

Building a Practice of Place

By John Atkinson

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On February 28th – March 1st the Leadership Centre for local government hosted a two day event called a DeepDive in London. nowhere catalysts co-designed and supported the Leadership Centre in their running of the conference. Below John Atkinson, the Director of Operations at the Leadership Centre reflects on the success of the intervention as a first step towards finding a new model of leadership for local authorities in their communities.

This week the Leadership Centre for Local Government held a 'DeepDive' to get below the surface in examining the leadership approach that will develop place shaping, a 'practice of place'. Attending were over sixty participants; thirty chief executives from the largest cities, London Boroughs, Mets and counties, government represented by senior figures in CLG, Government Offices and DEFRA, politicians and people from the various bodies that can support this work including the Leadership Centre's team of advisers. The challenge posed to this group was held as a question.

What can we do to help people influence and affect the future of their place?

The event was built around two simple but powerful ideas. First, that by better understanding our past we understand better who we are and why we are here, and that from that, if our approach to leadership is right, together we can start to shape our future. Second, that if we stay only with the data that we already know we recycle our existing thoughts and breakthrough is not achieved. This second point meant that we needed to surface the nature of some of the intangible elements of relationships in place shaping if we were to achieve any kind of really creative result.

The DeepDive started differently. People were sat in small 'homegroups' and before any formal content was offered, these groups got to know each other and created a bond that was built over the course of the event. (Even after the event had finished, two groups stayed together, resisting the lure of lunch and trains out the capital in favour of completion together of the work they had begun.) There was a promise of a different sort of event.

Over the afternoon, the homegroups worked together to develop a picture of the change that has occurred over the last 40 years and of the landscape of local government that as a result is now visible. They were challenged with differing views of the future from the perspectives of politics, wealth creation, environmental sustainability and cohesion. From this a picture of the future was created in a different and challenging manner that for some chimed true. And yet for others, it wasn't truly caught. We had stayed with what we already knew and so our energy dropped as we felt breakthrough had not been achieved.

The evening session was truly different. Using a process known as 'constellations' an individual with a question to address physically places people around a room to represent their relative connections. A skilled 'constellator' explores the effect of such placing and the effects of moving to form different relationships. For our constellation, the senior figures from CLG explored the role of the department in place shaping relative to central government, authorities, national parties, the public, traditions and change. Breakthrough occurred in two dimensions. Simply seeing the effect of managing relationships within the existing patterns and the power of changing them opened new possibilities for the department. More profound was what took place in the wider group. The courage of the senior figures in the levels of self-disclosure and openness they displayed resulted in an audience, who had spent the day in at times aggressive criticism spontaneously applauding them. Even finishing late, we left on a high.

The challenge for the next day was to reconnect with this emotion and enthusiasm and channel it into something creative that would build the practice by which we lead places. The recognition grew that the step we had reached the previous evening was a realisation of how, through making ourselves vulnerable and becoming more aware of how we are, we become stronger rather than weaker. Most powerfully caught, one chief executive described how our relationship with CLG is mirrored by the relationship our places have with us. She went on to expand on how our relationship with the department is immature and we must take responsibility for changing our end of it, and for changing the nature of our relationship with our places.

The final morning gained momentum now, as each homegroup explored for over an hour the nature of a leadership approach that would help people influence and affect the future of their place. The insights were many and personal and although we shared them, to reduce them to themes would have been to deny them their integrity and identity and thus remove their worth.

The output proved far more powerful than such a sanitised strand. Chief executives, civil servants and practitioners spoke one after another of the changes they would endeavour to create on leaving the DeepDive. Each was rooted in how they would attend to relationships differently, within the authority, within their place, even across Whitehall.

From here, the leadership centre's advisers, together with the Nowhere Group (our partners in designing the process), will work with the growing group of chief executives (and CLG) who wish to make the transformation in their place that they felt in this group. By capturing and sharing what occurs we will build a practice of place that we know can be applied by leaders across authorities to change the nature of their place.

And whatever it looks like, it will be rooted in the belief that has arisen from the DeepDive, that places are about people before geography and physical structures and that, starting first with ourselves, we can change the relationships between them to allow them to influence and affect their futures.

We are leaders *in* places, not *of* them.