

Hello and welcome to our Good Place Podcast that is run by good place innovators.

A team of researchers, educators and student fellows passionate about transforming communities with an extra sensitive eye for our place, local context and true community needs.

My name is Radka Newton.

I'm a senior teaching fellow in strategy and innovation at Lancaster University Management School and I'm also an education service designer and elite of good Place Innovators project funded by the Enterprise Educators UK.

In this podcast we have inspired educators to incorporate place based pedagogy to their curriculum.

We spoke to entrepreneurs who have impacted on their places and made commitments to placemaking agenda.

We also debated a notion of civic university and the role.

Of local council.

And today we welcome a key partner to our project, Tony Johnson, who is a manager of Lancaster Business Improvement District.

Tony, welcome.

Thank you, radka.

To start with,

could you share with us the remit of bit and the context of your role and how it's evolved over the recent years and maybe touch a little bit on the relationship with the uni?

No problem at all.

Yeah.

And Lancaster bid was formed just over nine years ago and there's bids now.

In the UK and we don't just exist, the business community basically vote on whether we're doing what they want us to do.

And so we initially served A year term, got voted back in, did A year term.

And I'm proud to say last February we had an % majority vote that the business community wanted us to stay.

Each term we put together a business plan that the business community voters for us on our business plan.

Last five years has five pillars that we always stick to.

We represent businesses and which as you can imagine, is the easiest thing to do on a day-to-day basis.

But we try our best and they range

from multinational companies to small independent companies and we have set rules like all bids do that we must adhere to based on ratable value and other things. I can talk to you about if it's of interest, but yeah, and.

Basically my my role within that is to deliver the business plan. I'm managed by directors and also a management board and they sort of steer me and and and two part-time colleagues and then we try and deliver said business plan. Yes about our relationship with the university and I think it's a good one and and ever increasing and developing and which is great because you know, fair to say in the past. Sometimes it's been seen as a them and us and I think or certainly over the years I've been with bid, which is years, that relationship has been getting stronger and stronger and and that's for the betterment of the city really. I feel that the university is massive player in this area and it seems deaf that just because the campus is based - miles away from the city center that we're not working together on loads of things.

So I'm pleased to say that that's really improved . Of businesses, I didn't realize that. And when you talk about the business community, it sort of seems quite abstract to me and I imagine it's a very heterogeneous community.

How does it work in practice that they sort of vote on this business plan?

Can you explain?

Or maybe you know, shed some light into the practicalities on how how this works? Yeah it is.

It is mad really, because as I say, it's a huge number.

But realistically we work with a lot of national.

Runs so the store managers, while would have an influence and and they would sort of work with us.

Realistically, the decision made by national companies, he's done a head office and you know whether that be based in London,

Birmingham, Manchester, wherever.
But they won't just be
voted on Lancaster bid.
They'll be voting on
Stratford bid Coventry bid.
Wherever numerous you know,
wherever Sainsbury's are,
chances are there will be a
bid in that town or city so.
Theirs is a slightly different decision
and what you find with national
brands is they either are very pro
bids or they are very against it.
It's it's very black and white thing,
whereas with Lancaster we are.
We have %.
I think it is radco ravar businesses
are independently owned so as you
can imagine we we try and do a lot
more closer work with them because
it's how you interact with them.
Realistically that is going to
make us be in Lancaster or not.
And because they are usually
sold decision makers or partner
decision makers so and and it,
it can be the difference between
tidying up the streets and not,
whether they vote for you making
the streets safe and secure to
whether they vote for you or not.
So I don't want it to sound political,
but sometimes it can be they they're
voting on a team and a plan and and.
You sort of got to stick with your
sword really and and and convince
them that that you know without us.
What,
what would Lancaster City centre look like?
You know,
cause we bring a lot of events to the city.
We tidy the city.
We make this the streets safer
without bid who would pay for that?
Where would that come from?
And I have a simple way of
dealing with businesses.
I always say if we can help we can.
If we can't, we'll tell you why we can't.
But we'll also try and find somebody
or an organization that will.
And when you was honest as that,
what can people say?
And what kind of place is Lancaster?
How would you sort of,
what are the challenges of the city?

It's a really great question.
It's it's it's interesting
one for me as well because
I know, you know,
I'm a local lad, born and bred.
I've lived here all my life and
there's a reason I stay here.
I really like it so.
If you're asking me what it's
like and you know I really,
really like, I love the place.
I love the district.
I love the whole area,
not just Lancaster.
What is it like and what
it's it's people like?
I mean, I've been fortunate I've
I've done a little bit of travelling
and and not just in this country
but a lot of places and and I find
my frustration sometimes with
Lancaster is that were a bit manyana.
We're a bit slow at making decisions we
we come up with lots of really good ideas,
talk good game,
but sometimes.
It's getting it over the finish line,
but that sometimes frustrates
me not only professionally but
personally because I think we live
in a lovely part of the world and
sometimes we don't make enough of it.
We don't announce it enough.
I was using example.
You live in Yorkshire, Yorkshire focus.
So proud of where they live.
They talk about it all the time
yet us in Lancaster in Lancashire.
We're just like this.
Yeah, it's OK, isn't it?
And slightly frustrating.
Yeah yeah we always say you
know it's like the best hidden.
Secret,
and that's the same goes about
the university, you know,
we we have the same sort of
reputation that we are very good,
but rest of a bit shy and not
really shout out about it.
Like other places we just sort of
brings me to another question and
in previous episodes we sort of
explored the ways entrepreneurs
navigate their relationship with
the place and how they actually.

How are they able to understand
the place dynamics and the needs
of the community.
So I guess you have quite a big role in this.
Do you see yourself as a bit
of a conduit between the east
of local and the partners,
or even people coming in
here wanting to settle here?
And you're almost like the Guardian, or how?
How would you see that a role that you have?
Yeah, it's really.
It's a good point because I
have to be honest with you.
As I said,
big manager for three years and
it took me a little bit of time
to get my head round it in in that
if you break down the bid it is a
business to business organization.
We would not exist without the businesses.
But if you spin it over,
the businesses need us to link
the public with them because they,
the majority of businesses that that
pay into our levy rely on Joe Public.
Yes, there's some service businesses,
but the majority rely on job.
Well, they all do really.
So we've got to join the two together.
And I think I feel that's what
I've brought to the table with
my commercial background.
I think I've made a bit more of
a link and tried to make the bid
brand more popular, more people are.
Beware of it because I'm with you.
I think we are really important.
I think we can act as a as that conduit.
We can bring partners together.
We have a lot of contacts.
You know whether it be in the
City Council, the police,
the university we're in the middle of,
a lot of conversations and.
And that's a nice position to be in
with no political agenda per se and
because we represent the business community,
that's the other thing that that
is hard to get your head round.
One business might say to us that
we don't like the parking charges
and all of your businesses agree,
but unless you ask them all.
We can't say based on one conversation.
The bid says we don't like parking charges.

We've got to get this representation from as many of them, businesses as we can. If all of a sudden say they don't like the parking charges, well, we have got to do something about it and we can do but. The only answer you think from an entrepreneurs point of view. I think Lancaster has a heck of a lot to offer, and I go back to my point earlier is that. If people agree with my opinion that we maybe do underachieve and undersell ourselves, the great thing with that position is you can only go one way. And being part of that ride is an entrepreneur should mean you're going in the right direction and success might follow. So we talk with lots of startup businesses, people moving to the area about. How successful or unsuccessful certain streets locations are in the city center? And because, as I said earlier, we have got data that shows movement across the city so we can help businesses make a uniformed decision about whether they want to be in new, straight or Market Street or penny straight, or avoid Lancaster at all costs. You know, we are bids are important. They really are, and I think they've there was a big fear when the pandemic broke that. The bids might struggle. I think there are, say, one thing the pandemic did. Forbids was made bids more important to the business community and and the communities in which they serve. And so I mean, I attended one of your breakfasts and I really enjoyed it because I could see how open the businesses were. There is no filter really. But at the same time you know the panel you had the the police like the involvement of the police for example and they were. Just fantastic discussions and the energy in the room. Even though there was some frustration and there are issues, but people somehow genuinely really felt

you know they wanted to address it.
They care.
So if you have that passion,
even if you know sometimes it
may feel a bit
negative, you know you know these people
care and and that that's really nice to see,
and I guess that's been sort of my
aspiration of bringing the students
every year to the city center.
You know, spend some sort of few weeks.
Deliberating over sort of these
potential innovations and
you've always been a part of it.
That's how we met anyway.
Yeah, what has this sort of meant to you?
Or to the bit because you know,
for us it's it's been a big eye opener and we
always really appreciated your contribution.
Have we managed to reciprocate
anything as well in this partnership?
Absolutely, I think I actually to you radka,
when we first met.
When I, when I did that session
with with your students,
possibly back in October, I think it was,
you know, I'm a year old guy.
Who's never been to university?
So to actually spend some, you know what?
Was it? An hour?
Spend an hour with students of of an age
far younger than me in a different era.
Knowing what they want.
Expect their challenges that they
have compared to the ones that I
had when I was their age and it
blew my mind really and I really,
really enjoyed the session.
I hope the students did and that really.
Brought us to try and do the
event that where we brought some
businesses up to have a chat with
more of your students for them to.
Really.
It's alright me telling businesses what
students are saying but I think for the
businesses to hear it for themselves,
I think it it opened their eyes to certain
things and and the great thing was,
as you know we had Primark and Marks
and Spencers there and then we had
independently owned businesses and yet
they all took away something that they.
Can try and bring to their businesses
or take to their businesses and so
you said has that been reciprocated?
Of course it has because you
students gets business people

thinking on how they can change.
Adapt in an ever changing.
A world that we live in is and as I say,
especially for the students and going
back to something I haven't said,
students are so important to
the economy of Lancaster.
You know,
when I first set out years dealing with
businesses trying to sell them advertising,
I used to come against the students.
I don't.
I don't need students in my business.
I don't think there's any business
now in Lancaster that that says
that they realize how important the
the students are to to Lancaster
and and the economy of Lancaster.
So,
and I think that will carry on changing
so and in some of our previous
episodes we discussed this notion of
students as transients and how they just,
you know,
almost just come and go really
so some of them only spent
months with us and they
never go to the city.
And so for us this initiative really
helped the students feel they belong.
They are the stakeholders,
the businesses care about their opinion.
So I think you know it's just
such a fantastic initiative.
For us as well, and for those students
as future entrepreneurs you know,
I think they will now look at places where
they do business differently and they're
already looking differently at Lancaster,
you know, they they've developed
a different relationship.
We also spoke to Andy Walker from
Lancashire County Council and we
debated sort of leveling up agenda.
And now I wonder what's your view?
You know about this and will it?
Or how will how will this leveling up agenda
support a Lancaster business community?
I think Lancaster it's a strange one.
I think whenever there's
funding to be had and.
Because Lancaster is quite a safe place.
It's quite a liberal place.
It's quite,
it's not what's the word I'm looking for?
It's not the most affluent
of cities in in the country,

but it's also not at the other end it.
I suppose what I'm trying to say
is when it comes to levelling
up and funding opportunities,
Lancaster sits in the middle,
so perhaps misses out on lots of
funding that there are available,
I think, where the district
should benefit from the leveling.
Open and then all the universities
heavily involved in in Eden Project,
I think.
I think you know us in Lancaster
is a business community so
hope that that happens again.
Going back to my point of being a local lad,
just because I represent Lancaster
doesn't mean I want brilliant things on
our doorstep in Morecambe I mean the
only three miles away for God's sake.
So, and I hope the leveling up happens
for Morecambe and the Eden Project.
I as I say,
I just don't know where it fits into.
Lancaster,
you sort of wish and hope it did.
I know when I used to deal with the
police about trying to get funding
from the police for for certain things
they couldn't get funding because
their crime work rates weren't bad
enough so there was no money to be had.
I mean,
it sounds it's it's a great thing.
But then when you want to do
something a brand new project
you can't afford it because yeah,
you are right, you know.
And we discussed this with Andy about
this heterogeneous nature of Lancashire,
so we can't just assume we're all the same.
And I guess, yeah, yeah,
it's an interesting point.
Alan Costa being stuff something
in the middle.
Yeah, yeah you are right.
Yeah, it's a good point and I wonder
so from the bit point of view,
what's your aspiration for the city?
What do you want to achieve?
Obviously selfishly,
I want to achieve lots,
and but going back to my point
of dealing with businesses,
I know I've been around long enough that
whatever we do, not everybody will

always be happy with what we're doing.
So as long as the majority are,
that'll be a a win for me.
Very selfishly. But for the city.
My aspirations for the city.
I think we've got a lot going for us.
We're going in the right direction.
One thing I really want to.
Get out there though,
to visitors to Lancaster or or people
that have never been to Lancaster before
is the fantastic heritage of Lancaster.
Going back to the underselling ourselves,
if there's anything we undersell ourselves
with, it's our fantastic heritage,
you know, the castle.
The cathedral, the Priory, the grand,
you know, the Royal King's arms,
all of this history,
and yet if you're a visitor coming in,
how do you get to see the mall?
Where where's the tours?
Where's where's the connection?
And again,
I think bid has an important part to playing
that going back to that conduit thing,
but with everything else
that we've got on our plate,
it's just another thing to focus on,
but I would love to get that heritage
heritage Lancaster thing going better.
Just think we sold to sell ourselves
if you compare us to York and I'm not
suggesting we're better than York,
but but we've got quite a lot to offer
like York has from from that perspective.
And yet as I say,
if I go to York tomorrow,
I know that I'll get a tour of this,
a tour of that,
a tour of the other on one ticket price
will be someone to show me round.
Haven't got it in Lancaster so.
Well, what a great message.
So future entrepreneurs or existing
entrepreneurs, we are listening.
You know there is a bait for you because.
I definitely agree that this is
something missing in this place.
Well, Tony,
we're coming to the end of the episode.
So I mean,
there is so much we could talk about,
but I really want to ask you about
and I ask every guest so don't worry.
I don't want to catch you out.
What is your place?

Where do you feel placed?
As I said earlier,
you know I'm a local ad born and bred.
I'm years of age.
I've had chances to move away from
the area and I never had a chance.
Or to America at one point and and I.
And I didn't,
and I just feel at home here and and I don't.
I used to.
Sometimes when I was young I
sort of question that on on did
I have the motivation to succeed.
You know,
wanting to stay in in little
old sleepy Lancaster district,
but on reflection it it's been a
it's been a great move because I
feel place when I walk down the
the the streets of the city center
and no word of a lie.
Every day I walked down them I will
see somebody I know now I know I
deal with. Every business in the city centre,
so you're probably saying,
well, you've got better odds
than everybody else Tony.
But what I mean by that,
not just business owners and know
lots of people locally and from
from different walks of life.
And that makes me feel really comfortable.
I also, you know on our doorstep
more confront you drive down
there on a certain night.
As I said earlier,
that I've traveled quite a bit.
There's not many better sites than than
than more confront at certain times.
It's beautiful.
I'm a big goal for our play golf Hesham,
so the the whole district is is who I am
really as much as I I like to travel.
I always like to come back to it
because it's home and that's wonderful
to hear from you and I hope that
every city or every bit has a local
lot or local loss because it just
makes so much different to have that
emotional connection to the place.
Thank you so much.
Tony was absolute pleasure
having you with us.
And thank you for supporting
our project as well.

And you know this connection that we have with you with the curriculum. It's made a massive impact on our students, so that's all for today. I hope you enjoyed our debate and perhaps you have a Tony in your city or town who is open to connecting your students with the locality as a resource and inspiration. Feel free to drop us a message, comment or recommendation, and until next time, take care.