

Leeds: Power through Partnerships

Context

Over the last decade Leeds council has been steadfastly building ever stronger partnerships with the other key institutions in the city, **promoting collaborative civic enterprise** through its 'Team Leeds' approach.

As chief executive Tom Riordan explains: "The central idea was about **local government needing to rediscover its enterprising Victorian roots** where Chamberlain and others collaborated to improve local public health, education, and utilities."¹

Or as Fiona Bolam, the council's head of economic policy puts it: "Realising that maybe the cavalry aren't coming in and we have to do this, we have to work together."

Ambitions

The council and its partners aim to become the 'Best City', tackling poverty and inequality, promoting health and well being, and achieving a net zero carbon economy by 2030. <https://www.leeds.gov.uk/plans-and-strategies/best-city-ambition>

As James Goodyear, head of strategy at Leeds Teaching Hospital declares: "We are ambitious, and we're proud of our city, and we think we've got huge potential."

One of the council's most ambitious aims is **doubling the size of the city centre**. It's regenerating the post industrial South Bank area, previously dominated by roads, into a 'central European style' area, with mixed use neighbourhoods and a huge new city park. A new footbridge, new cycleways and pedestrian routes will connect residents to the city centre, Leeds railway station, the new park and other green spaces around the city centre, providing much better access for the area's deprived communities to city centre jobs and education.

Fostering innovation and entrepreneurialism is another priority As Eve Roodhouse, the council's chief officer culture and economy explains, the council and its partners, have been: "Backing innovators and entrepreneurs, creating the right conditions for people to become entrepreneurs, to contribute to building a strong economy and a compassionate city".

Being digitally inclusive is also a top priority. The city is already recognised as one of the UK's most important digital hubs, with more than 1,350 digital businesses, employing more than 30,000 people. It has held a major annual digital festival for the last seven years. But council leader James Lewis wants to ensure that it is: "not just a digital city, but a digitally inclusive city, where everyone can benefit from the opportunities that the digital revolution is bringing."²

Who's involved

Leaders across the city have devoted a huge amount of energy and time to **building a range of strong partnerships** between the council, the key anchor institutions, the business sector, voluntary and arts organisations, and local citizens.

The council, two Leeds universities and the teaching hospital have established an **Innovation Partnership**, led by the organisations' senior leaders who meet quarterly. Underneath three working groups focus

¹ Municipal Journal 4 July 2023

² https://www.oecd-inclusive.com/champion-mayors/mayor_of_the_moment/mayor-of-the-moment-james-lewis/

on: 'people and programmes', 'place and spatial strategy', and 'communications and marketing'. The partnership has designated the city's main business area, where the organisations are based, as an '**Innovation Arc**'.

As Ms Roodhouse explains: "People see this really strong relationship between the council and the University of Leeds and other core partners like Leeds Beckett University and the hospital, that makes it even more powerful. **It's not just the council that's saying this is our vision.**"

Ms Bolam stresses the need to **ensure organisations are committed to collaborative working**, not just a handful of people at the top: "You have to get the buy in from the leadership at the top. They need a personal commitment, but that needs to filter through into the organization so everyone gets it and everyone understands that's how we do things."

Council leaders are deeply committed to **involving citizens** in developing and implementing their strategic objectives. For example consultations on the South Bank proposals attracted 30,000 responses. As Lee Arnell, the council's executive manager regeneration, describes: "Everyone had a view on it, which was great. And obviously not everyone agreed, but by doing that collectively and transparently for people in a room together, we were able to get harmony. **There was a great conversation in the city around what type of city centre do we want in the future.**" This included involving schools and young people in designing the children's play areas in the new city centre park.

Similarly the partners leading the inclusive growth strategy have engaged people across the city by holding three annual events, each regularly attended by over 100 people, each focussed on one of the strategy's key three themes: people, place and productivity.

The innovation partnership has also run events for key local economic sectors, such as one for health organisations, and another for the culture and creative arts sector. As the NHS's Mr Goodyear explains: "We brought together a range of different people, a real mix of stakeholders, but with a common theme. It's led to connections and spin out groups, for example a digital health network run by some businesses in the city."

Leadership

The Leeds approach has evolved over the past decade. As stronger cross city relationships and mutual trust developed, and successes have been achieved, **ambitions have become bolder**.

Ms Roodhouse stresses the importance of city leaders **being determined, consistent and committed long term**. "The city is successful because you work really carefully to **establish that long term vision**, and then you are consistent with it over time, but able to respond, and able to continue to raise your ambitions."

Learning together and from other cities worldwide has made an important contribution to refining the partners' strategic approach. A cross sector group of city leaders participated in Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Regional Entrepreneurship Acceleration Program, benchmarking themselves against global cities like Sydney. <https://innovation.mit.edu/resource/mit-reap/>

As Ms Roodhouse reports: "We went through that programme for two years in partnership with universities, corporates, and entrepreneurs across the city. Through that we developed our innovation vision, which gave us real confidence about our strengths as a city. **We focused on a vision that was about capitalising on the breadth of our economy, and on our values.**"

The NHS's Mr Goodyear adds: "We looked at: '**what is our innovation ecosystem in Leeds? What is our USP and our ambitions as a city? And how do we design programmes that can really help**

accelerate that?’ And that was particularly helpful thinking about the people focused programmes, some of the softer infrastructure that we need to support innovation.”

The council **devising and implementing spacial strategies** is recognised as important both for the South Bank, and for the Innovation Arc. As the NHS’s Mr Goodyear explains: “What’s been really helpful is that the council have taken more of a driving seat on the spatial strategy which only they can really do. We can talk about our own sites, and aspirations, but the council taking that placemaking role and thinking about the wider area and how, from a planning perspective, they can enable this.”

Creating joint delivery plans has been key to Leeds’ success. As Ms Roodhouse points out, in relation to delivering the inclusive growth strategy, the council had no statutory levers to pull. “The only way we could do it was by creating a strong collaboration the inclusive growth delivery partnership.”

The partners also **stress the need to reach beyond those who traditionally access initiatives**. University of Leeds regional entrepreneurship lead David Smith highlights the region’s Innovative Entrepreneurs Accelerator and planned Ingenuity Smart City Living Lab both aimed at supporting **a more diverse range of innovators and entrepreneurs**.

Finance

There has been some small scale private sector support for initiatives like the ‘Innovation Pop Ups’, but **much more is required**. Securing sufficient resources to deliver the city leaders’ ambitions is an ongoing problem, although devolution has helped recently, and there are forthcoming opportunities through the West Yorkshire Combined Authorities’ Investment Zone funds.

As Ms Bolam comments: “Fundamentally, the biggest challenge we’ve got is our council budget, and the public sector budget. **We have to make the case for the work that we are doing**, rather than we have a statutory duty to just do children’s services and services for adults. We have to be able to say, you won’t have any business rates or you won’t have the level of business rates to fund some of this if we don’t do our work.”

The council and its partners have had to **be ready to seize any funding opportunity**. For example they used COVID monies to help to pay for the new footbridge between the South Bank and the train station. As Ms Roodhouse recommends: “When funding opportunities come along you have to be ready to respond. But you have to do it in the context of your long term vision, not as an ad hoc thing.”

Challenges

Having the necessary capacity and skills for regeneration is vital, and can be difficult given competition with private sector pay and conditions. In addition, much of the cross organisational work is being done on top of people’s ‘day jobs’.

Mr Goodyear contrasts the resources available for research in the NHS, compared to the funds available to implement fresh approaches. “In the NHS there’s all sorts of funding streams, and infrastructure for research. **Innovation is the very poor relation. It’s not core business in the NHS**. Our capacity to do this stuff is challenging. There’s not lots of money sloshing around, so you have to be creative.”

Many leaders cite **government bureaucracy** as holding back progress. As Ms Bolam describes: “With certain things there’s more strings than a grand piano. The government needs to recognize that if it wants to improve economic growth, but at the same time not leave people behind, and start to address climate change, then we can help. We know what we’re doing so **let’s have an equal partnership**.”

She adds: “This stuff needs longer than a parliamentary timetable. It’s certainly in the long term interest of UK PLC to have great core cities that are really well connected in terms of public transport and transport

infrastructure, that offer great jobs for people and help people to get them as well, because the wealth of the country does come from that. And **it's in everyone's long term interest.**"

In the Innovation Arc, **slow progress in getting the new hospital agreed** has held up other ventures. As the NHS's Mr Goodyear explains: "We need the money and the authority to crack on. Part of the plan was that through building a new hospital, we'd release five hectares of land and buildings that could then be redeveloped." However he adds that the partnership is helping to move things forward: "We all pitch for Leeds. We've had huge support from city partners in our battle to get funding for the new hospital."

Progress

In November 2022 Leeds Council had a LGA Corporate Peer Review which concluded that:

"Leeds City Council is a very well-led, ambitious and collaborative council, a beacon of best practice, delivering for and with its communities, partners and stakeholders. A uniform love, passion and ambition for the city shines through the organisation and through its many partnerships. Members, staff, stakeholders and partners speak of their enthusiasm of working in and with the council for the benefit of the city, the region and beyond."

The city's upbeat and ambitious approach is bearing fruit, with major institutions like Channel Four, the UK Infrastructure Bank, and the new British Library North being attracted to base themselves in Leeds.

As University of Leeds 'Mr Smith observes: "It's inherently challenging for any organisation to innovate. It's much more difficult to innovate collaboratively, across multiple organisations. Yet think what was achieved during the pandemic, when under huge pressure organisations came together with a common purpose."

One of the partnership initiatives, based in the University of Leeds, Nexus, is supporting potential entrepreneurs in starting businesses. It's been so successful in a short time that it's planned to expand its operation dramatically. Reflecting the importance of this and other city-wide work the university recently created the new post of 'Pro Vice Chancellor for Business Engagement and Enterprise'.

'Innovation Pop Ups' are bringing entrepreneurs and clinicians together in the health sector to 'solve major world problems', including by working with businesses in the US, Norway and Israel. And Leeds has been recognised as the second most successful city in the UK for investment in start ups, an exponential rise from previous years.

To capture everything that is being achieved around the inclusive growth strategy an internationally based 'Leeds Social Progress Index' has been established. <https://www.inclusivegrowthleeds.com/leeds-social-progress-index>

Lee Arnell emphasises the benefit of **providing certainty for developers**. "We've got 100s of developers. As a city, unless we're selling a site, we don't choose who the developers are. The developers choose the city. If the private landowner puts a site up for sale, we have no control over who buys that site. But **increasingly, developers are buying into the philosophy and potential of the place.**"

In the South Bank already 4,000 new homes are under construction or complete. These include carbon negative houses produced by an onsite factory using a modular approach. The city centre park, one of the largest in the UK, is under construction. The council partnered with a developer to deliver it, **taking on the risk** of a 250 year lease, to enable the development to go ahead, while retaining it as a civic space.

Learning for other cities

Over the last ten years Leeds council has achieved a huge amount by adopting a '**civic enterprise**' approach, and building **strong cross city alliances**.

Leaders have devoted a huge amount of energy into **building strong partnerships** across the city, and developing **a vision for the city that is widely supported**. They emphasise how much time and effort it takes to develop these critical cross city relationships, and the importance of appreciating the different strengths, assets and connections that particular partners bring.

The city's **ambitions have developed over time**, as alliances have learnt and gained confidence from their successes.

University of Leeds' Mr Smith stresses the importance of a **having a shared vision and roadmap to get there and mobilising a city's collective resources and capabilities**: "If you think about universities, local authorities, corporates, start-ups, investors, community groups and all the other organisations with a stake in the city, it's possible to address huge societal challenges through innovation."

As Ms Bolam states: "Once you've got the relationships right, the willingness to do things is there and the willingness to do things that work not just for you but for your partners, that we're all going to get something out of this if we work together. **You don't get the coherence of change without it.**"

The leaders emphasis how much they benefited from the MIT programme, **spending a significant amount of time reflecting together**, helping them to craft and together commit to well thought through joint strategies.

Leeds leaders recommend **being bold and ambitious**. As Ms Bolam says: "Sometimes in UK cities, we think small, and it's time we stopped. There's nothing wrong with having the ambition to say, why not us? Sometimes there's been a mentality that goes cap in hand. We've got some great assets here and we've got a great collaborative approach in Leeds, and we've got the willingness from the leadership to do some of this. So why not? Let's set out some ambition. And let's see how far we can get with some of this."

Interviewees

Leeds Council:

Eve Roodhouse, Chief Officer Culture and Economy

Fiona Bolam, Head of Economic Policy

Lee Arnell, Executive Manager Regeneration

Other organisations:

James Goodyear, Director of Strategy, Leeds Teaching Hospital

David Smith, Regional Entrepreneurship Lead, University of Leeds

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