Towards Connected Places: Insights into Actions

Consultation Overview Report

Socitm / St George's House Consultation
Monday 18th March – Tuesday 19th March 2024

Introduction

This second Socitm-St George's House consultation forms part of the [Society for innovation, technology and modernisation (Socitm)](#) work on championing [place-based leadership](#) and [connected places](#). It builds on the findings of Socitm's previous consultation [Resilient people, communities and places](#) held in November 2021.

Actions from the first consultation include:
- formation of the [Socitm Institute](#);
- launch of the [12 local government digitalisation outcomes](#);
- sponsorship of the St George's House consultation on [AI threats and opportunities](#); and
- establishment in January 2024 of the [Socitm-Impera partnership](#) working to show how local government turns data-related insight into actions.

The 2024 consultation, involved 40 key policy influencers, drawn from public, private, third and academic sectors, and marked:

- the formal establishment of the Socitm Institute; and
- Socitm's transition to a charity supporting place-based innovation, technology, and modernisation.

Two days of shared insights, discussions and reflections provided a unique opportunity to stimulate debate on empowering and enabling place-based leadership and transformation, set in an era characterised by increasing devolution of power and growing adoption of artificial intelligence.

Through a series of contextual keynotes, multiple working groups and consultation exercises, participants looked at the interplay of place-based leadership and transformation with particular focus on the Connected Places and Artificial Intelligence agendas. The range of insights generated included identification of "what works" and what needs to change.

This report outlines the key insights and highlights from these deliberations.

Part 1: Connected Places: Devolution, Digital, Data, and Sustainability

The focus of this part of the consultation looked at place-based leadership and transformation in an era of turbulent times, devolution, climate change and technological change. Following a series of insight briefings and working groups[1] discussions which identified key challenges, opportunities and what needs to change around the themes of devolution, digital, data and sustainability, the following points emerged in the plenary discussion:

- **It is sometimes more appropriate to talk to people face-to-face than provide digital services.** This can be addressed through a blended approach, which includes support for those unable or unwilling to use digital channels. Some people prefer face-to-face interactions because these generate social interaction that digital does not. Digital interactions are also more vulnerable to abuse by fraudsters. Different age groups increasingly have different digital preferences, so a young person may not want to use email, while an older individual may reject social media. A way forward may be to use data and digital to inform and improve human interaction, rather than replace it.

- **We have been working on technology-driven public services for at least two decades and they are still not delivering the extra capacity they promised.** The Labour government elected in 1997 said it would have all services online by 2005, freeing staff time for frontline services. Did this happen? Who benefitted and who did not?

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[1] See Background Paper Part 1: Connected Places: Devolution, Digital, Data, and Sustainability

- **We do not know how to describe the people we serve, and we sometimes use language that alienates them.** Are they people, citizens, customers, service users? Is the word 'digital' getting in the way? How do 'smart cities' sound to people who do not live in cities? We need to make our language attractive and relevant to a variety of audiences.

- **How do we cater for local differences?** It is vital we understand that what might be right for a city, may not be right for a rural area. A uniform place-based approach could lead to an unintentional loss of localism.

- **How do we encourage local authorities to work together** through developing a shared recognition that devolution can help create new opportunities to improve local digital public service capabilities and practice across local systems, structures, and economies. Data sharing is key to this, with its potential to help create area-wide information and financial systems that can adopt the latest in AI and emerging technologies.

- **How do we bring political, executive, community leaders and suppliers with us?** The focus should be on the way devolution is changing how local government works and the boundaries between local government and industry. Emerging technology is changing decision making (e.g. harnessing Generative AI) and service delivery, while new opportunities are emerging for suppliers to partner in development of citizen-focused local services and capabilities that support both growth in local economies and environmental sustainability.

Part 2: Connected Places: Impact of AI and Emerging Technologies

Following an evening overview briefing on the findings of the [St George's House consultation on the threats and opportunities of AI](#) held in October 2023, the consultation's second day focused on how AI can help places and communities to thrive while guarding against its risks. Following a series of insight briefings and working groups,[2] discussions which identified key challenges, opportunities and what needs to change around the Impact of AI and Emerging Technologies, the following points emerged in the plenary discussion:

- **People are our priority**: Participants agreed public services must put the public at the heart of what they do by connecting and enabling those who live and work in a place. It was important to ensure that people rather than technology remain central to our concept of connected, resilient and sustainable places – that in effect "**People make places**".

- **Permanent challenges and opportunities:** Innovative technologies have always created challenges for local authorities as they consider its applicability and adoption. It is worth remembering these are common-place challenges, most effectively met through sharing of experiences and expertise and collaboration between people.

- **Need for common and inclusive language:** The importance of avoiding language which acts as a barrier to transformation. We need an agreed narrative around the technical possibilities which is doesn't focus on the word digital. This will help avoid leading to perceptions of "fixing the IT". It is essential to find ways to talk about transformative technology such as AI and the innovation it can achieve in a simple and effective manner.

- **Collaboration and Learning:** The sector has to get better at collaboration. There are lots of great examples of impact cases and learnings where things haven't gone well. These are not being shared and we are reinventing the wheel. Leaders have to empower staff to take time away from the desk, join

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[2] See Background Paper Part 2: Connected Places: Impact of AI and Emerging Technologies

networks and play an active role in doing better to build and share skills, capabilities and capacities to support change.

- **Modernising Procurement**: The complexities of procurements have been a challenge for public sector technologists for many years. With the advent of AI, these are changing rapidly. The public sector needs to develop flexible and agile responses to ensure these changes have a positive impact.

- **Stewardship and Local Digital**: The adoption of a stewardship role by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) is a welcome development, and the planned revision of the Local Digital Declaration (LDD) provides an opportunity to strengthen central-local collaboration.

Conclusion: Calls to Action and Collaboration

As this report highlights, the consultation brought diverse interests together with the aim of providing a unique opportunity to address the opportunities arising from devolution and connected places, and to consider how the use of AI/emerging technologies and data can assume even greater relevance in preparation for the societal and environmental challenges that lie ahead.

It will help to contribute to Socitm's wider international work with our partners Major Cities of Europe (MCE) and LOLA (Linked Organisation of Local Authority ICT Societies). We will use the information to build a multi-disciplinary international collaborative knowledge-sharing platform to address a concern about lack of knowledge sharing among place-based leaders, policy makers and practitioners.

The insight briefings highlighted a wide range of interrelated central/local government initiatives from DSIT, Cabinet Office, NCSP and DLUHC, together with several impact cases from various tiers of local government, regional networks, and the devolved nations. The DLUHC's plans to adopt a stewardship approach to working with the local sector and DSIT's forward thinking on wider public engagement around the concept of connected places were widely welcomed.

The outputs of working group discussions were valuable in revealing the scope for wider collaboration around the concept of 'Connected, Resilient and Sustainable Places' that can draw on the diverse perspectives voiced in the consultation. Their discussions highlighted what can be described as **"Calls to Action"** that will support the concept of Connected and Sustainable places:

- to establish common data standards across the public sector [with particular emphasis on supporting the work being led by iNetwork and iStand UK];
- to establish common AI terminology and guidance [and support its wider adoption via the AI@Socitm platform];
- to encourage the sharing of best practice/what works to prevent the re-invention of the wheel across the sector; and
- to facilitate and enable closer place-based collaboration around public, private, academic, research and third sector
- to support the creation of communities of interest and practice around the themes of 'Connected, Resilient and Sustainable Places' in the era of AI

With these points in mind, the discussions identified several key academic programmes, all of which offer the scope for wider collaboration around research and most importantly field trials of engaging citizens and communities:

- University of Exeter's Local Climate Adaptation Tool
- University of Derby CivicLab programme
- UCL (University College London) on citizen-council engagement
- International Public Policy Observatory, a project hosted at UCL to identify and synthesise evidence to address UK policy needs.

Supporting insights around this approach were also provided by the University of Birmingham Schools of Government and Computer Science, and Cumberland Lodge Fellows.

Alongside the insights documented, the group work and plenary discussions brought to the fore how issues being addressed by the research community and most notably the work of the Connected Places Catapult (CPC) and SPI/Impera Analytics, can be seen to intersect with Socitm's concept of 'Connected, Resilient and Sustainable Places'. This is through their shared goals of improving the quality of life for individuals and communities by using technology, data, and innovation.

Building on these concepts, we can see the potential for wider collaboration, around the following common themes:

Focus on Connectivity: All the participants and the three entities emphasised the importance of connectivity in places. The importance of acting as an intersection of public and private sectors, connecting businesses and public sector leaders to cutting-edge research, to spark innovation. The need to provide place-based decision-makers with data on the social and environmental health of their communities. This would be in accordance with Socitm's idea of connected places providing a systemic model that brings together better integrated, efficient, and more effective public services.

Place-based adoption of Artificial Intelligence: Similarly, participants and their organisations are investigating the role that AI can play across connected places. Looking at the innovative use of AI (such as the use of Digital Twins) to support local digital infrastructures and services. Considering how AI can improve local data insight capabilities and predict future demographic trends. The insights from this work can go on to help inform Socitm's forward AI research programme that supports place-based leadership, local digital transformation, and the development of connected and sustainable places.

Data-Driven Decision Making: several participants joined Socitm in advocating the use of data to inform decision-making. Whether this around connecting businesses and public sector leaders to cutting-edge research to spark innovation. The use of tools and indexes specifically designed to provide insights at the community level. All of which support Socitm's view of the need to start with people, communities, and places, when focusing on the use of technologies and data to connect them in ways that were previously impossible.

Improving Quality of Life in Communities: is a common theme that participants and their organisations clearly shared. Supporting this was the emergence of the idea of 'innovation as a service' for public bodies, businesses, and infrastructure providers to catalyse improvements in the way people live, work, and travel. This concept is the need to underpin the development of people-centric services by addressing aspects of social progress that relate to wellbeing. All which links directly to Socitm's connected places model that focuses on the creation of social and economic wealth, improved productivity, and employment, and aims to establish resilient, sustainable, socially just and ecologically safe places.

Sustainability and Resilience: Likewise, there was a shared emphasis on the importance of sustainability and resilience. Local collaboration linking with wider thought leadership and research was seen as key to addressing these issues. To support this process not only is it important to consider the measurement of social impacts and addressing environmental challenges, but also seek to understand how initiatives like technology demonstrators and accelerators can help to scale fresh solutions that drive growth, spread prosperity, and eliminate carbon. All of which in turn can help inform Socitm's concept of connected places as resilient, sustainable, socially just and ecologically safe places.

The Socitm Institute will work with St George's House to look at how best we can explore the scope for wider collaboration around a shared focus on improving the quality of life in communities through connectivity, the responsible use of AI, data-driven decision making, and a commitment to sustainability and resilience.

Lastly, but certainly not least, our grateful thanks go to all those participated in the consultation exercise and the staff of St George's House who helped deliver two days of stimulating insights, reflection, and debate.

Participants

Mr Justin Anderson Connected Places Catapult Director of the Digital Twin Hub

Mr Andrew Bailey Rathbone Results CEO

Mr William Barker Socitm Chief Strategy Officer

Prof. Emma Bland University of Exeter Assoc Prof of Practice, Environment, Health & Wellbeing

Ms Favour Borokini Cumberland Lodge Fellow

Mr Jos Creese CCL Founder / Socitm Associate Director

Ms Deborah Evans LLG (Lawyers in Local Government) Chief Executive

Mr Martin Ferguson Socitm Director of Policy & Research

Mr Kurt Frary Head of IT, Norfolk County Council / Socitm Vice President

Mr Michael Green Social Progress Imperative CEO

Miss Yasmine Hajji Socitm Research Analyst

Mrs Shelley Heckman iNetwork (Tameside Council) Partnership Director)

Mr Johnny Hugill PUBLIC Deputy Director

Mrs Nadira Hussain Socitm Chief Executive Officer

Prof. Slava Jankin Professor of Data Science and Government, Centre for AI in Government, University of Birmingham

Dr Rhiannon Jones Head of Civic, University of Derby Dr / Associate Professor Civic Practice

Mr Bob Kamall Cabinet Office (Central Digital and Data Office) Engagement Manager (Workforce & Capability)

Mr Mark Lumley Director - Digital, IT & Resilience, London Borough of Hounslow / Socitm President

Mr Steven Mathieson Socitm Freelance Writer

Mr Aidan Matthews Socitm Learning Programme Manager

Mr Pye Nyunt Chief Executive Officer, Impera Analytics

Mr Liam O'Brien Head of Secure Connected Places, Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

Mr David Ogden Socitm Director of Engagement

Mrs Lindsey Phillips Chief Digital Officer for Local Government, Welsh Local Government Association

Ms Freya Pierrepoint Solace Policy Officer

Mrs Yogita Popat Assistant Director of Sustainability, London Borough of Barnet / Socitm Vice-president

Mrs Diana Rebaza Socitm Senior Research Analyst

Mr Dave Sanderson Socitm Director of Member Services

Mr Maury Shenk LearnerShape Founder & CEO

Dr James Shraiky Chief Impact Strategist, Impera Analytics

Mrs Sam Smith Socitm Director of Institute

Mr Geoffrey Stevens Connected Places Catapult Director of Digital, Data and Urban Infrastructure

Ms Emily Sullivan DLUHC Head of Product – Local Digital

Miss Rong Wei Cumberland Lodge Fellow

Mrs Carol Williams Director of Transformation & Digital (SIRO), Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council / Socitm Vice-president

Mr Paul Wilson Connected Places Catapult Chief Business Officer

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