

Excellence in Place Leadership Programme 2021

Session 1: The Future of Place

"To explore and identify the most significant trends and issues we will have to tackle as leaders in our local places over the next three to five years, and to develop plans to address the ones you consider the greatest priority."

Background

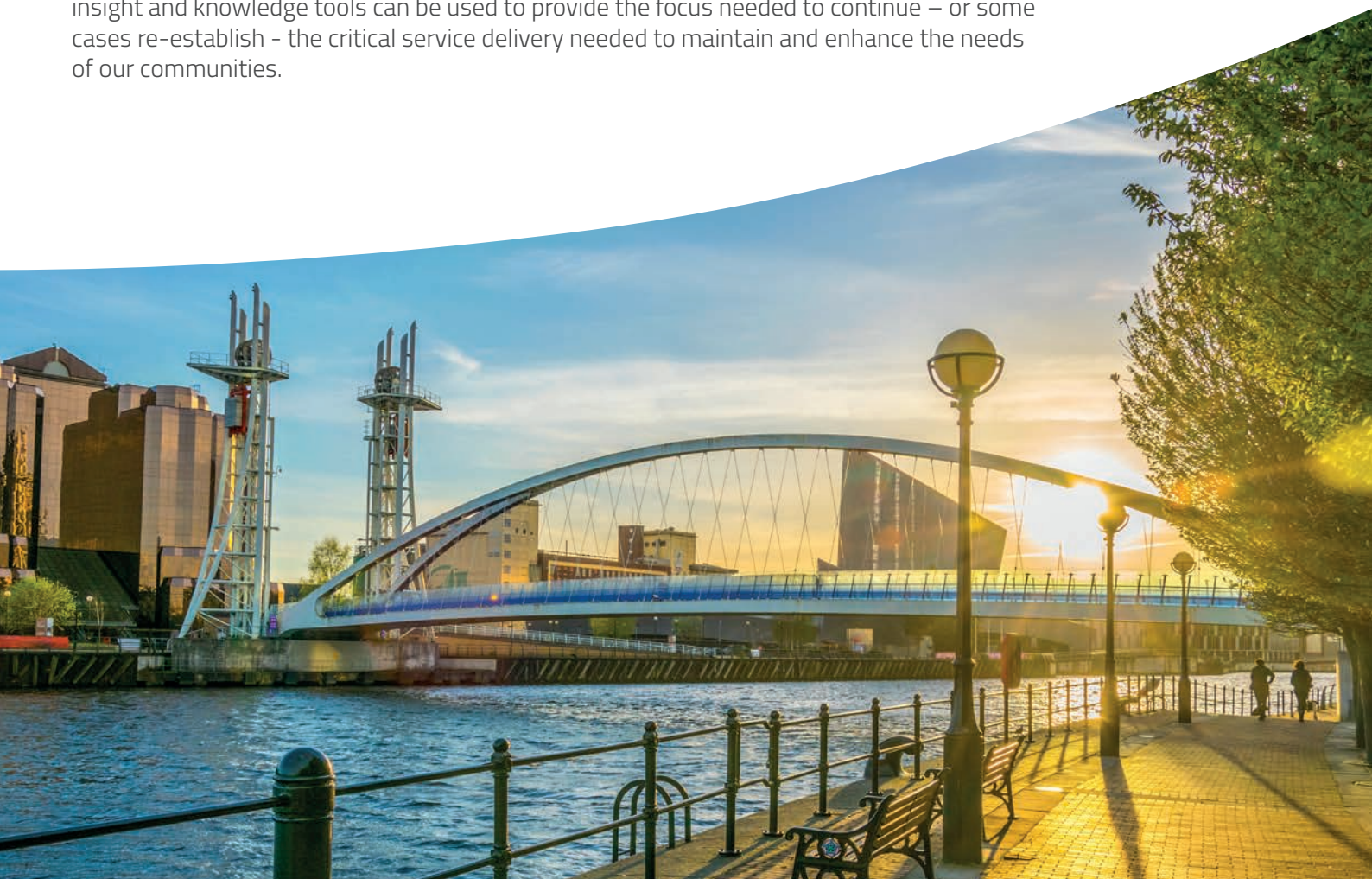
Almost a year on from the start of the Covid-19 crisis, it is clear that the three to five-year post-pandemic landscape and operating context will be challenging for everyone across the public and private sector. These challenges are expected to be particularly acute for local authority leaders as they are tasked by politicians and the public to drive forward the delivery of community services against a background of increased need and reduced resources.

Place leaders will sit on the front line of this community response and recovery. It will therefore be critical for their teams to have a clear understanding of the future scenarios that may play out ahead, and a focused view of their likely impact on the social, environmental and economic dynamics of different localities across the UK.

The Foresight process can provide a vital set of tools to help public and private sector leaders identify some of the most significant future trends impacting local places, while also helping to develop the critical plans to address them and to manage the multitude of risks and uncertainties that these emerging trends might bring.

However, it is clear that, to date, such tools have not been appreciated nor adopted widely across local authority management, particularly in the teams responsible for key operational service delivery and for creating the socially and economically sustainable environments demanded by future communities.

The next few years will test every public and private sector organisation like never before. But by helping to establish this much needed clarity around future priorities, these powerful insight and knowledge tools can be used to provide the focus needed to continue – or some cases re-establish – the critical service delivery needed to maintain and enhance the needs of our communities.



Objectives for the session

The session attempted to give delegates three core take-aways which can be summarised as:

1. **An overview of the Foresight process** – why place leaders should embrace it as a critical step towards planning and managing future services for their communities.
2. **An Introduction to some simple tools and processes** that can assist place leaders to embed Foresight into their working practices as key to enhancing leadership and building capacity across teams.
3. **Embedding the value of Foresight and Horizon Scanning tools** for local authority place management teams as they start to plan for future needs and likely changing scenarios.

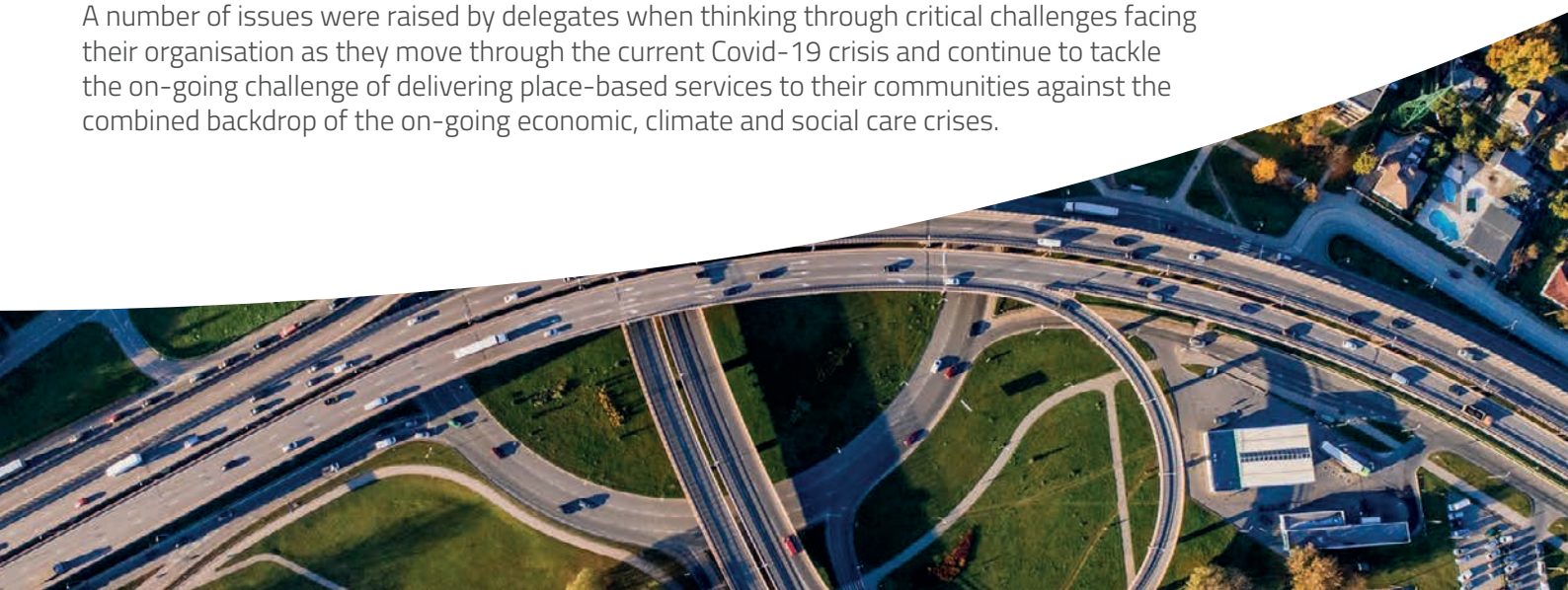
1 An overview of the Foresight process – why place leaders should embrace it as a critical step towards planning and managing future services for their communities.

“Foresight is a systematic, participatory, future-intelligence-gathering and medium-to-long-term vision-building process aimed at enabling present-day decisions and mobilising joint actions. Foresight is neither prophecy nor prediction. It does not aim to predict the future – to unveil it as if it were predetermined – but to help us build it. It invites us to consider the future as something that we can create or shape, rather than as something already decided.”

The “what”: the process of Foresight combines thinking about, debating and then shaping the future for an organisation. This means identifying and evaluating critical forces, themes, drivers of change, trends, developments, possibilities, ideas, and wild cards that could shape the future for that organisation and so influence the decisions that are made.

The “why”: the overarching purpose of Foresight is to help organisations make better choices and better decisions today and so prepare for the unknown range of possibilities that may impact its activities in the future. It also helps organisations ensure that they are ready for those futures and better understand what shape they need to be in to navigate the uncertainties that are to come.

A number of issues were raised by delegates when thinking through critical challenges facing their organisation as they move through the current Covid-19 crisis and continue to tackle the on-going challenge of delivering place-based services to their communities against the combined backdrop of the on-going economic, climate and social care crises.



The value of Foresight tools for local authority place leaders

The relevance of Foresight to the local authority place leader was discussed and identified a number of potential operational issues and uncovered the way that greater use of Foresight might assist as follows:

"There is an inevitable conflict for local authority place leaders looking to drive post Covid-19 recovery between adopting reactive short-term policies and taking a longer-term view which might deliver greater reward over time."

- Laying a robust foundation through the use of Foresight is key to understanding and managing this tension.

"Partnership between local authority stakeholders is essential, but the challenge is how to build trust and bring everyone involved in the community onto a level playing field so that the private sector achieves its desired profit while the public sector gets its desired outcomes."

- Engagement is key to involving the community and can be accelerated by investing in Foresight to establish a clear view of how to manage future trends and understanding which public and private sector skills and processes will be critical in the future.

"There is a tendency to blame elected politicians for poor local decisions and outcomes when quite often the problem is rooted in the local authority delivery organisation's inability to delegate and trust officers."

- The issue is too often accentuated by a lack of Foresight in local government. The more you can inform yourself as an organisation about the threats and opportunities ahead the better your decision making will be.

"Very often there is a willingness by local authority officers to sign up to sound bites but an inability to actually commit to what those decisions mean in practice."

- Spending time really thinking through future scenarios presents an opportunity to break away from the ways that things have always been done.

"Although the power of collaboration and longer-term thinking is well understood by local authorities, most are hamstrung by the need to deal with short term challenges affecting the next 1-3 months. Finding the headspace to take a longer-term approach to assess decisions over the next 4-12 months and beyond is a challenge."

- The use of Foresight tools can identify the capability and skills within teams and provide the burning platform to enable leaders to lead from behind and influence those above.

2 An introduction to some simple tools and processes that can assist place leaders to embed Foresight into their working practices as key to enhancing leadership and building capacity across teams.

The Foresight process can be broken down into six key stages:

- *Framing – scoping the project, defining the issues and current condition*
- *Scanning – exploring signals of change or indicators of differing futures*
- *Futuring – identifying a baseline and alternative futures*
- *Visioning – developing and committing to a preferred future*
- *Designing – developing prototypes, offerings or artifacts to achieve the vision and goals*
- *Adapting – enabling the organisation to generate options to alternative futures*

The EiPL programme focused on three of these stages – **Scanning, Futuring and Visioning**.

The aim was to provide delegates with a better understanding of how strategic forecasting can be embedded as a key part of their on-going planning and operational processes, and provide them with some simple tools to enable Foresight to be quickly utilised within their teams to help deliver better outcomes.

Scanning

A robust scanning process should provide compelling content to help leaders to understand the value of looking ahead. This should cover a range of different “future factors” that might shape the emerging future – in particular:

Level 1 – Megatrends / key drivers of change (national / global)

- *Economic power shifts and political instability*
- *Rising societal demands*
- *New construction approaches such as modularisation and superfast 3D printing houses*
- *Artificial intelligence (AI) enabled processes*
- *Crypto economy / new forms of exchange*

Level 2 – Underlying trends, developments, ideas, and possibilities

- *Pandemic impacts*
- *Outward migration from cities*
- *Self-aware and self-enhancing artificial intelligence*
- *Multiple methods of payment*

Level 3 – Deep dives on specific themes

- *Potential impact of smart city solutions*
- *Reinventing city / town centres*

Workshop 1

Horizon scanning

Exploring signals of change or indicators of differing futures

Each group was asked to identify and describe briefly two megatrends / major driving forces that could impact their agenda over the next 1-5 years.

Taking 4-5 megatrends that may have the most impact on the future of placemaking in a locality, each group:

- *Created a short description*
- *Assessed the potential impact*
- *Identified the focus of further exploration to determine how best to respond to the megatrend*
- *Determined the timeframe over which it might have an impact*

Key megatrends impacting local authority place leaders identified by the workshop sessions were:

- *Climate change creating more severe weather events*
- *A growing aging population with changing housing and care needs*
- *Global economic uncertainty*
- *Digitisation of services and the economy*
- *The shift in society to measure success / outcomes in terms of well-being*
- *Technology, automation and the use of Artificial Intelligence*
- *Changing use of towns and cities – demise of the high street, home working, rural to urban living*

Takeaways from the workshop

- *Be aware of what defines a megatrend – for example, an economic downturn is not a trend but merely a situation that feeds into economic uncertainty as a megatrend.*
- *Avoid rushing to fix things in the scanning process. Instead use the process to explore the underlying issues and use this insight to lead to the overarching megatrend. Busy people always have the tendency to seek solutions rather than explore.*
- *Expressing a time frame for the megatrend is a device to drive action – by their definition most megatrends occur over the longer term.*
- *Seek out industry data to assist in identifying and tracking megatrends. There is much available be it from the web, social media, blogs, videos, newsletters, networking, experts workshops or crowdsourcing.*

Futuring

Exploring signals of change or indicators of differing futures

This stage is designed to help make sense of the megatrends that have been identified – how do they fit together and contribute to the range of uncertain futures within which you will have to make decisions?

Scenario planning is at the heart of this process and involves creating and then overlaying between three and six alternate futures against which today's decisions around a specific project or idea may play out. The aim is to identify how an organisation or leadership team might prepare for that future.

Each scenario narrative is based on the megatrends, underlying trends and developments identified during the Scanning process. These scenarios are not predictions but simply a set of story lines to explain and express how the megatrends might come together to form a version of the future.

Each scenario should be distinct from the others and sufficiently detailed to enable the users to accurately assess the likelihood of success or failure of different strategic options.

Workshop 2

Scenario Evaluation

Each group was allocated a scenario to review and asked to identify the 4-5 megatrends they felt were most likely to impact their organisations. These megatrends were then assessed under the allocated scenario outlining:

- *The emerging issues and challenges in relation to that megatrend under this scenario?*
- *The most important opportunities in relation to that megatrend in this scenario?*
- *What local authority priorities might be in relation to that megatrend in this scenario?*



The four scenarios identified for the EiPL workshop session, based on the likely megatrends affecting local authorities and the built environment, were:

1. **Lumpy and Bumpy** – impact of the Covid-19 pandemic continues until late 2022 leading to great economic uncertainty and a very challenging outlook. Taxation rises and budget pressures force local authority priorities to shift to resilience, tackling climate change, and the journey to net zero on emissions, waste, and energy. A radical rethink of place strategy and infrastructure plans is inevitable.
2. **The Roaring Twenties** – the pandemic is effectively bought under strong control by the end of 2021 and the global economy bounces back quickly leading to a period of great optimism and investment. Greater responsibility for investment is devolved to local government; incentives encourage sharing and collaboration between authorities to accelerate transformation and levelling up.
3. **Tough Love** – pandemic vaccines are less effective than hoped but life returns to a resemblance of normality in the second half of 2021. A new more fiscally austere leadership ousts the current Conservative government and with it brings in a period of spending reduction and a pro-business agenda including commercial deals that allows the private sector – and technology companies in particular – to have access to citizen data in return for lucrative licence fees. Tax rates are reduced and local authorities are forced to deliver real term reductions in council taxes.
4. **Hard Landing** – vaccines are less than 50% effective hampering the global return to work. Global stock markets fall, economies crash and unemployment rises. The Government pursues a radical austerity agenda and the relationship between central and local government deteriorates. Local authority projects over £20K have to be approved by central government and demonstrate they will pay for themselves and increase service provision. Deep collaboration with the private sector is the norm.

Takeaways from the workshop

- *Overlaying different scenarios forces trends to be considered from different perspectives drawing out potential challenges and opportunities that may not otherwise have been seen.*
- *For local authority place leaders, it is important to consider and explore the impact of the megatrends under different scenarios from the perspective of communities but without getting drawn into the detail of solving the problem.*
- *When exploring the potential impacts and opportunities under each scenario it is crucial to realise that there are no right and wrong answers, simply a collection of ideas that can help to lead towards better decisions in future.*
- *It is important that place leaders use the Scenario Planning process to look outward toward emerging issues as they impact their communities rather than be tempted to focus their gaze inward towards operational issues.*
- *Attaching timescales to the prioritisation of emerging issues is a useful way to prompt action.*

Visioning

Developing and committing to a preferred future

This stage of the Foresight process attempts to help answer key questions around “where are we going, what do we want to be, and how do we know what we want to be doing?” in relation to one or more key themes or issues that were identified or that have emerged from the Foresight process to date.

Essentially it is the moment to create a plan, template or outline plan of key tasks and timescales for addressing that specific issue or series of issues. This builds in any research needed and outlines the resources and capabilities required, and areas where collaboration might be appropriate.

Workshop 3

Defining Issues

Each group was asked to review the ideas coming out of the day to select one big theme that needed to be addressed as a priority and could be pursued collaboratively. Each group described the issue and current impacts, defined the goals, set out the desired outcomes, and summarised the plan to address the issue:

- *Develop an outline plan of key tasks and broad timescales for addressing the issue*
- *Identify any key research requirements to progress the issue*
- *Outline the capability requirements to implement the project and deliver the desired outcomes*
- *Identify the tasks that can be done collaboratively and those that need to be delivered locally*

Takeaways from the workshop

- *This is the moment to get specific about creating a plan or template to tackle a key issue or theme that has emerged from the Foresight process – think of it as creating a plan or toolkit.*
- *Avoid being tempted to leap into problem solving at this stage – this is about creating the toolkit or process rather than actually identifying solutions.*
- *Create space in this process to put in place the process to create space to act – not to simply problem solve.*



3 Embedding the value of Foresight and Horizon Scanning tools for local authority place management teams as they start to plan for future needs and likely changing scenarios

The Foresight process contains a very powerful set of tools that can assist place leaders to better understand and plan for an uncertain future of changing scenarios. The range and scale of outputs that can be accessed should assist in tackling not only short-term issues but also in planning for longer term and emerging trends.

The challenge for place leaders – perhaps the most important part – is how to most effectively use the output to the benefit of elected politicians and communities. How can the output be used to address issues collaboratively across the local authority departments and throughout the supply chain and what plans could we put in place to help take this forward?

It is important to understand that the way that we think about strategy is changing. It is no longer enough to simply think about how we see the future in 5-10 years. We have to be more specific about the timescale:

- *1-3 months – is about survival and operational stability*
- *4-12 months – how do we adapt our processes to meet the future need*
- *1-10 years – future visioning around capability and services.*

For place leaders the Foresight process should help to focus strategic thinking around these timescales, building in actions and driving appropriate outcomes.

It is also an opportunity to identify the requirement for new skills that enable place leaders to tackle the biggest emerging issues and trends. This might include using, say, collaborative thinking to balance new digital skills with an approach that delivers sustainable but human outcomes.

The Foresight process should also be a valuable tool to help place leaders answer the ongoing and increasingly critical question around how they work together to build capacity and capability to create a better human space for communities.

Points for further discussion

- *Why are place leaders reluctant to use Foresight tools?*
- *What stops us scanning?*
- *How can place leaders create the space to scenario plan rather than simply problem solve?*
- *How can Foresight be used to avoid unwanted situations and drive towards enacting desired outcomes?*
- *What is the role of Foresight in on-going risk and opportunity assessment?*
- *How can Foresight tools be focused to help identify and build capacity and capability?*

Building Capacity together – themes for future sessions

Whilst the focus of session 1 was to get the cohort to think about Foresight and linked techniques, the discussion around megatrends and scenarios did also generate appetite to probe further into some of the priority issues identified during the day. The general consensus was to work together on three key post-Covid recovery themes relevant to all place leaders in building back better:

- *Green renewal – re-imagining our approach to carbon zero through nature conservation*
- *Organisational renewal – re-imagining the way our organisations, people and services work*
- *Economic renewal – re-imagining our places, towns and high streets*

Future sessions to test what needs to be different in leadership, collaboration, understanding of demography/end users, and utilisation of data and technology to drive better solutions to these issues at scale and pace.