

# LEADERSHIP OF PLACE IN TIMES OF CHANGE

 LEADERSHIP  
CENTRE



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# COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

**We recently brought together a Community of Practice on Place - a collective of leaders working in local systems, exploring what it means to lead for place when place itself is changing shape. Not simply a geographic label, place was understood as emotional, political, and lived; entities made up of relationships, structures and history. The provocation that opened the session was powerful: Change is constant - so how do we hold onto our sense of place, and our connection to it, even as it shifts beneath us?**

Elections, restructuring, transformation were all mentioned and seen as being a constant feature of local systems. Some saw these as moments of possibility, an invitation to take stock and reset. Others described the churn and instability; how just as one structure begins to bed in, another sweeps it away.

We were fortunate to be joined by Helen Bailey, Chief Executive of the London Borough of Sutton.



Helen Bailey

Helen led our conversations and provided a helpful framing:

- Where we are now...
- Where we could be...
- And what will it take to move between the two?

What follows is a summary of the group discussions.



# THE SHAPE OF CHANGE

Places are home to so much: history, geography, demography, identity. They carry the feel of belonging and responsibility. Yet in policy terms, places are often reshaped, renamed or merged – sometimes into forms that feel unfamiliar or unwanted. So how do we hold on to the idea of place when its formal shape is redrawn?

As leaders, we are often where the rubber meets the road. We're connected to people in places and we see how national ambition lands (or fails to land) on the ground. There was a clear sense that we need to speak up more about this. To be prouder of what we do. And to act on the opportunity that's opening up: real activism, new coalitions, transformation.

Some named the tension between increased autonomy and tighter accountability. With devolved powers comes promise, but also scrutiny. It was recognised that those in newly-formed or struggling authorities might not be given the same space to experiment.



# LEADING IN SYSTEMS

The group explored how leadership must respond:

- Let our place and people guide us, however overused that phrase sounds
- Use data to demonstrate insight and impact
- Empower those already getting things done – councillors, officers, community leaders, health partners
- Own the space national government can't or won't reach
- Don't wait for perfect structures; let new ones emerge

We returned to the idea that place leadership is often about working in the gaps, in complexity and often in ambiguity. We discussed how it requires a different kind of skillset. Not just technical strength or formal authority, but the capacity to hold relationships, build shared purpose, and support others to act.

Discussion focused on a growing gap between the skills we advertise for and the ones that truly help leaders thrive in place. There was an emphasis on how important it was to be able to build teams and networks that can lead across systems.





# EMERGING QUESTIONS

## **How do we maintain the strength of networks – those who keep things going through every structural change?**

- There is always a danger of "carrot management": pulling change up too soon to see if it's working, and in doing so, stunting growth
- How do we reframe the question to focus on outcomes, not rigid means?
- How do we create legitimacy for flexible working approaches, especially for authorities with less leeway?

## **What is the opportunity to tell a collective story of place – one that reflects what people actually feel?**

- Most people don't relate to the formal title of their authority
- Place-making must resist the cookie-cutter approach
- The story should amplify what place means for people

## **How do we close the gap between advertised skills and what is actually needed?**

- We need system leaders, not just strong individuals
- Elected members play a key role here – convening power, and local knowledge
- We must learn from and empower those leading visibly and well, even when outside formal roles

## **What did we learn from Total Place 1.0?**

- It unlocked different kinds of conversations, encouraging people to be less parochial and more generative
- It invited a mix of shared purpose and flexibility about the means
- Like building an arch: it doesn't look like it'll hold until the keystone is in but once you've built one, you can build more
- Start with the coalition of the willing

## **How do we connect this work to national missions and spatial policy?**

- We must lean into missions and make this part of our focus

# REFLECTIONS

## From reflection to practice

There's a growing sense that more councils will be under No Overall Control and that local leadership will require greater agility, cross-party collaboration, and new forms of legitimacy. This could be an opening, if we step into it wisely.

We were reminded that life happens in networks. That supporting those networks – helping them work in service to each other – may be the best way to change the system. Or as Myron Rogers puts it:

*"All life is networks of networks. If you want to change the system, maybe it's in supporting that capacity of the networks to be in service to each other. And the unique responses to the challenges ultimately create a collective health of the system."*

This is ongoing work. We don't need perfect structures. We need people with a shared sense of purpose, the ability to act, and the courage to keep going when the ground is shifting. If this resonates and you want to be part of this growing community of practice – we'd love to hear from you.

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