Under the skin
Exploring the culture of place

Whether it’s the place we call home or somewhere we’re irresistibly drawn back to time and time again, places can get under our skin.

Our towns, counties and cities have their own compelling and richly varied cultures. There are shared and sometimes contested values; particular local traditions, behaviours and drivers for change. It can be a set of stories describing how we do things around here, bringing out the best in us – things like our history and heritage – but also preventing us from moving forward.

We want to explore how culture impacts on our ability to facilitate and support vibrant economies. What does it take to lead our places in the current environment? What guides decision making and responses to new opportunities – and how does culture inform our ambition and willingness to take risks?

Why is this debate important?

• What underpins a successful economy is more than the standard financial indicators of any place. A vibrant economy requires a balanced scorecard approach that, alongside economic indicators, also takes into account inclusion and equality, health and wellbeing, resilience and sustainability and a sense of community, trust and belonging. As place-shapers, local authorities have a key role to play in influencing these elements and the devolution agenda highlights this.

• The outcome of the referendum is an indication that some communities are not feeling heard. It hints of the danger of being a council that’s been left behind and highlights how trust, integrity and relationships with a shared purpose are increasingly emerging as vital components of success. To improve our places, we not only need to expand our understanding of local economies, but also how culture informs our ambitions and willingness to take risks, what guides decision-making and responses to new opportunities, and therefore what will fly and why.

• To be authentic and accepted cultural expectations and a focus on place need to underpin the re-negotiation of the relationship between the state and its citizens.

What we are hearing so far?

• The place leader is the story-teller. It seems that as leaders we need to be more deliberate in our story telling. That’s not about communications or PR; leaders need to help communities make sense of a complex world, the past, present and possible futures. We need to be authentic and clear about what our places are like and to go with the best of what’s in our DNA.

• Being clear about what we want to see, particularly in terms of cultural attributes, comes into sharp focus if we want to deliver a vibrant economy that works for everyone. There is a need to create an environment that gives people permission to care, to be innovative, to take action themselves, to adapt and experiment.

• Socio-economic situations often drive the culture. Therefore, the wider economic factors that impact culture need to be understood and influenced. The uniqueness of these also needs to lead to a recognition that one place will never be like another – you can’t aspire to be the next Manchester or London – whatever local leaders do, or however positive the culture. However, you can build on your local unique strengths.

• It’s all about context. For the places that are part of London and our major conurbations, they can be local, national and international at the same time. Learning to live with, and get the best advantage from, what’s on our doorstep is key. As the drive towards integration speeds up, there are messages about aligning cultures with those partners and organisations who share a common purpose. Whether it’s a grounded, fine grain community approach or massive physical infrastructure, who we work with – and how – will make the difference.
Continuing the conversation

We are all in the business of re-thinking public services. We know that centralisation, short-term, shallow thinking and institutional constraints, and public (and employees’) opinion can create inefficiency and inhibit innovation. Structural reform is only a part of the picture and, like a watermark that we can sometimes forget is there, culture runs right through it.

From conversations with local authority CEOs, leaders and others, we have collated a selection of stories that invite us all to think about how the sector can disrupt fixed thinking, open up cultures and energise our places. They go beyond what’s immediately obvious, voice what is sometimes unsaid and work with the strengths of their place.

In sourcing and sharing these stories – which also touch on the implications for leadership in practice – Grant Thornton aims to help the sector dig deep, identify themes and facilitate action.

We hope that you will find them illuminating and inspiring, and invite you and your colleagues to join us in a wider conversation that resonates, informs and drives change.

About us

At Grant Thornton our underlying purpose is to build a vibrant economy. A core part in achieving this will be creating places where people and businesses can flourish. We want to play our part in building a healthy and equitable society by helping those responsible for public services to make better-informed, longer-term decisions; decisions that drive reform and deliver economic growth and social value.

Grant Thornton has a well-established market in the public sector and has been working with local authorities for over 30 years. We are the largest supplier of assurance to local authorities and the NHS in the UK.

Grant Thornton UK LLP provides independent assurance, tax and advisory services to over 40,000 public interest entities, privately owned and publicly listed businesses and individuals. Proactive teams, led by approachable partners, help our clients to find solutions, by using insights, experience and instinct to provide meaningful, forward-thinking advice.

Culture of place

“The place leader is the storyteller. I have to make sense of the place, our past, present and our shared future. How I do that is through telling the story…”

John Mothersole, Chief Executive, Sheffield City Council

“I’m exploring how my responsibilities and accountabilities work in a place that is multi-local, national and international at the same time. I spend a lot of time thinking and reflecting. Ours is a fast moving borough, the contrasts are sharp.”

Will Tuckley, Chief Executive, London Borough of Tower Hamlets

“I believe every place has to have a clear economic purpose. Places don’t have a right to exist. We need to think about culture and timescales. What works for Shrewsbury is specific to the place.”

Kim Riley, Chair, SOLACE

“If Manchester is a Great Dane, Halton is a Jack Russell with a bone. We won’t let it go. People in Runcorn and Widnes have a fighting spirit and a powerful pride. I’m not sure you can change people but I do think they can change themselves, given the right opportunities and environment. That’s our approach to place.”

David Parr, Chief Executive, Widnes Council

“We’ve been thinking a lot about our role as a business in shaping successful places. It has to go beyond corporate social responsibility to be more active and engaging. We’re trying to use our networks and skills in different ways, like bringing SMEs into the devolution debate.”

Sarah Howard, Partner, Grant Thornton

“The echoes of the past are strong – that’s both a strength and a weakness. The future is bright but people can’t quite see that yet, so we haven’t developed a new vision. We’ve done a lot of work on the cultural attributes we want to see. Ours is a continuing narrative of the need to change.”

Mike Palin, Chief Executive, St Helen’s Council

Contact us

To download a copy of ‘Under the skin: Exploring the culture of place’ visit: www.grantthornton.co.uk/en/insights/building-vibrant-places. To request a hard copy, please contact one of our team:

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