nevertheless, to take responsibility for economic and social outcomes of an area, you

have to understand the area – and have the skills and knowledge to effect place change. There is a *professional* element of place leadership – which is about improving places.

As Sir Howard Bernstien said "Chief executives should be judged not just by the quality of their services, but by their place shaping ability and place leader credibility". Sir Howard pointed out that in some places, local authorities simply do not recognise their responsibilities for place leadership. This, therefore, suggests a civic platform exists within the role of a local authority leader to take the reins, or at the very least play a significant role, in driving place change – but many council leaders are choosing to ignore this, perhaps because they lack the professional place skills and knowledge, or because they feel no connection to the location, or because they really do not believe it is part of their job.

Leaders' role as conveners of people, developers of partnerships and utilisation of local authority systems and functions.

Local authority leaders put collaboration at the heart of their approach to place leadership in their towns and cities. Their use of convening powers is key to the establishment of robust place-based partnerships.

All the respondents conveyed the notion that any approach to town centre transformation has to have key stakeholders embedded and active within the process, as summed up by Cllr Jones when he suggests that collaboration is fundamental, "in terms of place leadership, collaboration is essential. You can't do it unless you bring people along with you". This is perhaps best epitomised in the quote from Michelle Sacks, "You can't do placemaking on your own. It's no one's sole responsibility. It's like a giant jigsaw puzzle and every one of your stakeholders and partners have a little piece of that puzzle. You get a glorious picture with a multitude of partners as opposed to one dimension with a single piece". Michelle Percy talked of the energy that comes from bringing people together that drives change in Newcastle. "I ask what is it we can do together, enabling change by collaborating? There is something about working with people with energy, you create some form of effervescent spirit that leads to change". Mr B believes that "collaboration has to be at the heart, from the start, and then all the way through the process" and he sees council leaders, senior members and officers having a major role in steering and encouraging this. Likewise, Sir Howard also sees a "key role for local authority leaders in terms of fostering a collaborative place leadership approach".

The local authority place leaders' consensus around the importance of collaboration is clearly evident in the transcripts. Broadly speaking there are two key categories that come out from the findings which explain how they see their role.

- Convener of people, to draw together the key people and organisations necessary for change.
- Influencer of people, to unite people behind a vision, plan or process for change.

The research shows that the participants used a number of methods to enact these roles.

Conveners

The cohort clearly see their role as bringing together the relevant people and organisations whose stake in the town gives them a reason to seek change. Sir Howard sees his role very much about convening. He says of people in his position, who have a place leadership role, that "…..it's about using your convening power as a place leader to develop and share a vision for place. It is about your leadership to get stakeholders on board". Similarly, Mr B also uses the word convener and also suggests local authority leaders can enable or facilitate the bringing of people together. All respondents talk about the methods of bringing people together and this is evidenced below, showing how the participants' use of convening helped the collaborative process. The study elicited two specific methods that they utilised in order to act as effective conveners: meaningful engagement and active listening.

Engage

The research suggests that to help facilitate a meaningful engagement strategy, leaders try to create an alignment between the place vision, with what matters to the stakeholder in question. Sir Howard says, "in order to enable partners to take responsibility to deliver part of the vision, they have to believe in it. They will only believe in it if it represents their priorities and values". So, how leaders engage becomes equally important. Ms A develops this further when she explains, "The role of local authority place

leadership is about creating the conditions for effective engagement….. where people can come together in a safe environment, where they feel safe to speak and where their contribution will be valued.." Equally, the importance of who they engaged became apparent in the study. There was multiple use of the word connections in the context of both making a new contact but also using their connected networks to involve the right people. All leaders exhibited some means of generating a connection with people or organisations by tapping into their aims or aspirations or, most simply, by creating an emotional connection by appealing to people's desire to see positive change. To understand people the study showed you had to listen to them.

Listen

Many of the leaders suggested that their role is to act as an enabler of conversations and to bring people together, with a council leadership role seen as a great platform for this. It was suggested that this wasn't always easy where passionate views exist but as one respondent said, 'you might not agree with them, but you have to involve them and that starts by listening to them". Neil Schneider referenced a musician who undertook the mantle of Stockton's social activist, who was seen by some as more of a hindrance than an asset. Neil visited him with a view to listening to him and his views. Having listened, Neil said "I saw him as part of the solution not a problem, he informed my thinking".

Influence

Stakeholders are not obligated to engage or contribute to the delivery of a place vision for their place. Therefore, the research suggests the leader's role in influencing is significant. Sir Howard is clear that for him place leadership is "…..an influencing role as much as it's a doing role", a point that Cllr Jones appears to agree with when he says "the role of the leader isn't about having the power to crack on and do stuff. It's influence". Cllr Jones echoes this, 'What a good council leader does is based upon the inputs, recommendations, research by a range of people. You can't do it on your own. Therefore, it's about very high-level influencing to bring these people around you". The methods of influencing come from their use of inspiring people, being bold, leading by example and being positive about the future by linking it to a potential vision for the town.

Communication and Inspiration

In one form or another the leaders all highlighted the use of communication and inspiration as a method to influence people. Neil Schneider explained that he had personally gone to 'dozens and dozens' of stakeholder groups to influence people through "winning hearts and minds, to encourage people to dare to be different, braver than others and forward looking". He stated that he saw this as an intrinsic part of the local authority place leader role. Six of the seven participants talked about the importance of communication countering any prevailing negativity towards place as an important factor in influencing people. In doing so, people became inspired to come forward and in partnership to help support places.

Michelle Sacks suggested, 'public consultation, communication and engagement is critical. We did face to face consultation, we have a standalone Facebook page, we post regularly. We put ideas on the page and we can see the level of engagement. Our videos we were posting were being shared in excess of 100,000 times'. She continues her theme when she said, 'you have to get out there, (take) a combination of approaches to see what people are looking for. We talk about 'hard to reach' but often they are not hard to reach if you make the effort to go out and find them. It's important to be inclusive. It's worth engaging with visitors as well as residents'. Through her communication efforts and by being bold and

countering negativity Michelle Sacks was rewarded by "a chorus that came to sing together about what is good about Boston".

Aspiration

Place leaders could articulate ambition and an aspiration for a location to excite and motivate people to be part of a collaboration that will drive change in their place. The leaders use of aspiration was not necessarily defined in great detail at this stage – it can be thought of as a pre-cursor to the more formalised vision that is later developed through partnership working (see Vision in section below). For example, Mr B talked of a future town that was 'vibrant and buzzing' and of 'distinction'.

Develop Partnerships

It was interesting to note that a central theme that emerges from the research is the involvement of the local authority leaders in ensuring the conditions for partnership working are right. Neil Schneider said, "a core aspect of place leadership is to create an environment for other people to flourish", whilst for Ms A that environment is 'a safe place (where people can) share ideas and discuss what's working and what's not'. She pointedly states it is the role of the council leadership to create this space. Creating an alignment between the interests of the stakeholders and that of the vision of the leader is also important and it was suggested by Sir Howard that this helps to foster a spirit of 'distributive leadership', which he sees is a role of the local authority place leader. True partnerships are said to exist where everyone gets something out of it, and there is a pragmatic quid pro quo as highlighted by Michelle Sacks' point when she says, "sometimes we do things for our partners as we may need them to do things for us". Although maybe not for totally altruistic reasons, this does convey a sense of active curation of partnership maintenance. As such the methods underpinning these conditions are explored below.

All participants reference some form of partnership vehicle. For example, Sir Howard talks of the New East Manchester Partnership, Cllr Jones of his role in setting up a town partnership board called Chester Renaissance, Neil Schneider similarly talks of bringing together key people in partnership to drive change and Ms A and Mr B reference their involvement in town partnership working in towns A and B. The reasons for partnership working were manifold, but put simply, it's a matter of harnessing an untapped resource. The leaders spoke of tapping into expertise and knowledge of others as well as the ability to undertake certain roles or bring other resources to the partnership that will help drive change. The respondents referred to a number of methods to create the conditions for effective partnership working; vision is used to inspire people, leaders empower people, creativity and challenge is encouraged, connections to external networks are used and decisive behaviour is present when needed, as are formal structures, the use of statutory, regulatory and hierarchical process and authority.

Vision

The research suggests that the participants all see crafting a defined vision as an important part of the place leadership process. Creating an aligned vision is key, as suggested by Sir Howard, "The biggest challenge of all is partners not recognising the vision". All talked about the importance of creating a strong vision and their role in bringing this about. Every participant recognised that place leaders must, in contrast to more traditional approaches, allow the vision to be influenced and shaped, in one form or another, by the wider stakeholder groups and that it must be allowed to evolve over time.

Empower

All the place leaders made reference to the notion of empowering stakeholders, as well as harnessing the talents of people and giving them free reign in a partnership. Neil Schnieder said, "for me, it's about empowering and enabling the people of the town to take up a role to drive the town forward". Sir Howard's distributive leadership comes because he creates the conditions where partners "feel they have the ability to have influence and therefore belief in the process". Leaders talked about actively involving stakeholders to not just shape proposals and plans, but to take a leading role in driving them forward. Michelle Sacks encourages this because she sees placemaking as a giant jigsaw with stakeholders all holding a piece of the puzzle, "you get a glorious picture with a multitude of partners as opposed to a one-dimensional piece" she said. It required the place leaders to take a special role in creating the conditions for this to occur. This is either by leading by example, creating a space where mistakes are permissible, or sheer dint of their position to make the normally unacceptable, acceptable.

Creativity

One aspect of empowering people that came out of all of the interviews was creating the conditions for idea generation from stakeholder partners. For change, says Sir Howard "comes in all sorts of ways when you unleash the forces of creativity". Mr B's experience was markedly similar suggesting that he encouraged fresh thinking with the effect that "people start to come up with ideas" which can help inform thinking. Of course, creativity often results in doing something different to the norm and this is not without risk and so the local authority leader has to be both prepared for this and to allow for it within the process. Neil Schneider explains, "It (being creative) was about getting ideas and some didn't work". He gave two examples, the first of putting on music festivals that initially were less than successful. However, they persevered, and eventually they worked well. The second was to establish a beach in the town centre. Neil said "it was expensive and difficult and maybe not hugely successful. But we did it because a large number of stakeholders wanted to do it and we couldn't block their idea if we are saying let's be bold and different". On the latter point, he did point out that this made for an easy target by opposition councillors who raised the issue of cost, and again speaks to the personal characteristic of the place leader of being bold when it comes to decision making and courageous in the face of criticism.

The 'free hand' example of creativity that Cllr Jones mentioned was an idea that stakeholders came up with for an open-air theatre that became a great success, and this developed an audience base for the present theatre. In this and the previous example, it is not just creating the conditions for ideas that are prevalent in the research, but also the fact that leaders then turn the idea into reality, which in itself will be a tangible and reinforcing sign of empowerment in action.

Challenge

Inevitably, if empowerment is not to be tokenistic then the leader will need to be prepared to have their own ideas challenged. Cllr Jones suggested he actively seeks out challenge, "I involve people who are great at analysis and developing options.....I get them to challenge my intuitive thinking and then we end up with an improved result". The notion of leaders allowing themselves to be challenged, and the process resulting in a changed approach, is, I would suggest, an interesting characteristic of these place leaders. Similarly, Sir Howard takes the same approach, "inevitably you have to be able to embrace the ideas and proposals and the contribution of others which might challenge you and challenge your view of the world, but you can't make places (otherwise), we've been challenged by the private sector in the

city centre, we've been challenged by partners in East Manchester and it's right that you get challenged". However, the flip side of the challenge coin is that the research suggests that equally, leaders need to challenge. Mr B captures this when he said, "where people don't see eye to eye with you, you need to be prepared to challenge, I think from being able to challenge both ways you get real credible leadership and that develops confidence which makes for good collaboration".

Be this as it may, for the elected leader this can be hard to do when the cohort you seek to challenge is part of your natural supporter base, a point made by Cllr Jones when speaking from experience about a scheme in Northwich, and this conflict is potentially a downside to local authority place leadership. Likewise, Ms A recognises this but nevertheless says council leaders need to challenge to be able to "cut across personal agendas to focus on what is best for the town". Sir Howard gave an example of 'doing what is best', when he was leading on the regeneration of Spinningfields. Landowners were holding out for high value residential use for the site, as opposed to office use as envisaged by Sir Howard, which he felt was better for Manchester. He said, "when you get challenged and someone says, ' I fundamentally disagree with your vision, not because it's not right for the city, but because it's not right for me and my value expectation' then a stand has to be made against (it)".

Michelle Percy alluded to her approach of thinking differently about what can be done to get the very best out of given area of the city of Newcastle. In doing so she gave examples of her aspiration for key parts of the city and of challenging developers and landowners to think with greater aspiration around their sites to optimise opportunities to create vibrant and thriving places. Similarly, Michelle Sacks speaks about how she has challenged individuals and groups to think and act differently, a point underlined by her when she said, "we had businesses saying, 'business in the town is not like it was 20 years ago' and I would challenge them back to say 'you need to stop doing business like its 20 years ago' and we could then discuss how to move forwards".

Connect

Most of the research sample spoke of connecting people to their place to foster a spirit of change or simply the physical act of connecting themselves to others in the pursuit of collaborative partnerships. Neil Schneider spoke of his "authentic style of leadership which fostered an emotional connection and awareness to place in people".

Interventionist

One particularly striking aspect that emerges from the research is the role of both the leader and chief executive intervening in the structures and cultures of their own organisations so they can work differently in regards to place. Neil Schneider stated that "he saw a lot of people in the council seeing everything through the same lens, so you get the same outcomes....I didn't want engineers and highways people to lens the reinvigoration of the town" so he set about obtaining a fresh perspective. Cllr Jones makes a similar point by suggesting that his role was to broaden out the collection of ideas on how to boost Chester. He explained that in too many places town plans are only created by councillors, officers and their consultants and this can be suboptimal in terms of outcomes. Sir Howard had a different perspective on the same theme when he said that it is the role of the chief executive to be 'interventionist' as a place leader in 're-imagining place'. Neil Schneider suggested that a number of councils are not interventionist and as someone who 'immerses myself' in his place he finds this 'disappointing'.

Decisive

The notion of decisiveness appears 16 times in the research, either specifically or anecdotally as in the Spinningfields example above. This could be seen as the other side of collaborative, in that ultimately, to make progress, decisions have to be made. Cllr Jones talks of the dangers of 'paralysis by analysis', when spending too long reviewing options and not moving forwards, perhaps best summed up when he said, "I say that we are a democracy until we have to make a decision and then we become autocratic".

He builds out this theme and references, unprompted, another participant of the study, "Sir Howard was quite collaborative, he set up a number of organisations to advise him and support him, but he could be a bit dictatorial by saying that he wouldn't be held up by some small, minded politician or community group. And you need a bit of that, you have to be firm on occasions, once you've made a decision, you have to get on with it". Mr B made the same point, "there are times when you just have to plough on otherwise you can be going around in circles for a long time", and he saw it as part of the role of the local authority leadership to do this. Neil Schneider hinted at the personal characteristics needed if you are going to be assertive when he said, "you need courage and belief and conviction to stand behind where you want to be, it's easy to be bounced into places that you don't want to be". It was interesting that four participants all clearly saw being decisive and assertive as an important part of their role.

Systems and Function

The majority of the findings shine a bright light on the function of council leaders in establishing collaborative partnerships. However, the research suggests that leaders still have an important role to play in providing a structured, strategic and systematic approach to place and the deployment of traditional council resources.

Strategic, Systematic & Governance

In terms of systems and function, all bar one of the participants were clear that, although it is important to create collaborative, flexible and creative ways of working, it is essential that this is underpinned by a strategic and systematic operation. Ms A and Cllr Jones both talked about taking a strategic approach to place leadership and Sir Howard said that the process has to be approached in a "systematic and thoughtful way", with Mr B stating that, "councils can help to bring some process and structure to the execution of place making, they just need to avoid stifling it, and I see that as my role to prevent this".

Peppered throughout the interview with Michelle Sacks is the notion of the formal function that the council can play with regards to the towns' partnership, the role she plays within that sphere to help shape a formal vision, assemble the necessary expertise and partners and the ability to bid for government funding. Likewise, Ms A talks about the role of local authorities in bringing their experience of established systematic governance, to place partnerships when she says, "there has to be some form of structure with systems in place to bring it all together and that's where local authorities can help".

Leaders do believe that there is a certain weight conveyed by the civic governance functions of their respective office, indeed Sir Howard believes the democratic function is a unique and important part of place leadership. He states that business leaders respect political leadership and that ministers will want to engage with elected leaders when discussing major place changing schemes. Likewise, he

suggests that the position of chief executive has 'convening power' that is drawn from the formal side of the office.

Networks

Unsurprisingly, those in a local authority leadership position tend to have access to a wide network of people and organisations from across the public, private and community sectors, tapping into various parts of their networks to ensure progress became an emerging theme. Michelle Sacks talked about utilising her business networks to draw on their "experience and nous" to optimise a placemaking project she was working on and similarly she recounted her network experience of engaging with the local college, DWP, health providers and port authorities to deliver a number of projects in her city. Likewise, Neil Schneider talked of utilising his networks to various regional and national people and organisations from the arts and culture sector to enable change in Stockton. Both Mr B, Ms A, Cllr Jones and Sir Howard talk of their extensive networks of people and organisations that they can draw upon to help shape place, a useful thing to have as a place leader.

Regulatory & Statutory

Having a range of council departments under the control of the leadership is not only helpful in terms of the ability of place leaders to re-orientate those services towards effective place management, but is also reserved only for local authority place leaders, as Mr B says, "having the levers to pull, such as strategic control of highways, planning and licensing is useful to help make improvements to place".

Sir Howard went further by explaining how he fundamentally repurposed the strategic planning system with the creation of place based Strategic Regeneration Frameworks, to overcome a 'cumbersome' planning system which inhibits progress. The ability to do this is a facet of place leadership that can exist with no one else other than a civic leader. Likewise, and tying into the earlier themes around challenge and decisiveness, Sir Howard also stated that he has utilised the council's CPO powers, albeit sparingly, to obtain a desired outcome. Likewise, the formal power of land acquisition was outlined by Michelle Percy as a very powerful tool in the box of Newcastle City Council. This highlights the fluid shift between collaborative informal power and the stark reality of formal council powers, "Local authorities also play a placemaking role in terms of strategic land and property acquisition".

As if to highlight a range of 'tools' that he used to help support Stockton, Neil Schneider talked about being able utilise public health funding, social investment programmes and invest in leisure services within the town, all of which he was able to bring about. Funding and access to funding was mentioned as a key function by four of the seven contributors.

Barriers to local authority place leadership and transformation.

Whilst those interviewed talked positively and passionately about their roles as local authority place leaders, they also identified many barriers, that are stopping local authority leaders become place leaders.

Reticence towards adopting of/ignorance of place leadership role.

All explained in one way or another, that their place leadership efforts did not get recognised (in comparison to their organisational leadership roles). Respondents explained many in local authorities are not interested in adopting the role of place leaders. There appeared to be a lack of skills and understanding of HOW to do the role as well as accepting that it is the duty of local authority leaders to be place leaders. For example, Neil Schneider talked about his "deep sense of responsibility for the economic and social wellbeing of an area" and he expressed his surprise that some chief executives do not use their office to discharge place leadership roles. Similarly, Sir Howard, pointed out that in some places, local authorities simply do not recognise their responsibilities for place leadership, "there are some local authorities that don't recognise that they have a responsibility to discharge place leadership".

This, therefore, suggests a civic platform exists within the role of a local authority leader to take the reins, or at the very least play a significant role, in driving place change – but many council leaders are choosing to ignore this. Sir Howard thought "Chief Executives should take their duty to place as seriously as they do to statutory services." Likewise, Michelle Sacks said "in the public sector we have the ability to (make) change (happen)and the ability to influence change because we are in charge of the policies. I don't think this is fully recognised." All felt there is a need for far greater recognition of the place leadership function councils should take. To bring this about, Sir Howard suggested a carrot and stick approach where the stick involved "imposing statutory duties on places that have a place making role and if they do not discharge those duties then send in Place Commissioners who will work with the local authority to get them to do it".

Lazy paternalism and institutional statutory/regulatory/operational drag

All recognised that the existing function and form of local governance can hold back change. Michelle Sacks explains, "there is a real old fashioned traditional view about what local government does and how it operates and as such you have constrained yourself before you've even started (if you take that approach)". She went on to talk about ensuring "place-based decision making is not about being top down, us telling you what to do" and outlined the far more collaborative approach that she adopts.

In terms of statutory and regulatory services, by way of example, the research points to evidence of Highway Services not being adaptable for festivals/events, Planning functions holding back bold interventions and processes that take too long to make progress. For example, Cllr Jones talked of his view of the institutional inertia that results from the approach some planners take, "ask a planner for a solution and they will give you a list of reasons why you can't do something". The same was reported in licensing.

Sir Howard talked of bypassing the traditional planning and governance functions and creating Strategic Regeneration Frameworks (SRF) to drive place-based transformation. He explained, "The statutory planning process can be a bit cumbersome, inflexible and time consuming, whereas if you adopt an SRF

process you can actually guide public and private investment intelligently without lumbering the planning system with a set of processes that drives everyone mad and doesn't achieve much value at all". With regards to heritage, Michelle Percy suggested that in some places, heritage officers stymied improvements to streetscape and facades, unnecessarily, in her view. In many of these instances, it was not professional knowledge that was blocking action, but more of a culture of 'LA knows best' or 'lazy paternalism' that needs to be challenged.

Overreliance on masterplans and external consultants

Linked to the point above is the problem that local authorities tend to commission masterplans as a way of doing something – and doing nothing at the same time. Simply commissioning a master plans, as an outcome, does not, on its own, result in action. Without collaborative input the plans themselves are likely to be flawed, meaning that even if they did result in development, it would not be right for the place. Michelle Sacks talked of one such example where the external consultants clearly did not understand the town when she explained, "in Boston we have a 10-acre town centre site. A planning consultant produced a town centre masterplan, and it became really apparent that they haven't understood the town. They'd not walked the town, understood its connectivity to different parts". She suggested that place-based plans need to be informed by the "hearts and minds" of people and that many masterplans are generic and could apply to anywhere. Mr B echoed this when he explained, "we'd previously commissioned masterplans that were, frankly, ubiquitous and didn't speak of the unique sense of a given place. Learning from this, when we wanted to improve our town, we deliberately didn't go out to commission a masterplan, but brought those experts, the people and organisations of the town, together to create our own plan". Michelle Percy similarly alludes to a "bottom up" approach to help create a vision and plan for their place.

Lack of capacity, resource and expertise for place management

There was clear recognition across respondents that there is limited in house capacity and so everyone talked of using partnerships to tap into external resources and expertise. They also suggested that the additional value of tapping into independent knowledge and expertise was manifold. Bringing people in from outside of the local authority also created challenge to unhelpful culture and thinking – which led to better outcomes; "I get others to challenge my intuitive thinking and then we get an improved result", said Cllr Jones.

A very common barrier was the lack of revenue to coordinate these place partnerships and undertake other place management activities. Michelle Percy explained that this resulted in having to prioritise procedural matters over place making activities because, as she explained, "we don't have the resource and capacity within the authority. We don't have the time and space to think strategically and work together. Imagine what (we could do) if we were to spend 50% of our time away from bureaucracy". Sir Howard also referred to the lack of people and skills to drive change, and suggested the Towns Fund temporarily alleviated this problem, pointing to a more permanent need, "the Towns Fund did bring in some revenue to get people in with the appropriate skills, whether that was staff or consultants".

Aligning views, town centre capacity, driving change and collaboration does need resourcing – but there is a huge return on investment, in terms of the additional capacity, resource and expertise this coordination/alignment brings.

Politics

Politics was mentioned as a barrier but is a common theme we have encountered through HSTF work. Party politics can hold back change when elected members weaponise place changing ideas. This can happen between Town/District and County Councils and is a major issue in these places where different political, geographic and statutory functions and agendas prevent progress. Also holding back partnerships is the view of some councillors that they hold the civic mandate for place, and everyone else is secondary. One interviewee, who did not want their name attributed to the quote said, "I've had councillors saying, 'we're the elected representatives, we're the ones that set the vision. Those partners aren't elected, we set the vision', and this creates a very sterile working environment". If Members have a better understanding of their role in terms of place leadership, and recognise the paths to effectively discharge it, this gap may be closed.

Negativity/Apathy

This is a major blocker in terms of driving change. All bar Sir Howard spoke of great negativity and/or apathy within communities and their role in combating it through the use of the blue functions in the model. Michelle Sacks said at one point she faced "a constant tide of negativity" but through active personal engagement, effective use of social media and communication, plus an ability to undertake the difficult conversations, she managed to work through it. She also suggested that for elected members, trying to make place-based change can be akin to "putting your head above the parapet…and they get destroyed on social media". Mrs A suggested that such negativity can, "make people put place transformation into the too hard to do bucket. There needs to be a greater understanding of the means and ways of overcoming it".

Conclusions

The results of the study show that the cohort of local authority leaders studied are highly cognisant of their role as active place leaders, are deeply motivated, personally invested and philosophically disposed to take a highly collaborative approach in driving change in their places. Furthermore, the study indicates that they draw from sources of informal and formal power as required, and they believe that the position of local authority leader offers a significant platform for place leadership for the benefit of the places and communities they serve. We believe they are also highly skilled and knowledgeable.

This study has identified what place leadership is, in the context of local authorities, and established its benefits – it is a critical success factor for vital and viable high streets. Nevertheless, from the small sample of successful place leaders we found to interview, only some council leaders are extending their leadership from the institutional or political, into the realms of place leadership. Given the benefits of adopting a place leadership role, and the funding that is available for regeneration and levelling up of local authorities, it is important to have competent place leaders.

With regards to the philosophical position of the council leaders adopting a collaborative approach to place, the study provides further examination of the role and methods that were employed and likewise further development of this may very well aide those seeking to undertake a similar role. We summarise our main conclusions below.

➢ Leaders have a civic responsibility to place, and this defines their role.

Distilled down, the essence of this study suggests that local authority leaders can undertake a place leadership role, precisely because their local authority position provides both a unique platform and a civic duty to discharge this role. It also suggests that a largely collaborative based framework approach is the bedrock of place leadership.

The literature review and this study suggest that place leadership by local leaders is neither commonplace nor widely recognised as a requirement of their wider role. However, the literature does not make the case for requiring authority leaders to undertake the role. Yet this study is unequivocal; local authority leaders have a very clear role, responsibility and indeed mandate for leaders to take up an active place leadership position.

Furthermore, the study highlights an emerging pattern; the position the leaders occupy at the top of the council hierarchy motivates the cohort towards place leadership roles as there is a wide recognition that it is their civic duty to undertake place leadership. This accords with current research 'that civic leadership has a key role in bringing disparate actors together to have a creative dialogue' (Hambleton, 2015:15).

➢ The motivation of leaders plays an important part in place leadership.

The study also highlighted the personal motivation of leaders to become place leaders through connection to place and also a professional motivation to do the best they can. It is interesting to observe that a pattern in the study has become evident that may suggest a link between the degree of motivation of the individuals (highly in this case), personal characteristics (passionate and determined) and the type of place leadership role and methods undertaken/used (collaborative and immersive). A study of a larger sample would be needed to more fully understand and validate the linkages and the findings.

The study also suggests that local authority place leaders can use their role in a number of ways. One such role that is consistent throughout the study is that of the job of acting as a convener and also as an influencer of people and that it is essential in order to draw people together to work on the areas' betterment. The study suggests that in discharging this role, they are utilising a form of informal power that their position confers upon them. This aligns with existing research by scholars (Collinge et al., 2010; Hambleton, 2015; Sotarauta, 2016).

➢ Leaders' personal characteristics shapes their approach to place leadership.

Of course, charismatic business leaders, celebrities and community campaigners have all been known to be effective conveners, usually through sheer force of personality. Indeed, this study suggests a clear pattern around the uniformity of personal characteristics exhibited by the cohort: they are massively motivated, passionate, exhibit a strong sense of belief in themselves, are resilient and inspirational. However, personality notwithstanding, it is the local authority position itself that provides the platform for convening that is perhaps supplemented by their personal characteristics.

➢ Leaders utilise the leadership platform, and the formal/informal power this confers, to discharge place leadership.

Significantly, the study shows that council place leaders can supplement their informal power with access to formal power, drawn from the statutory and regulatory nature of the local authority. We saw this in Sir Howard's reference to compulsory purchase orders which has echoes of Savitch and Kantor (2002) when they state that civic leaders can use their position to negotiate with business. We also saw

it emerging as a common pattern where leaders are seen as the de facto decision makers, and they are prepared to be decisive when needed.

Secondary research suggests that rarely does place leadership involve simply the use of traditional, topdown hierarchical power and structures. Rather it is the combination of both, formal and non-formal power or influence (Collinge et al., 2010; Hambleton, 2015; Sotarauta, 2016). In line with this, the study shows that in order to optimise successful place making outcomes then the ability to move fluidly between one form of power to another is important and this was a clear pattern throughout.

> ➢ Leaders display a profound awareness of the value of collaborative partnership working at a place level and this shapes and influences their role and methods in the context of place leadership.

The secondary research focused on collaboration to a large degree, and it suggested that to achieve collaboration, council leaders with institutional power need to move beyond their organisations and tap into wider networks of influence (Liddle, 2010). This aligns with one of the substantive findings from the primary research, which is just how important collaboration is to these leaders.

There is a clear pattern showing that all of the leaders see their role as collaborative place leaders, and there is a correlation between this and the extensive methods that they deploy to bring this about with a pattern of listening, engaging, inspiring and influencing stakeholders being very much present.

The study points to their methods of establishing partnerships where an organismic approach is encouraged to fostering creativity and the generation of bold ideas. Significantly, linking to their personal characteristics and what they see as a method of ensuring a robust partnership is the aspect of challenge, both personally being prepared to be challenged, and creating the conditions to allow that to happen, as well as being challenging. With regards to being challenged, this study suggests that this is a pre-requisite to empowering or to distributing power to others. This is consistent throughout the study and points to a very clear method for local authority leaders to engender collaboration.

This is backed up by existing literature which suggests that dispersing power or empowering others generates and necessitates collaboration and collective action, (Stimson et al., 2002; Liddle, 2012; Hambleton, 2015; Sotarauta, 2016). Additionally, these factors and methods suggest that the leaders are very hands on and do not automatically wholly 'contract out' the role of driving change to other parties.

There is a counterpoint to this. Despite encouraging a collaborative approach, the study suggests there is value in drawing from some of the more structured and systematic characteristics of local authority operations to provide some rigour around the process. This chimes neatly with Beer and Clower (2014) when talking of leadership characteristics such as setting visions, implementing plans, instigating change, adjusting strategies and monitoring performance.

> ➢ Leaders re-orientate their own organisations towards place-based methods of working.

One aspect which has come out of the study and was not widely anticipated is the role of the local authority leader to 're-orientate' their own organisations towards better place making. In this regard the leaders took an active role in breaking down silos within the council, to push back at the mechanistic approaches of council departments and officers, to stimulate new thinking and challenge old behaviours, in short to ensure councils are enablers, not blockers, of change. This again highlights a clear and important role for council place leaders.

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