

— *PACE* →

Making a Stronger Case for Place

Session Two
Planning for Stronger Places





How can Place Leaders plan for stronger Places in a period of uncertainty and change?

After considering how to build advocacy for Place in session one, a key theme emerged around storytelling, specifically how we harness the extraordinary power of creating and driving strong narratives which resonate with people. Stories cut through – they enable an audience to focus and remember those speakers who share personal details and their individual story. It is often the case that no amount of eloquence can rival the power of a compelling narrative.

During the session, senior Place Leaders explored how colleagues had used narratives to support the successful development of policies and services, often overcoming challenges. Some stories are told against a difficult backdrop, but grit is an essential part of a successful story.

Discussions with Sarah Norman, Chief Executive of Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council, and Ivan Browne, Professor of Public Health and Wider Determinants of Health at De Montfort University, provided opportunities to debate and reflect on their experiences and use of narrative to rejuvenate and safeguard their Places.

Storytelling techniques and structures were explored by Dawn Reeves in a session on Place-based storytelling and narrative, which emphasised the central importance of the 'why' in building a successful story.



Brian Andreas, The Story People (2024)

"If you want a message to land you have to say it eight times: but actually if your message is contained in a good story you only have to say it once."

Andy Denman, Highways Sector Director, Amey

Telling stories throughout time

In the second part of the day, the group examined the strengths and weaknesses of how Place Leaders currently plan for Places, identify opportunities to make changes and overcome adversity.

The setting was the People's History Museum in Manchester. The museum tells the story of the development of democracy in Britain, and how people have come together at different times and in different places to fight for a fairer world.

“Can you really plan for Place without planning for people simultaneously? Is it about the cycle lanes or the people who are riding the bikes?”

Neil Gibson, PACE Facilitator

Even before the general election was called, Place Leaders were constructing new narratives against a backdrop of uncertainty and change, with shifting policies and budgetary pressures impacting on decision making, the development of vision and thought leadership. With a new Government in place, the challenge of planning for stronger Places remains as vivid and urgent as ever.

The importance of better conversations about Place; listening and hearing

During the pandemic, national leaders were often telling local leaders what to do: at the local level, leaders had to assess whether those policies would work in their Place. But Place can be a challenging concept, it can feel fickle and elusive – even when you think you've got hold of it, it turns into something else. This is true even when your relationship with a Place is deep and set within a powerful narrative.

“I was Director of Public Health in Leicester – I was born there, it's a place I felt at home. My Mum was a Windrush nurse, worked for the NHS for 40 years. My Dad was a builder...he worked on the university and when he was cold on the roof he would tell himself the only thing keeping me warm is the thought that one of my children will study here...I actually went to Derby, then Birmingham – however I think they're going to make me an honorary doctor of science there this year, so he got what he wanted in the end.”

Ivan Browne, Professor of Public Health and Wider Determinants of Health, De Montfort University

Those relationships with a Place put you in a strong position. But this knowledge has to remain fluid, and the changes which are taking place under the surface can be hard to spot, even when you know a Place very well.



How can we really understand a community so we can build infrastructure which really works for that community?

In Leicester during the pandemic, being purposeful about community engagement was part of the answer. Can Place leaders become better at having those conversations, and better at understanding how dynamic the changes are? Cities and Places are changing and becoming more diverse, but we still have structures in place that were built and maintained from 1991 onward. As Directors, how do you learn to listen, and how do you hear and translate that into action which changes the experience for people?

We are all working with limited resources, so every penny we spend must be meaningful – we need to hear what our communities need. Place is dynamic, and often self-determined: it can give us the insight to measure the impact we have.

Case Study - Understanding the people in your Place

Through the pandemic, authorities had to decide where vaccine centres should be located. NHS leaders in Leicester thought they had picked locations carefully – but it became clear people were not visiting one centre and this was affecting vaccination rates. The preconceived reason for this was vaccine hesitancy, but in conversation with Somalian community leaders it became clear the underlying problem was one of Place. It was a matter of the vaccine centre being 500 metres across a road, putting it somewhere the community would not naturally visit or feel safe.

Moving the vaccination centre to a mosque changed that: a community which had been wrongly perceived to be vaccine hesitant ended up with good vaccination rates. Another unexpected and positive outcome was that the white working-class community also came to the mosque in good numbers: it was their Place too. This highlighted the city had changed – the original narrative was out-of-date. The NHS was learning about local Places and communities, and understanding how dynamic and changing they are.



Telling stories to make Barnsley the place of possibilities

Storytelling has been part of the way the Council at Barnsley has provided leadership as it emerged from a difficult period in its history, to write a new narrative for its communities.

Recognition of its narrative came through being awarded both the MJ Awards Local Authority of the Year and the LGC Awards Council of the Year in 2023 – the first time in history that has happened.

“Having emerged from the industrial past that left a generational legacy, the council has utterly transformed every aspect of its Place. Its determination to create a Place of Possibilities has engendered community pride, opportunity and hope. It is a story of success with further chapters to be written which can inspire others to do even more and is more than a worthy winner of the MJ Local Authority of the Year Award.”

Citation, MJ Awards

Barnsley’s story was once defined by coal, which dominated the economy until the end of the last century. Perhaps nowhere else was as badly hit by the miners’ strike and the pit closures: almost every ward has a memorial to miners who died in accidents.

A new narrative emerged, centred on the need to find a new economic purpose. Job creation in Barnsley is above the regional and national average, with an ambitious local plan and the creation of an ecosystem of digital businesses. The transformation of the town centre saw footfall become higher than before the pandemic, with an NHS diagnostic centre right at its heart, showing that people will come to the right things in the right places. The changes were challenging, such as releasing greenfield sites for development due to very little industrial land in the borough, but they have moved Barnsley forward.

“One of the things my leader will say is that everybody wants things to improve, but nobody wants things to change.”

**Sarah Norman, Chief Executive,
Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council**

Barnsley had to be bold and brave, and this comes with the risk of being laughed at. Working with architect, Will Alsop, to plan the new town centre, he proposed the idea of modelling it on a Tuscan hill town. The story appeared in the Guardian on 1st April, and some thought it was an April fool joke. But now the town centre is aligned with that vision: tightly bounded and highly successful.

Engaging with communities requires confidence and ensuring that confidence is extended across the wider authority team. The approach can be purposeful by experiencing different parts of the community – using public transport, eating in local restaurants or spending time with local schools. Taking the time to reflect on these experiences can make a difference to how the whole Place team connects with communities.



Points for further reflection

How do we bring the voice of young people into the storytelling narrative?

Young people should be offered the chance to feel a sense of pride in their Place. Losing that pride is damaging – it leads to a feeling more successful young people will move away. The sources of pride can be diverse, so think deep and don't limit them. In Leicester, it might be the football team returning to the Premier League, while Barnsley has one of the best youth choirs in the world.

Should leaders make it personal to help land the overall message?

Leaders who share some of the personal details of their lives can be easier to relate to, and this can be important for getting your audience to accept the narrative being offered. Putting yourself out there is bold and can be risky. People may tell you how you are doing, but they may also forgive you when you make a mistake because they understand you care.

How do we build trust in our narrative when so many of our communities feel they have been left behind?

Take the time to craft the right narrative for the community and be honest about the difficult decisions that have been made. People are very ready to call things out now: the issue of trust is at the heart of all kinds of public services. As leaders, we can prove to our audience that we are human beings – talk about our own stories and lives and build relationships, friendships, trust and transparency on a local level. It's positive there are more conversations happening about trust, and perhaps they should have happened earlier, but the momentum will only continue to grow.

"We've got to think about growing trust and putting it firmly on the agenda: the best time to plant a tree was a 100 years ago, the next best time is now."

Ivan Browne



Creating and telling stories to change perceptions and perspectives

Storytelling is changing the way people see local government. From old narratives around corruption and 'town hall fat cats' to what we actually see: good people trying to do the right thing in difficult circumstances. The stories we tell ourselves and others makes a difference to how people think, feel and act.

We need to be telling stories which celebrate the central purpose of local government, which has not changed that much. As W Eric Jackson put in his 1945 book Local Government in England and Wales, "councils do a fine and necessary job...without it no civilised country can carry on or call itself civilised".

What we notice about successful stories is they are personal, optimistic and connect with the audience – structured around the Why, the How and the What. But the Why is at the centre.

As leaders, we must be comfortable with emotional stories, we're always trying to go from the individual to the universal. Local government tells a whole system story. It doesn't necessarily come to a definitive end, because it reflects work which is ongoing and continuous.

There is never just one story, stories are connected and often contested. But leaders are seeking to treat stories as strategy, so they are always looking at the underlying narrative. For example, the film Jaws has a narrative which says sharks are dangerous, but the deeper narrative is our fear of the unknown and the other – nature taking a form we can't control.



Simon Sinek Golden Circle

"Stories don't have to be true to be powerful."

Dawn Reeves

Narratives are messy and leaders can change them. Campaigners fighting for equal marriage in the US did this when they went from a position of calling for equal rights to 'love is love'. Shifting the narrative to one focused on love got people behind them and enabled them to make a change. Narratives are messy and not fixed; Barnsley does not need to be a forever story about a mining town unless it wants to be.

Sometimes the dominant Place narrative is very negative, but in shaping an alternative you don't need to replace the old one. There should always be grit and there should always be hope. If you don't have grit, it won't be authentic. Stories have weaknesses to overcome, alongside the hope for what could be.

How to change a negative or unhelpful narrative

1. Is it true?
2. Can you know it is absolutely true?
3. How do you react when you have that negative thought
4. What could your Place – or your organisation – be like without that negative thought?

A story will be true for some audiences, but not others. A Place might have its challenges, but some people would not want to live anywhere else. Places sometimes need 'deprivation stories' to get support, but they also need stories of hope, so they can have more than one narrative simultaneously. We make choices about which story we tell, because stories are not absolutely true for everyone. We can decide to acknowledge one story but choose to tell another one. When dealing with a negative story, lean into it: but Place leaders should tell a different story.

Stories are made up of many voices and need to appeal to different audiences. When creating your Place story, think about ideas, facts, practical, and the heart. All of these aspects are needed to appeal to different audiences and not lose the people you intended to reach with your story.

Somerset as an example of a Place story:

Somerset's story celebrates the county's unique environment, landscape and sense of community. It brings together a sense of Somerset's history while exploring its ambitions for the future. It is very specific to the county and could not be any other Place.

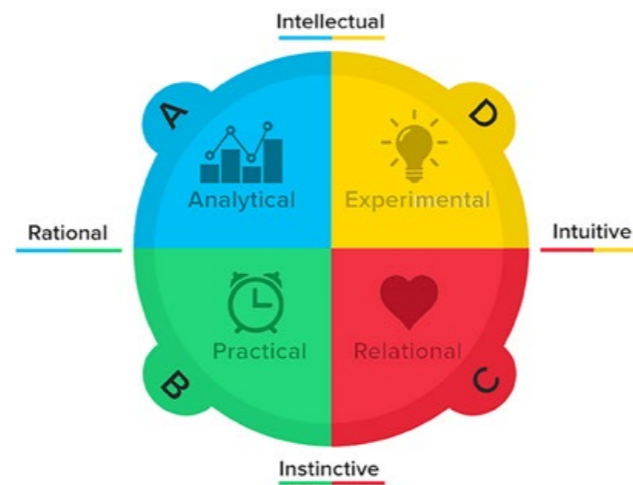
Appealing to different audiences

We tend to communicate with others based on our own thinking preference.

A wholebrain story appeals to audiences regardless of natural thinking preferences.

Yellow = ideas **Blue = facts**

Green = practical **Red = heart**



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Our starter for ten narrative - All the people of Somerset

All the people of Somerset - Sumorsaete ealle, as our motto says - make this historic, creative and beautiful county special.

Ours is a place of distinctive communities, market towns and rural villages, shaped by a proud heritage and unique geographies. From great sites like **Wells, Exmoor and the Cheddar Gorge to the Sweet Track - one of the world's oldest roads** - every beautiful winding country road, rolling hill, coastal and wetland area is a reminder of the **importance of nature to us and our way of life**.

At heart there's a common core to Somerset: **friendly, peaceful, with a strong sense of community**.

You see our spirit in the **carnivals that take place all over Somerset**. In the winter, they **bring light into the short days and long nights**. **Glastonbury Festival** - the most famous and joyful music festival in the world - could only happen here. **Music, craft and a rich diverse cultural life are catalysts for growth and bring people together**, keeping us inspired, healthy and active.

The challenge of planning for the future comes with the **responsibility for protecting Somerset's precious, but fragile, environment**. The Romans first began to reclaim the extraordinary Somerset Levels from the sea. Now the threats of flooding mean **protecting our stunning landscapes** from climate change is urgent.

A green future is our reality. Our reputation for innovation in areas like low carbon technology and energy means new investment, **like 4,000 quality jobs at the Gravity site** - but not at the **expense of our environment**.

We want to **lead the South-West in building a green regional economy, using our excellent location, growing supply chains and generating sustainable employment** that fits with **our values**.

It's right to **be ambitious, all the people of Somerset deserve the best**. We see our **market towns growing** as vibrant places where **young families can settle**.

Children will **get the best possible start in life and training will be linked to work in a range of thriving local businesses**. We know **we need to do more to connect people** across this large county to the jobs, homes and opportunities that will see Somerset flourish. We will always work hard to support **people who need more help. It's in our DNA**.

Our county of big skies, special places and unique history is treasured by every generation. The stories we tell about Somerset have people at their heart - facing the future with a sense of **belonging, determination and pride**.

Workshops – how can Place Leaders plan for stronger Places in a period of uncertainty and change?

Dividing into two groups and building on each of the morning sessions and exercises, the cohort were asked to delve into how Places were currently planned for and what could be changed to create a new narrative.

Workshop 1: Assessing the current backdrop

Place Leaders

- Work with a creative vision and have effective frameworks to draw upon.
- Understand all the relevant connections and draw on strengths relating to their access to data and evidence, the ability to consult effectively, to work with partners and their knowledge of communities.
- Move an idea from inception to delivery, navigating the planning system and understanding business cases and contracts.
- See the long-term, looking ahead to be visionary and think about how things can be better.

The planning system

- Can be a weakness, with local plans often at different stages which makes master planning too slow and done in pockets when opportunity presents itself. Local plans take five years and are sometimes out-of-date by the time they are adopted.
- Has a history of professional silos and potential mismatches between plans and the resources available.
- Can create solutions which are too often top-down rather than consultative with communities working with them rather than doing something to them.

Wider capabilities

- There can be a lack of political coherence, and the short termism of the political cycle can work against effective planning. Systems of governance can drive risk aversion, sometimes in ways which do not drive innovation or pace.
- The people responsible for community engagement sometimes have the technical expertise, but not the particular set of skills they need to engage successfully.
- Place planning is becoming increasingly complex, for example, energy is now a top issue for Place, meaning Place Leaders have to expand their knowledge base.

Workshop 2: Creating proposals to change the current backdrop

- Politics is a key driver, and resources and resourcefulness must be linked to politics. Directors need to be very clear about the assets and deficits which are in a Place.
- Place leaders have a unique position to balance long-term and short-term needs, break down complex problems into manageable parts and develop the right narrative for their communities and Places.
- The 'who' is always the stakeholders and the community. Need to work with the community as a co-production, not selling an idea but having the humility to work with people from across the community.
- Be more opportunistic when the backdrop allows – get on with doing things rather than over planning and not delivering.
- Exploit Place's strength to look ahead and tackle big, complex challenges, by building stronger narratives that drive change and engender support.
- Maximise the strength of strategic planning by ensuring strategic plans contain enough flexibility to reflect big economic and demographic changes. Working in partnership with developers, central government and other councils can address this and provide visibility and flexibility.
- Review the process for creating Local Plans to identify smarter ways of working, such as using technology to develop plans in parallel rather than being a long drawn out linear process.

Understand the Place and the people to create stories that flourish

Place Leaders have an unenviable role to make sure infrastructure is representing the real needs of communities. There is a difference between knowing what they need and thinking we know what they need – better conversations are key: listening, hearing and enacting to remove the conflict between institutionalised structures of Place and the actual needs of Place.

Councils can make statements of vision and take people with them by building a sense of pride. Leaders must be bold and brave and go out on a limb if they believe it's the right thing for their Place. Finessing narratives to work with various audiences, co-producing with partners and selling it to local people, communities and Places for the benefit of all.

"A strong narrative helps people hold their nerve during a period of change."

Neil Gibson, PACE Facilitator

Points for further reflection

- Place leaders need to remember the importance of being brave and bold. Sometimes introducing a narrative means going out on a limb.
- Place Leaders have the power to develop narratives and embed them in the Place system. This takes time but with authenticity, honesty and grit, they have the power to influence audiences and change communities.
- Listening and hearing your audience helps to create your story but offers wider benefits to truly understand the Place and communities.
- Listening can be challenging but prevents producing a narrative which is only reminiscent of a glossy brochure.
- Narratives and stories need a custodian to ensure there is no loss of momentum and the ultimate goal of improving a Place is achieved.





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