Under the skin:
Stories that explore the culture of place
“We need to radically reform public services to meet extreme funding pressures while continuing to secure the best possible outcomes for local people and places. Focused on economic growth and enabling sustainable communities, 21st Century public services must be both ambitious and locally grounded.

If we get that right we can act as authentic local champions and where appropriate, be confident to challenge. In order to enable growth we’ll need to secure good infrastructure, access to funding, research and a skilled workforce; while at the same time helping local people and communities to thrive and supporting the most vulnerable.”

**Deborah Cadman**
Chief Executive, Suffolk County Council
Contents

Introduction 2
Sheffield: ‘The place leader is the storyteller’ – John Mothersole 6
Tameside: ‘Chatting over the fence’ – Steven Pleasant 8
Shrewsbury: ‘Century after century’ – Kim Ryley 10
Halton: ‘From the Ditton Alps to CERN’ – David Parr 12
Folkestone: ‘Past the tipping point’ – Paul Hughes 14
Tower Hamlets: ‘A fine balance’ – Will Tuckley 16
Sefton: ‘Community of people and place’ – Charlotte Bailey 18
Haringey: ‘Shapeshifting spirit’ – Nick Walkley 20
Haringey: ‘Shapeshifting spirit’ – Nick Walkley 22
East Suffolk: ‘Making the most of the mosaic’ – Stephen Baker 24
Burnley: ‘Pride and paradoxes’ – Chloe Edwards 26
Suffolk: ‘The acid test’ Councillor – Colin Noble 28
Stockport: ‘The same and different’ – Eammon Boylan 30
South Hams: ‘Vibrant and resilient’ – Sophie Hosking 32
Canterbury: ‘Modern pilgrims – all welcome’ – Colin Carmichael 34
Greater Manchester: ‘Appreciative conversations’ – Sarah Howard 36
Enfield: ‘Oiling the moving parts’ – Doug Taylor 38
Newham: ‘Genuine intention to engage’ – Ben Hughes 40
St Helen’s: ‘Grumbling gargoyle is a win-win’ – Mike Palin 42
Doncaster: ‘The psyche of the place’ – Jo Miller 44
About Grant Thornton 46
Contact us 47
Introduction

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, local traditions, behaviours and drivers for change. Culture evokes memory and identity. It affects how we feel about where we live and work and what’s possible. 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.

This booklet represents the start of a conversation about how we understand culture of place. We want to explore how culture impacts on our ability to facilitate and support vibrant economies. In a very practical sense, councils and their partners have to align their outcomes and strategies to make the most of their locality – getting the culture right in both their organisations and their places in order to deliver. In challenging times, with the pace of change ever-increasing, that’s no mean feat.

The stories you’ll read here are the results of some initial conversations with local authority chief executives, leaders and others about unlocking the potential of place. They are personal views that get under the surface, draw out peculiarities and illustrate distinctive ways forward. They invite us to reflect on the dominant narratives in our own places and organisations.
Equally they ask how we might nurture the important, quieter or newer stories that support new directions.

**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.

**What are the stories suggesting so far?**
The place leader is the storyteller, as one of our chief executives says. 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. Our stories speak to the 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 ever local leaders do, or however positive the culture, but 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 – all 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 rethinking 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.

We recognise the importance of a fresh exploration of this subject. In sourcing and sharing these stories – which also touch on the implications for leadership in practice – we aim to help the sector dig deep, identify themes and facilitate action.

These stories invite us 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.

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.
The place leader is the storyteller

JOHN MOTHERSOLE
Chief Executive, Sheffield City Council

I have to make sense of the place, our past, present and our shared future. How I do that is through telling the story.

So, we are currently bidding to host the Great Exhibition of the North 2018 – a prestigious programme designed to showcase the best creative, cultural and design sectors. Sheffield has made it to the last four. At a panel meeting to discuss the bid, I was asked directly: “What’s the story here?”

I replied, “Once upon a time there was a proud place, famous for innovation, for collaboration and for making things. But as years rolled by we forgot. Now we remember that we are still good at that, and we want to remind others.”

It sounds simple, but it’s compelling. We live in a world of complexity and our job is to explain things in a way that can easily be understood. We don’t spend time being ‘right’. People are cynical about experts; it wouldn’t work. We recognise there are strengths and weaknesses in every city.
Sheffield has an authentic spirit and an independent culture. You can’t tell people what to do, like “just stop smoking!” It’s our job to get on with improving the things that might cause problems in the first place; better housing, skills and jobs.

Although the world is unpredictable there is still a pressure on us as leaders to have answers. I’m often asked what will the council look like 10 or 20 years from now? If I told you I knew, in fine detail, I’d be lying.

But there’s never just one story. Despite austerity, we will probably be involved with more money in the future. Resources and organisations are coming together. Health and social care integration is a starting point.

I studied Medieval English. What that gave me was a confidence in synthesising and articulating what’s at the heart of the matter. My education helped me discover – and education is surely about discovery – that I had the ability to make sense of complexity. I often start my stories with … “What this seems to be saying is…” or “I understand it like this … what do you think?”
Chatting over the fence

STEVEN PLEASANT

Chief Executive, Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council

I was brought up in East Manchester and as a teenager I was desperate to escape. I moved south and ended up in a commuter town for a while, a place that empties at 9am in the morning. It was soulless.

Coming back to Hattersley, I felt a sense of community that was real. After many years I recently moved to three doors down from my old house in the same street. Why? Because I never want to live anywhere else. (And as the mini-move still cost £20,000, I’m definitely staying put.)

I was welcomed by my new neighbours with jars of peaches and a homemade lasagne. You can’t put a value on that kind of grounded, stable community. And the importance of social connectedness was in no doubt when I tried to put up a new fence in my garden. The B&Q panels I’d chosen were too high. They stopped neighbours chatting and they had to come down.
I think this is a cultural strength that resonates across the communities of Tameside. Stalybridge and Ashton are similar. Does it matter? On Friday nights there are 150 kids playing cricket on a pitch behind my house. I’ll leave you to imagine what else they might be getting up to if they weren’t there.

Building community capital is a deliberate part of our approach – we work at it. Recently we knocked down an under-performing school on a deprived estate to absolute uproar. We rebuilt it, within walking distance, but on the border of a more affluent community. The catchment area made the kids mix. Aspirations rubbed off and the results have gone through the roof. Aldwyn Primary School is now the best in the borough.

That base of community and the practical examples that people see and trust also help us to make change. It gives us a quiet confidence. Our political leadership isn’t afraid to be bold and when an opportunity opens up; we can move quickly. Like we did for the bid for the World Expo site on Ashton Moss. Whatever happens it will bring something new and at the same time, it will always be home.
I live in Shrewsbury, a lovely market town that’s at least 1,200 years old, and is still a busy centre of everyday life for a wide area around it.

That doesn’t mean there’s been no change over the years. In fact, Shrewsbury is constantly changing. The town has cleverly moved over time to where the money is, riding successive economic waves. The local economy has a deep seam of SMEs as its bedrock so money made locally is spent locally. People here don’t go on benefits. They are hardworking, enterprising and inventive – because they have to be.

The population of the town has grown in the last thirty years to around 100,000 and is projected to rise again, providing the critical mass needed for a wide range of shops, restaurants and other facilities, giving local people a rich quality of life.

Nimby-ism doesn’t completely rule the day, because Shrewsbury sets its own pace of change, ensuring the fundamental nature of the town isn’t compromised. What’s regarded as
acceptable change is brokered locally in many small and intense conversations. So it’s 30 houses here or there, maybe in two phases over 20 years, rather than massive change. Surrounding villages also benefit and remain viable local communities.

Places don’t have an automatic right to exist. I believe every place has to have a clear economic purpose and re-invent itself when the local economy changes. It’s a tough message and an idea we aren’t used to in the UK. In reality, some places are no longer viable and probably need to be abandoned. Our past, however glorious, cannot get in the way of our future.

Shrewsbury flourishes and will continue to do so precisely because it knows that you must keep the best and change everything else. Place shaping, for me, is about spotting the next economic wave and investing to secure meaningful development for the future that works with the grain of local history and culture.

The future does not have to be a scary place. Living in a town like mine, you come to understand different time frames. Sometimes, 30 years is a mere blink of an eye. I enjoy a high quality of life and want to maintain it, that’s why I have my own plan for the future. That’s another lesson I’ve learned from living locally.
From the Ditton Alps to CERN

DAVID PARR
Chief Executive, Halton Council

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 in where they come from.

This determination is what’s delivered us a world class science park, at Sci-Tech Daresbury, the location of the world’s first CERN Business Incubator and the location of research that was a forerunner to the Large Hadron Collider research in Switzerland.

With our partners, STFC, we’ve recently done a deal with IBM to bring ‘Watson’ leading edge cognitive computing to Runcorn. We’re proud that the site hosts one of the most powerful computers in the world. It makes a massive difference not only to our economic prospects but also to the level of aspiration in our communities.

I’m on the board at Daresbury and on my visits to the site I’ve become friendly with one of the caretakers. We started talking because his wife
works for the council as a cleaner. The family lives in Windmill Hill, a poorer neighbouring community. I had a lump in my throat when he told me that his daughter is going to become a scientist. When I asked why, he said it’s because she comes to visit me here. She wants to work here.

Contrast this with the culture of our past and you’ll get a sense of how far we’ve come.

The chemical industry left us with a toxic legacy. The Ditton Alps were slag heaps covered white by calcium sulphide. Ours was a place that literally stank from the production of alkalis, soda ash and bleach. On open refuse sites with green pools of liquid waste known as ‘liquor’, where kids used to play.

We now have cleaner air quality than many of the UK’s thriving cities and green field sites.

I’m not sure if you can actually change people, but I do think they can change themselves given the right opportunities and environment, that’s our approach to place.
As an outsider you’re never allowed to criticise your adopted home; I get that. But I didn’t recognise the negativity from locals on social media and decided to publicly talk the place up.

I chose to live here, so I see it differently. Along The Leas is a piece of art that me and the kids love. It’s a gigantic shade-card of one hundred different colours of the sea. You look through a peep hole in a big wheel and match the pantone colour as you look out at the water.

The artwork is part of an artistic renaissance that’s not unique among the towns of the South Coast, but with a triennial festival that adds to the stock public art, it’s distinctive and growing. The amazing natural resources of the place are Folkestone’s stand out strengths. The Harbour Arm has been regenerated and draws locals and visitors in, some great galleries, bars and restaurants have opened up and the coastal park that borders the beach is beautiful.
The high speed rail link gets me into London in an hour and the motorway connections are great. For many years businesses on the Old High Street would open and we’d wonder if they would survive. Development used to stutter and fail, until roughly six months ago when it took off. Now the Old High Street is buzzing.

What made the difference? There’s been a culture shift and a critical mass of people who believed and invested in the town. Backers of the change like Roger De Haan, former chair of the Saga Group, set up a charitable foundation. He battled for years against the naysayers in the town, who looked backwards to the time when ferries rolled in and out of the port. His is just one of the many organisations who worked together and stuck at it. The economic purpose of the town has changed and its viability has been strengthened by a programme of new house building.

Maybe I notice and appreciate more than my wife who grew up here, but we are agreed; we are staying put. Taking a long-term view and being optimistic works.
Tower Hamlets has many cultures. Growth and population pressures add greater complexity to a steep gradient between poverty and wealth. In one corner of the borough we have conservation areas rich in Victorian and Georgian heritage. Yet the expanding families of home owners, often professionals, have led to calls to relax tough planning rules and allow mansard roofs. Do the perceived benefits of retaining this important and growing family presence justify potentially compromising the unique residential character of these locations? And will increased investment in school places, to meet projected future demand in some locations, be matched by a reduction in other quarters as demand begins to level off?

I have to mediate in the interests of the public good and that can’t be a trade-off between the politics or issues of the day. It means leading the place, not the council, sometimes in a low profile way. With the highest growth rate in the country and a very ambitious housing target, building at higher densities is inevitable.
The Isle of Dogs is a small part of the borough, but is already home to Canary Wharf and a rapidly expanding population. The tower cranes and feverish construction would be the envy of many places, but they aren’t always welcomed by residents, both newer buyers and longstanding tenants of social housing.

There are only two roads on and off the Isle of Dogs so any closures to accommodate development can have dramatic consequences, and if this coincides with the decision to raise the bridges, as it did during a recent weekend, the result is gridlock. Part of my role is to balance the need for new homes – especially affordable ones – and quality of life for existing residents, while trying to exert influence over factors we don’t control like private investment and dock and canal access.

Following the political upheavals, we’ve been going through a period of regathering and re-energising. Times have been tough for the staff with a loss of professional and managerial confidence. It’s also true to say that some of the criticism was right. I have to balance between being positive and making the changes needed. The risk of being in denial is too great.

What’s been interesting is that levels of trust in the council have been relatively stable and are now improving rapidly. There’s a sense in which the community didn’t blame the organisation, they said; “that’s just what it’s like round here.”

I’ve had to change my style as chief executive here. I’m exploring how my responsibilities and accountabilities work in a place that is multi-local, national and international at the same time. Ours is such a fast moving borough, it’s a fascinating, creative place.
Our culture of place is just as much about the character of local people as it is about our unique assets and we place a great deal of emphasis on relationships; lived experience and where people feel there is energy to take things on.

Alongside our data and intelligence from analytical work we focus on what people tell us. The dialogue about local needs and what we’ll collectively do about them feels very natural. Jargon doesn’t work, nor does labelling. In Sefton we find our own way of describing things; a way that makes sense to us and our local people.

At a recent strategic summit on prevention and early intervention local leaders from business, the community and the public sector discussed what prevention really meant in Sefton; promoting resilience in people, in place and in environments. Interpreting the issue of prevention in our own way allowed people to move really quickly to trialling and prototyping new approaches. In Litherland for
example, the discussions were instigated by a local head teacher who said boldly, “I want this to happen”. Before the end of the session there was a plan to set up a learning lab, all agreed by local people and the vast range of agencies from the public and voluntary sector. The council was the subtle facilitator in the background.

I’m new to Sefton. When I arrived everyone told me the same story about the borough. What’s special is the community spirit. Community leadership is strong and it results in practical action. Local people and groups deliver our parks and gardens services and services like meals on wheels are run by the community themselves.

We do have culture of place challenges; an age profile that puts a high demand on adult services, for example. Geographically we are a long, thin coastal borough with many sites of protected scientific interest and we are a place of diverse townships with assets including a golf course, Aintree and Anthony Gormley’s life-sized sculptures on Crosby beach. Through place branding and our fantastic community spirit our ambitions for growth are starting to be realised.

I’m still learning about the place – but I love it already.
We need to be careful about how we use the model of place in a dynamic, uber-connected city. A culture of place evokes issues of identity and attachment that, in a London context, we can’t make any assumptions about. It could be dangerous.

Take the idea of local jobs for local people, for example. Our economy doesn’t work like that, it’s international.

The question for us as leaders is: how do we help people contribute to, and benefit from our mega-city? The place lens is important but maybe it’s not the most important thing for us.
I’m more interested in making London work and trying not to be defensive about my bit of it. I don’t pretend I’m ahead of the game, sometimes I need to get out of the way, and sometimes it feels like I’m scooping up. The culture of Haringey is dense and multi-layered. It has a shape-shifting spirit.

That means our economic strategies have to go beyond the anodyne and be bold. We need to see clearly where we are and what it is we’re trying to do. We have to work out how to share what there is.
The city that bounces back

LISA COMMANE
Director of Customer Services and Transformation, Coventry City Council

Coventry is a city that has had its fair share of challenges – from the decimation wreaked by the Luftwaffe in the war to the devastation of manufacturing decline in the 1980s, forever epitomised in ‘Ghost Town’ by The Specials, perhaps the most well-known of Coventry’s bands.

It has a longer history of medieval wealth based on the wool trade, silk weaving and watchmaking – all transformed by competition and technological change. Throughout its history Coventry has a recurring theme of bouncing back and it’s booming again.

Like many Coventry residents today, my family has its roots in other places. My grandparents came from Ireland and Manchester in the 1950s to work for manufacturers like GEC, Jaguar and British Leyland. Just like other skilled workers have done for centuries they moved here and flourished, driven growth and given the city the resilience to bounce back from setbacks. It’s created a diverse and tolerant culture where people are welcomed and valued, and which has avoided most of the community
tensions that have impacted on other big cities. It’s no surprise that we have led the way in welcoming Syrian refugees here over the past couple of years.

Here, in my city, is a real sense of community built on the diversity of people; the essence of Coventry is about people and we aren’t vanilla – it is a city of characters and personality.

It’s big enough to have all the stuff a city needs to be successful, but small enough to feel friendly. We brew craft beers, create art, dance, music and it’s a place where alternative and mainstream culture comes together in a cool vibe. And now Coventry is growing in confidence about its assets and personality.

We are capitalising on the energy and movement stemming from our city of culture bid and celebrating the strengths in our asset, including our universities, cathedrals and people. We are tackling the challenge of making reform of public services real with much more joined up working across public services to support community aspirations and we’re taking the opportunity to build on Coventry’s digital strengths.

That’s all down to the people who live and work here. We don’t do enough to shout about our assets and achievements – it’s not in our nature to show off here. Maybe we should start to talk about the story of our place a bit more.
Making the most of the mosaic

STEPHEN BAKER
Chief Executive, Suffolk Coastal and Waveney District Councils

I’m currently chief executive of two district councils in Suffolk, the county I was born and brought up in. The place is a real mosaic of different communities: rural; urban; even semi-urban! Everywhere is different and everywhere changes – constantly. Making assumptions can be dangerous and is ill-advised.

So, while life expectancy in Waveney compares well to the national average, that of a man from a deprived ward in Lowestoft is very different to that of someone from Southwold – where a beach hut can sell for £120,000. And a wealthy community throws up different challenges and expectations; the large number of second homes makes it difficult for young people to access affordable housing.

There are lots of quaint villages in East Suffolk, but public transport and broadband access can be difficult and is often non-existent. There are different economic and social challenges and opportunities between each of our coastal
towns. And residents have a strong view of their own identity, and how it compares; they value their ‘unique-ness’, but want to be treated equably and fairly.

The resilience of communities in our market towns, such as Framlingham, Woodbridge and Beccles, is remarkable, with their own unique identities and spirit of independence – in many senses they run themselves. But we can’t rely on things staying that way without a succession plan for the community leaders of tomorrow within towns, parishes, and communities.

Our approach is to continuously review what communities need and to be flexible in our response. Communities do change, but we need to support them to always change for the better. As someone once said, we need to be “shoulder to shoulder with them, not toe to toe”.

Lowestoft Rising is a great piece of joint cross public service and third sector work; so far it has tackled educational attainment, career guidance and health issues. Local secondary schools developed a consolidated approach to career guidance and made new connections with the business community. It inspired young people (and in some cases their parents) and levels of aspiration and attainment have improved. The Beat the Streets project inspired young people to walk more around town, and that’s encouraging exercise and improving youngsters’ health, and that of their parents!

Reflecting on the two district council areas that make up East Suffolk, I’m always conscious of looking ahead and the need to always view our communities with fresh eyes. We must see them as they are, and could become, not as they once were – that’s the challenge.
Pride and paradoxes

CHLOE EDWARDS
Public Sector Audit Associate, Grant Thornton

There is a deep rooted sense of community in Burnley fuelled, in large part, by pride in our football club. The team has made it to the Premiership three times in the past seven years despite having a fraction of the financing that other teams do. It’s not unusual to see people wearing football shirts around town; the team has the highest match attendance to population ratio of all Football League clubs. Supporters are proud to follow a team that reflects the town’s values – we carry on regardless despite not being handed the best financial situation.

Most people in the UK have heard of Burnley for a variety of reasons – good, bad and ugly. We’ve topped the charts for the country’s cheapest housing and the lowest GCSE results. There are significant economic and social issues and people in the town voted overwhelmingly to leave the European Union in the referendum this year. Towns like Burnley are often overlooked nowadays and we’ve lost some of our economic opportunities with employers like Michelin and Lucas, heading to Manchester.
During the industrial revolution the town produced a vast proportion of Europe’s cotton. Since then, while it’s remained true to its working class roots, it’s struggled to return to such prosperity. Many houses in Burnley are built from stone rather than the red brick that is typical of our Lancastrian neighbours – the tax imposed on bricks meant that stone was the only affordable option.

Nevertheless, in 2013 the town won an award for the ‘most enterprising area in the UK.’ And only months after the EU referendum, a survey named Burnley the friendliest town in the country thanks to the strength of its family bonds, affordability of housing and the number of people that could be relied upon in an emergency.

Add to this the picturesque landscape of the Lancashire countryside, with the heritage of the remaining cotton mills – and an accent like no other – and you get a flavour of what makes the Burnley identity so unique. There are paradoxes here that create a distinct sense of culture and character, and succeed in separating it from its Lancashire neighbours.
The acid test

COUNCILLOR COLIN NOBLE
Leader, Suffolk County Council

When we were discussing devolution with government they asked; “Is your place a place?” The reason I am so confident that we are – the acid test, if you like – is that if you ask someone round here where they are from, they say “Suffolk”.

Our county is identifiable. The countryside is beautiful and the lifestyle is relaxed with the best elements of what makes for good family life. Like any family we row now and again, but we aren’t precious and in shaping our county, we won’t die in a ditch over how things get done. I’m often asking colleagues; “Why are we interfering in this?” We are entrepreneurial – we want people to get on.

Who we are as people; our families and our life experiences are important. My great grandfather, a character called Doc Griffiths, originally came to Newmarket to be a stable lad. The story goes that he got too fat to ride the horses, opened a café and became the first off-course bookie and today some members
of my family are still local Ladbrokes licensees. My grandfather then started his own building company, my parents went into the business and so did I.

We know how to make a success of things and what it’s like in hard times. As a kid I remember the adults sitting round the kitchen table, heads heavy, talking about having to lay someone off. You took the implications of that seriously, that was someone else’s family – but we knew it could happen to ours, too.

I’ve approached local government in a business like way. I want businesses to grow and make money and generate income so that we can fund more services. I’m a massive fan of public service mutuals and am proud we now have four independent companies wholly owned by our staff.

In order to lead a county like Suffolk, you need to be pragmatic, balancing many interests and you need strong networks and an ability to bring people together. We’ve done that well with our New Anglia local enterprise partnership, for example.

We’ve moved on from being regulators, to facilitators. Now we need to become champions.
We’re moving to an approach which is based on health not ill-health; this is at the heart of the changes we are putting in place to tackle inequality in Stockport.

In the past, professionals would have assessed a resident’s needs and given them a package of services delivered by our preferred suppliers. Now we jointly agree what’s needed, put our residents in control of the resources and work with whoever is best placed to keep that person well, be that family, friends, volunteers or specialists.

We don’t think of it as demand management and it’s not re-jigging services. We are negotiating a new deal with local people, one that enables them to be confident and stay independent. Stockport has gone further and faster down the route of personalisation than many other areas.

We took a similar approach to working with vulnerable children. When we looked at the way we transport children around the borough,
it wasn’t financially sustainable and didn’t help children in the long-term. For some families, the DIY approach went down like a lead balloon. Many were wary and a few were ready to give it a go. Now the majority love it; and the variety of ways that families are putting in place what their kids need is impressive.

This kind of realistic, community-focused, pragmatic approach is typical of Stockport. Frankly speaking, there would be no flowers in Stockport parks if it wasn’t for the many active friends of parks groups and I’m reminded of this every day.

Stockport might look a bit old fashioned. It’s often in the shadow of big brother Manchester up the road. We have a diverse base of SMEs and one guy still carts scrap on a horse and cart; but that’s not the whole story. I was at a meeting this morning with a family brewery that’s been in the town for 175 years. They are collaborating with 15 new micro-breweries. There’s a new artisan approach with more funky, creative start-ups around the place. Stockport has a quirky independent culture. It does its own thing and is proud about that.
Vibrant and resilient

SOPHIE HOSKING
Executive Director, South Hams District Council and West Devon Borough Council

Travelling across Dartmoor National Park from Totnes to Tavistock is the commute from heaven. South Hams and West Devon are stunning places to live and work and I always get a real kick when driving over a crest of a hill and seeing the sea or finding a hidden valley. The colours of the earth and the light on the trees are so vibrant.

The two localities do differ. West Devon is made up of many small, rural communities. Subsistence farming for over 1,000 years in a relatively inhospitable landscape has made people resilient and tenacious. They stand up for themselves and don’t look to others to solve their problems. There are also lively market towns; Tavistock has a strong, beating heart. Okehampton, on the main A30, has good accessibility.

South Hams has rolling, beautiful countryside, its rich soil supporting different types of farming. Our coastal towns are beautiful, but the associated tourist economy has low wages
and seasonal work. People move here to retire and buy second homes – a strength which can also create tensions. Some newcomers want to maintain the status quo to protect the environment they chose but we can’t preserve everything in aspic. South Hams market towns are all entrepreneurial but their personalities and identities differ – there’s a quirkiness to Totnes, for instance, that attracts people seeking an alternative lifestyle.

During the winter, the pace of life slows. There are limited bus and train routes across the two areas, so if you don’t have access to a car it can be very hard to access jobs. There are real opportunities for home-based businesses but connectivity needs to improve – both internet access and transport infrastructure. We suffer from young people leaving the area and not being able to buy homes. Keeping our pubs, schools and shops open is also a priority.

Overall, both areas have a very positive story of place. It’s about keeping healthy, thriving and appreciating the environment. We are sustainable communities.
Modern pilgrims – all welcome

COLIN CARMICHAEL
Chief Executive, Canterbury City Council

All roads lead in and out of Canterbury, from Watling Street down to Dover, it’s the centre of East Kent. Today it attracts millions of tourists and there’s a real buzz about the place. We’re proud that we’re the second most visited place per head of population in Europe (below Venice but above Florence.) Our visitors are modern day pilgrims, more likely to come here for education than the cathedral, but also for the heritage and culture. The city is now built on these three pillars.

Canterbury has a vibrant mix of communities. 30,000 students study at three universities and a further education college, making us a more diverse place. With the high speed rail line we attract people travelling to and from London. But we’re never going to be a dormitory town, it’s a kind of reverse commuting where people bring their earnings back here and spend them locally. At the other end of the age demographic, we are pleased that people want to retire to Canterbury.
Statistically, our population is more of a U-curve than a traditional bell shaped distribution – lots of young people and older people. Some people might see this as problematic, but for us it’s part of what makes the place special and economically it works. Most people – myself included – aren’t born and bred here but want to stay which has meant pressure for more affordable housing.

The city council owns the freehold on significant parts of the city, part of our strategy to ensure we have a sustainable city that benefits all. We’ve taken a stake in the local shopping centre so that we can have a say in its future and we own the Marlowe Theatre. We work positively with the private sector and the Business Improvement District manages the Christmas lights, Britain in Bloom and keeps our pavements and rivers clean. These things make people feel good, they make a great first impression – as it did for me.
Appreciative conversations

SARAH HOWARD
Head of Public Sector, Grant Thornton

There’s a classic Manchester drizzle in Spinningfields this morning – some would say no change there! But I barely notice it at the moment, there’s so much good stuff going on and the vibrancy of the place rubs off. The sense that Manchester and its partners in the Northern Powerhouse are in control of their own destiny is really exciting.

For me, one of the many stand out strengths is the cultural sector. It’s what uplifts me, seeing the Halle orchestra, visiting the Central Library, Whitworth Gallery or the Royal Exchange theatre. There are many great examples of Victorian art and architecture that have been bought up to date, reflecting the proud industrial heritage and a dynamic contemporary future. At the re-furbished Whitworth I recently saw one of Cornelia Parker’s installations, a large room draped in the red paper that poppies are cut out from. It was really moving to see something familiar from a different perspective. It had a real impact on me.
The work the gallery does is also illustrative of the ways in which art and culture are being used to improve health and wellbeing outcomes. It extends beyond the gallery itself to a ‘poet in a pub’ initiative that engages isolated older men and there’s a programme of art and rehabilitation work with the local hospital. What’s typical of Manchester is the way these activities bring different people together, in an innovative and entrepreneurial way.

I think people want to hear a positive narrative, nationally and locally, appreciating strengths and focusing on possibilities, not problems. The city and its partners have been great at taking opportunities, being bold and developing positive narratives.

Devolution provides a great opportunity for deeper collaboration – people across the city and beyond coming together to share ideas and innovate, to feel part of the journey and shape that future together. I don’t see that as a role only for civic leaders. I see it as a responsibility of business, communities and individuals to get involved. We’ve been giving a lot of thought as to how we might be more proactive in helping to make that happen, taking a first step in hosting a ‘live lab’ conversation on pioneering world class health in Manchester.

We all have a stake in making devolution work for Greater Manchester.
Describing the culture of a place like Enfield is really difficult. It tends to depend on your perspective, age and where you are in life’s journey. If you are an 80 year old resident who’s lived in Edmonton all your life the place does look different these days and you’re likely to have a very different perspective than that of a member of our new Somali community who has put down roots here over the past decade.

My view is that culture changes and people change – there are no absolutes. Parts of our borough are tough with a gritty inner London feel, but we also have more affluent leafy areas and the physical geographical boundary of the green belt.

I’ve lived and worked around Enfield for more than twenty years now, but I grew up in a mining village in the north east. Instead of working in the local pit, I went to university in Hull and then made my way south to London for work; I guess it was a relatively unusual pattern back then.
What’s interesting to me is the push and pull of life – the way populations move, either through choice or because of harsh economics. Housing pressures and high rents mean people are being forced to move out of the centre of London and into our borough. We also notice an outward flow. People like it here and if they can afford to move up the road, so to speak, they do so.

We want Enfield to be a place of opportunity and the council does try to place shape. We’re keen on beneficial development and try to make helpful interventions at different points in the economic and social cycle – despite much of it being beyond our control.

Many interventions take years to come to fruition. A major story for Enfield is the new flagship development at Meridian Water; it’s big by any standards – 85 acres, 10,000 homes and 6,000 jobs – and significant for London. There will be new transport links and we’re creating new neighbourhoods. That’s exciting. We can’t anticipate everything that will ultimately shape the Enfield of 2030 but I’m looking forward to seeing our current investments reap real dividends.
E\textit{verywhere is different. Big local partnerships try to get down to the essence of the place and what it needs, although engaging communities can sometimes seem messy because what people want is often different and building a consensus takes time. But our experience is that working with communities in a more radical way can become an opportunity, not a challenge.}

In a debate on the value of this approach at the LGA conference Councillor Lester Hudson from Newham was really clear that services can work better when users take control – and that’s not a question of handing over responsibility without resources. “\textit{Do that and you can expect resistance,}” he told everyone. “\textit{If we’re devolving services to residents, we only do it on their terms. It isn’t an abdication of responsibility.”}

The Newham story focuses on eight community neighbourhoods where engagement takes priority. Residents team up with adult social care workers to deliver activities that result in reduced social isolation. Nineteen
existing buildings in these neighbourhoods have now opened their doors to deliver events, activities, learning and skills. From extending the opening hours of libraries to refurbishing public spaces, working with Barclays Digital Eagles and University College London, the neighbourhoods are determined to ensure access to quality local opportunities.

The discussion about involving communities in shaping vibrant economies sometimes gets missed in the face of big public sector structural change. It’s not just about worklessness; the dialogue needs to get to grips with the quality of local jobs, supply chain development and procurement practices.

We’re learning how supporting communities to self-organise can lead to new employment alternatives, hybrid models of service delivery and local transport initiatives. The process often focuses on patient, tried and tested small scale community development activities that build confidence to then experiment.

By placing more trust in local people, Newham turned cynicism into energy and creativity. They – and others – built on a genuine willingness to engage. It’s inspiring to see in practice.
Grumbling Gargoyle is a win-win

MIKE PALIN
Chief Executive, St Helen’s Council

As a council we’ve been undertaking a cultural change programme – people describe us as under pressure and sometimes parochial – attributes that could also be true of the place. St Helen’s is a proud Lancashire town – people don’t necessarily associate themselves with Manchester or Liverpool – and that brings with it a sense of pride.

The echoes of the past are strong; that’s both a strength and a weakness. Walk up a grand staircase to the wood panelled council chamber and you’ll see historic images of glassmaking, metallurgy and pharmaceuticals. The motto on our town crest, *ex-terra lucem*, ‘from the earth, light’, refers to our former coal heritage. In 1982 more than 20,000 people were employed by Pilkington’s, since taken over by a Japanese company and now employing fewer than 500. It’s a symbol of globalisation and of de-industrialisation – but that does not mean doom and gloom.

Our location gives us significant potential, the connectivity of being on the M62 and the
M6 and our links to the markets of the big north west cities mean we can offer access to 35 million customers. We know we can attract big logistics firms but we’d like manufacturing and pharmaceuticals, too. We have the skills and distribution networks. The future is bright but people can’t quite see that yet, so we haven’t developed a new vision. Ours is a continuing narrative of the need to change.

The new cultural attributes we are developing include being efficient, effective, well-managed, caring, positive, and – critically – we want to be an adaptive place. In the place between a past that’s disappeared and a future we can’t quite imagine we want innovation, ambition and arts and culture to be at the centre of what we do.

We won a National Lottery award for our cultural hubs programme which puts arts events in libraries. One of the performers, a poet known locally as the Grumbling Gargoyle, whose dog has their own Twitter account, has become a real star and an asset to the town. They have grown in self-esteem and confidence in the way our services are delivered – it’s a win-win and, being very honest, it’s a way to save money in the long-term.

We need more initiatives like this and more stories to help develop a new culture.
The psyche of the place

JO MILLER
Chief Executive, Doncaster Council

If Doncaster were a character from history who would we be? We’d be in medieval times or the fictional Game of Thrones. We’re the plucky underdog who steals the spoils from elsewhere to feed the village. At least, that’s what the young people we asked told us. It feels right.

Our work on place marketing has got under the skin of Doncaster, suggesting it’s a pretty direct place, inquisitive and not afraid of a fight if needs be. In times of austerity that spirit might give us some extra tools in the box, but we don’t see culture as being fixed – and we don’t always need to fight. With a population of 310,000 we aren’t small, but there are lots of connected sub-cultures which means we are small enough to get things done.

When the mass shootings in Orlando happened the organisers of our local gay pride march got in touch to ask us to support a small vigil in the Hallcross gay bar. We used our own personal networks and in less than 24 hours 400 people
turned up, including the first Pakistani Muslim settler in the town and his family. It was during Ramadan and he’d never been in a pub before, let alone a gay one.

The family hadn’t imagined they’d be there – they thought the memorial was in a school with the same name. Typical of Doncaster, though, their attitude was ‘well, we’re here now, what are we going to do about it?’ The many groups there talked to each other, made strong connections and decided next year’s gay pride festival should include an extra day celebrating world cultures, communities and food. The process was organic and the result was special. We were in the background helping it along.

Doncaster is changing. I remind people to look at the sky, not the floor. If your head’s down you just see a small area; the sky is huge. We’re building confidence in our place, the economy is growing, there are more businesses and we’re a beacon for skills. We aren’t a city – so what? We can behave like one, claim the city tag as ours and use our influence to shape the future.
At Grant Thornton our 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. Our expert advisory teams work across the local authority landscape, supporting councils with financial and strategic transformation plans.

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Contact us

**Paul Dossett**  
Head of Local Government  
T 020 7728 3180  
E paul.dossett@uk.gt.com

**Paul Hughes**  
Public Sector Advisory  
T 07792 897 403  
E paul.hughes@uk.gt.com

**Sarah Howard**  
Head of Public Sector  
T 07831 564 148  
E sarah.howard@uk.gt.com

**Mike Thomas**  
Public Sector Assurance Director  
T 0161 214 6368  
E mike.thomas@uk.gt.com

**Guy Clifton**  
Head of Local Government Advisory  
T 07771 974 285  
E guy.clifton@uk.gt.com