

CONNECTED PLACES

TRANSCRIPT

EPISODE 67: INCLUSIVE INNOVATION IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

INTRODUCTION

[theme intro]

Emma Frost:

the innovation process today is rarely inclusive. In fact, you know, I'd go as far as to say it's inherently quite exclusive. So that's what we need to start shifting. And there are large and persistent disparities in things like race, gender, class

Monder Ram:

There are 250,000 businesses owned by black and ethnic minority entrepreneurs. In the UK, they contribute some 25 billion. What we estimated is that if we focused on the right issues, as Pam said, we could quadruple that contribution to 100 billion.

INTRO:

Welcome to Connected Places; a podcast about the future of our towns and cities, and how we live and travel in them.

I'm Ivor Wells, the producer of Connected Places, which is brought to you by the Connected Places Catapult.

We're the UK's innovation accelerator for cities, transport and places.

We help to connect businesses and public sector leaders to cutting-edge research and new technologies that can spark innovation and grow new markets.

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Ivor:

If you work in pretty much any part of Britain's innovation economy you'll know that the government wants to make the UK a science and tech superpower by 2030.

A bold ambition has been set, but what does success look like?

Well, success on that level can be measured in many different ways. But one area that's been getting a lot more attention recently is around questions of equity and how to achieve better social and economic opportunities for more people across the countries – and what does that mean when we think about some of the chronic imbalances across the UK.

Income inequality in Britain is one of the highest compared to most developed countries.

Education inequality still means that fewer than 30% of children in the poorest households will achieve GCSEs.

We're facing a skills crisis in STEM subjects – science, technology, engineering and maths.

That has implications not just for businesses and research institutions, but also for the life chances of people too – particularly people from marginalised groups that are typically exclusive from or overlooked by the innovation economy.

And then of course there is the other bold ambition that the government has set out. Levelling up the UK economy, and the importance of really understanding place, when thinking about the government's commitment to increase public expenditure on research and development outside the Southeast of England by at least 40% by 2030.

So in this episode we want to share with you some of the conversations that are happening around creating a more inclusive approach to innovation, and what this looks like from a place-based perspective.

And to tell that story we we'll be visiting the West Midlands, where my colleague Catherine Hadfield recently visited Birmingham to talk this through with some of the leading figures in the region.

We'll hear from Catherine and the others later in the episodes.

But I want to start with someone who we've been working with closely here at the Catapult.

Emma Frost is the Chair of the UK Innovation Districts Group, or the UKIDG, and we've been working with them and other partners on unpacking what inclusive

innovation means on the ground, and the steps that place leaders need to be taking.

I spoke to Emma about what inclusive innovation means to her.

Emma:

For me, inclusive innovation is an ongoing process and a mindset, and it's about making traditionally exclusive innovation activities intentionally beneficial to more people and places and the economy.

As we think about developing different types of economic models, and particularly developing solutions to things like the climate emergency, it is really important that we've got innovation to create more sustainable economic systems, and to do serious problem solving on the big issues that we face.

But unless we address some of the fundamental imbalances in the innovation systems, there is a risk of it becoming another extractive economy and one that exacerbates already serious inequalities that we're struggling with. And that's really at the heart of inclusive innovation.

Ivor:

So who are we talking about when we're talking about exacerbating existing inequalities?

Emma:

There is a huge drive on understanding more marginalised communities and how we broaden the sense of who's involved in the innovation economy. And that's really important when we think about something that's often called the lost Einsteins.

People who would be innovators or inventors if their demographic or economic group were better integrated into the innovation economy. If all groups innovated at the same rate as white men from high income families, the rate of innovation would more than quadruple in the US. Now, more has been studied in the U.S. on this, which is why we've got these kind of baseline examples. But that's precisely why the U. K. Innovations District Group wanted to run a commission that looked specifically at the U. K.

Ivor:

We'll hear about the work of the Commission in a minute. But as well as the social equity benefits of a more inclusive innovation economy, there are economic ones too.

Emma:

Innovation plays a key role in helping to improve productivity. Innovation organisations are also often the most fast growing, so they create more jobs within themselves, but they also create more jobs in the wider economy.

So that job multiplier can be quite substantial. For example, in every 10 new jobs created in the high tech sector, there are seven new jobs generally created in other parts of the local economy, like in restaurants, security, cleaning, or business services. So we can see that there's a significant job generator that happens through the innovation economy.

But despite the innovation process today is rarely inclusive. In fact, you know, I'd go as far as to say it's inherently quite exclusive. So that's what we need to start shifting. And there are large and persistent disparities in things like race, gender, class, and certain education, uh, and roles in things like STEM subjects, access to innovation finance, you know, all different stages, and at the senior levels, um, in innovation companies.

And a lot of this was unearthed first in the Rose Review in the UK. And what our Inclusive Innovation Commission aimed to do was start a national conversation around. The state of play of inclusive innovation in the UK, but also develop a very clear and simple framework for how we start to think about and then tackle inclusive innovation.

And what's crucial about that is the identifies inclusive innovation needs to be woven through all three phases in the innovation cycle. So from design, Delivery and diffusion and at the moment, we tend to focus more on design. So inclusive design practice, which we're actually pretty good at as a country, but we focus less on the delivery and the diffusion stages. And that's a problem.

Ivor:

So, if we're serious about making the innovation economy more inclusive, we have to understand how we can measure it.

And the question of measurement formed a big part of the work of the Inclusive Innovation Commission.

Emma explained it to me in a bit more detail.

Emma:

Measuring inclusive innovation is a minefield because it's made up of so many component parts and that brings with it a huge amount of complexity.

So the work we undertook as the IDG most recently, was specifically to look at how we measure the social and strategic value of innovation districts, understand the role they play, in returning value to the communities and the cities that they're part of. So this is really about thinking, how do we measure inclusive innovation in part through the places where it can happen most?

And that's why IDG with funding from Connected Places Catapult commissioned the Business of Cities to undertake this work over a series of about nine months. It was really about achieving three things.

Firstly, understanding that there's this interplay between innovation economy dynamics. Place dynamics and people dynamics, and that's what generates your wholesale value of innovation districts and innovation activity is really important. We then wanted to create a more consistent approach to how innovation districts value and use metrics to generate a value understanding in general, so that we could do some comparative analysis and some identification of trends over time, trends over the whole of the UK and shared learning.

And then thirdly, we wanted to use all of this to inform direct conversations with policymakers and thinking about how some of this work on understanding value differently might play into things like the innovation accelerators program that national government is leading at the moment with three national accelerators.

So these are the sorts of conversations that we want to be able to influence from practitioner level to policy level to really inform what is it that makes a difference on the ground? How do we have a fuller understanding of what the value and the positive impacts need to be? And how are we measuring that in a really practical way?

Ivor:

OK, so it's a huge topic, and it's important. But from a place leadership perspective, where does one start?

Emma:

This is a big and complex and often quite sensitive agenda. So sometimes it feels really daunting and that can prevent people from even wanting to step into it. So what we're aiming to do with conversations like this is to really try and map out. what we're talking about, what's involved, what's practical, what's possible, and, and just try and make it bite size and meaningful because the important thing is starting.

So for example, we suggested four things to focus on at first. The first was around becoming a living wage zone and adopting good local employer charters and practices.

So recognising there are some fundamentals in terms of fair and equitable economic practice that need to be the bedrock of how you set about inclusive innovation. The second one was around creating procurement processes that weigh social and environmental value alongside financial ones. It's also set district wide innovation challenges to address local barriers, and then fourthly, connect to local education providers, and diversifying how you think about them.

So it's not just your local universities, as fundamental as they are, it's also thinking about your colleges, your adult education training centres. The other thing that we aimed to do in the report was provide a series of, you know, UK case studies, um, specifically to help showcase examples of good practice and models that are already making a difference now, you know, across the country, things like build an accelerator dedicated for, um, diverse founders in Leeds, things like the good growth hub at the Olympic park in London.

So these are the sorts of elements that can start to make a big and practical difference in terms of how you do inclusive innovation on the ground. It's about how you tailor it very specifically to your needs. the local landscape, the local assets, the local players, the opportunities and the needs that you need to be designing your inclusive innovation strategy for.

And it has to be a properly co designed and practical plan that responds to that local context or it just won't have the impact that we need it to.

Ivor:

So where does the Catapult come into this? Well, Alex Cousins is Business Director for Devolved & Local Government.

Alex:

So we are part of the innovation economy. We've got to shine a torch on ourselves, haven't we? And say, you know, are we inclusive in what we're doing and how we do things?

Ivor:

Based on the work of the Inclusive Innovation Commission, the Catapult is creating guidance for place leaders. Alex explained more.

Alex:

We're starting to put a little tool kit together based on what we've learned from ourselves as an organization And what others have learned as well so that people can like work out how you do it on a practical level

You know, what funding can you affect to make it more inclusive around innovation? So we start off with the rigour of an academic review. So that we've got the rigour of inclusive innovation, what it means, how you do it, how it's done elsewhere, what the benefits are, etc.

And then we've come up with a series of recommendations. Now those recommendations are getting tested out initially with the policy makers, the funders. and the community groups so that we understand what the recommendations they buy into them and we get a view of what they are and what you can do then to implement those recommendations and how you can benchmark yourself against what good looks like.

Ivor:

Another area of focus for the Catapult, beyond the development of guidance on how to do it, has been celebrating what's already happening across the country.

Alex:

We host awards now, we host inclusive innovation awards and that is great because what that gives us is how do people define inclusive innovation and what are they doing. And every time we go out for a set of awards, we get so many submissions. So we can put all that in there as well so that you will have a great menu of things that other people have done and then be able to go on to that.

There's an award called the Northern Power Women Awards, and they've been going for, oh, eight years now. And they're, the Northern Power Women, there's about 80, 000 women and men. And every year they have an awards ceremony. And two years ago, we sponsored the Inclusive Innovation Award. And I think we had about, you know, hundreds of submissions. We get all the different types of judges from across the country to shortlist down to a final 10 and then on the night there's a winner.

There was one winner last year and she's got disabilities. So people asked her, well, what does it look like for you? What do you see out of your own eyes? So she created some software that people could see what she could see. So she's made massive changes to individuals lives there by, by what she's done.

It's all about untapped talent. So you're going to have people who would never, ever imagine themselves to have any sort of idea of innovation and they are inventing things and they're creating good jobs for themselves, right? A good

income for themselves. They might even set up their own business because of the solution they've come up with.

Ivor:

So I mentioned at the beginning of this episode that we'd be hearing from some of our partners that we're working with in the West Midlands region about the work we're doing there.

Well the Catapult's Catherine Hadfield was recently in Birmingham to have a roundtable chat about just that:

Catherine:

Hello, I'm Catherine Hadfield, Principal Place Development Lead at Connected Places Catapult, and I am leading the Diatomic Programme, um, and looking after Connected Places Catapult's presence in the West Midlands.

Ivor:

And she took the time to sit down with Monder:

Monder:

Hello, I'm Monder Ram, I'm Professor of Small Business and Director for the Centre for Research in Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship at Aston University.

Ivor:

Pam:

Pam:

Hello, I'm Pam Waddell, I'm the Director of the Innovation Alliance for the West Midlands, and I'm also the Executive Chair of VentureFest West Midlands.

Ivor:

And James:

James:

Hey, I'm James Muscat Sharp. I work in research strategy at the University of Birmingham. I'm responsible for finding links with industry across the city, but I'm also wearing a second hat today, I'm a co founder of Birmingham Digital Futures, which is looking at bridging the skills gap in the West Midlands.

Ivor:

They are some of the people that are leading on inclusive innovation across the region and we wanted to get a sense of what that looks and feels like on the ground in the West Midlands.

[STING]

Catherine:

Inclusivity and innovation are two big words that mean a lot of things to a lot of people, so I just wanted each of you to tell me in your own words what inclusive innovation means to you. James, if you could go first.

James:

Yeah, so thinking about this from the skills perspective, there is an underlying foundation in all skills development work, which is really focused on inclusion, social mobility, and looking at the statistics in Birmingham, that's something which we're not doing particularly well compared to other parts of the country.

And the risk is that actually what we're seeing at the moment is social exclusion as a result of the skills gap that we have here, particularly in digital Skills. And so I think inclusion and innovation going hand in hand is around. How do we manufacture opportunities for everybody to have the same opportunity.

Pam:

To me, innovation is the application of new knowledge or technology. The more applications that we can have in mind, the more people that we can be relevant to, the more powerful, the more useful that that innovation is going to be. So inclusive innovation means Getting everybody's brains at work, all the huge diversity of brains that we have, getting them to work to how we apply new technology and knowledge, but also who we're applying that to. So including everybody is critical for us to have successful innovation.

Monder:

For me, inclusive innovation surely has to be about human flourishing. It's about giving everyone the opportunity to realize that potential. But it's also important to validate and valorize sort of social arrangements, social contributions, social values as well. So I think there's a interconnection between the social and the technical that I would like to see at the heart of the debate.

Catherine:

So, why is inclusive innovation so important to this region and what are the steps that we need to be aware of?

Monder:

The region has always been strongly associated with the manufacturing sector, but it's transitioning into services, tech, innovation, skills.

Whether we have the skills to make the most of that transition from the manufacturing to service sector, that's, I think, something we need to be mindful about. Related to that, it's well known that the country struggles with productivity. It's an enduring challenge, and it's flatlined since 2010. But this region lags behind. And innovation, we hope, will be a way of addressing that.

Pam:

One of the things that we've been doing is the Innovation Alliance says we have a virtual innovation team of people that are embedded in sector facing business support organizations. And this has allowed us to look at innovation across multiple different sectors.

And it's not the same everywhere. And I think that's a really important point to understand if we are going to serve all those growing sectors. So I think the listening to what the needs are of different parts of the socio economic landscape are really critical in this.

James:

Just looking at, you know, the UK in the broadest sense has had a really torrid time in the last couple of years in terms of skills development.

I think we are behind countries like the Dominican Republic and Bolivia, you know, countries that we perhaps wouldn't expect to be behind in this space. And what that looks like in this region is you know, 15 percent of West Midlands residents lack any foundational digital skills compared to a national average of 8%.

And when we say foundational digital skills, this is things like being able to send an email. That is an incredibly exclusionary position to be in. When you look at the opportunity for employment in this region, the statistics bear out. We have a massive gap here in this region compared with the national averages that need to be addressed before we can really start to expect any major change in productivity and GVA and this kind of thing, you know.

Monder:

The Productivity Institute highlighted very recently three reasons why we as a country have lagged behind. One is chronic underinvestment, one is the application of skills and the third is institutional fragmentation. So we've got a tech sector that's seemingly booming.

If we're talking about inclusion. We need our young people equipped to take advantage of that. James has highlighted that they're not. So what is a good news story runs the risk of unintentionally being exclusionary because we simply haven't equipped our workforce with the necessary skills to take advantage of those opportunities.

Catherine:

So we've got a really interesting story emerging in terms of how do we encourage more people to be entrepreneurs and innovators in the first place? How do we move some of those barriers you talked about Mondo, whether it's health or skills? How do we encourage young people to be thinking about becoming entrepreneurs and pursuing ideas?

It's about working with our key sectors in the region and understanding what skills and Opportunities and facilities that they need, but then it's also critically that diffusion part and making sure that communities are benefiting and there's that diffusion of skills and knowledge across sectors.

Pam:

Actually, we're really good at encouraging people to become entrepreneurs, and early stage businesses is one of the places that we have another good, good news story. I actually think a bigger challenge is existing businesses, particularly manufacturing, which, as Amanda says, is still one of our main sectors.

And the slowness to take up new technologies and new ideas, and that would include digital technologies, but it would also include sustainability, which obviously is another big driver at the moment. We're also at a place where there's constant change, as there is everywhere else.

So inevitably, this, this makes for a, a very complex, dynamic process. System. And my personal view is that we shouldn't try to overmanage this. That diversity better equips us to respond to those challenges and be fleet of foot.

We should be encouraging and embracing that diversity. And for those of us who are trying to support. The ecosystem that can be really challenging at times, and we kind of wish it would be a lot easier, but it's not. So let's stop trying to make it easier, but try to understand it better.

James:

For me, the way in which we have to embrace that complexity is by putting in place as many sort of inter organizational networks as we can, there are organizations that exist, you know, like Pam's organization who have cropped up

in the last kind of 3/4 years and have very rapidly changed the debate and the discourse around Innovation in this region, and it's made us more fleet of foot.

We just need to keep riding that momentum and pushing that forward. And, you know, that will do two things, right? Firstly, investors look at the West Midlands. They look at Birmingham at the moment externally, and it's been quite difficult for us as a region to be able to really articulate why invest. Here, you know, what are we good at?

What are we doing? And I think we always kind of go down the route of we're great at advanced manufacturing and hey We're really good at med tech and this kind of thing But there are other competitors who are better. So it doesn't give us that distinction and then when you kind of overlay that with things like the Skills, challenges, et cetera.

Then that makes it, you know, is this a good prospect for an investor? Well, actually diversity of opportunity to invest is a really great thing to be able to offer to people who are interested in helping us in Birmingham to grow this. And the second thing is that with such a diverse population, The consumer base for an organization is massive.

We are this huge Petri dish of nationalities and cultures. And that has proven really great in things like medical research, but I think it could be great from any perspective of sort of consumer sort of take up of a business, you know? So I think from that perspective, we have a huge amount of potential here to offer to anybody who's interested in working with Birmingham and the Westmids.

Catherine:

There's lots in there about celebrating the diversity of the region and actually tapping more into that, which is what we're trying to do through the work around inclusive innovation. So, Mondo, what is the size of the prize here if we get this right?

Monder:

We've done some intensive research. We produced a report called Time to Change, Advancing a New Blueprint for Black and Ethnic Minority Businesses to identify the size of the prize.

There are 250, 000 businesses owned by black and ethnic minority entrepreneurs. In the UK, they contribute some 25 billion. What we estimated is that if we focused on the right issues, as Pam said, we could quadruple that contribution to 100 billion. And for this region, that is 10 billion. And ethnic minorities have always been entrepreneurial, they're twice as likely to start a business than their white counterparts.

That's been the case for decades. The key challenge is what happens after the start of business. The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, which is the most rigorous entrepreneurship survey in the world, they have a cutoff between starting and 42 months. And after 42 months, if you're white, you're twice as likely to be running a survival growth business.

What happens at that stage? That is when we need to think about whether they have the right technology, whether it's intensive enough. Too often, business support is transactional when it should be relational. So in terms of size of the price, that's a very, very clear example that if we got the policy objective right, which should be growth.

If we've got the interventions right, which is developing bespoke, tailored support, then there could be a real financial payoff.

Pam:

One of the things that we run as part of the Innovation Alliance is a whole series of network activity. So we have a zero carbon working group, we have a health working group, and those have always been very open.

In other words, we've never excluded anybody. And I think the way we need to move is towards making them more proactively open and inclusive and to get to the communities where we maybe aren't reaching at the moment. So one real life example is Venture Fest, which is a large annual event that we run.

We always do an evaluation afterwards. And the last couple of years, we've looked at the evaluation and realized that really, People attending are largely coming from central Birmingham because we always hold them in central Birmingham. We're not reaching other parts of the region. So we've decided this year that we are going to investigate the possibility of doing some smaller local events that are happening all over the region and are focused on topics that are of interest to those communities.

So it's coming back to that point I made about listening to what the needs of that local community of those people are, where they want to have the conversations.

James:

I'd like to put my other hat on for a second and talk about how strong our higher education sector is here in the region. And I think there's a lot of universities here in the West Midlands, all of them doing fantastic work.

And I think it's important to point out that Braindrain is pretty mild here in this region amongst graduates. The University of Birmingham is a good example of a net importer of talent. I think something like a quarter of our graduates are from the West Midlands, but 48 percent of our graduates choose to stay in the region.

So we're doing something well when people come to visit us here and do their degree. But I think the thing that a lot of people don't realize, um, about universities, you know, our team alone, we raise sort of over 30 million pounds of investment per year from industry into research endeavors, and that is across a broad spectrum of work.

And then, On top of that, we recognize the importance that we pose to this region economically as a civic anchor, and so that has enabled us to invest in things like Birmingham Digital Futures, which is the other hat that I'm wearing today. And BDF was founded by the University of Birmingham with PWC and a charity called Tech She Can.

We all kind of came together with a common goal, which was we want to do something for this region. Skills is the thing, which is, you know, perhaps posing the biggest risk and the biggest threat as far as we can see. And so we are a neutral convener in this space as a university, and we give the opportunity to businesses to come and work with us and work with each other.

And to be able to actually demonstrate this kind of really strong consortia of like minded organizations that want to. You know, nudge the policy dial and set the strategy for the region.

Monder:

The challenge here is that universities and other sort of large anchor institutions need to sort of face those, how well connected are they with diverse communities?

I'm not sure that how well they're connected to the communities that reside in this city. And I think that's evidenced by the skills gap. That's also highlighted by the sort of business profile of different communities. So there's still a disproportionate number of minority communities in low pay sectors like catering, retailing, etc.

So you have this situation where a very, very sophisticated innovation ecosystem is developing and higher education is increasingly becoming, um, quite rightly very prominent in this space. The universities are collaborating on, um, venture capital and investment, MindForge, for example. I'm asking the question about diverse communities.

How well embedded are they in these amazing developments? And I think that's where the challenge is if we're really serious about inclusive innovation.

James:

The big perception shift for me was when we were sort of consulting around how we work with, you know, broad, diverse communities, and we would often refer to them as hard to reach communities, right?

And somebody who was in representing one of those so called hard to reach communities that kind of stopped me and said, Yeah, it's the other way around. You're the ones who are hard to reach for us, right? Because you, you know, You have put up this this wall is our perception of it, and you know, it wasn't just levied at the University of Birmingham.

I think they were referring to all universities and all like large organizations that work in the region. They think that they are cut off from those opportunities of working there. And so we had to completely change our entire mindset around the way that we do that. And I'll be honest, it's really, really hard.

Pam:

And I think we all need to look at ourselves in the mirror, be very honest about this and say, how well have we done up to now and how can we do better? So one of the things that we're doing with the Connected Places Catapult as part of the Diatomic project is to create an inclusive innovation network.

So I think we've agreed now, rather than creating a whole new network, we're going to work together and make our networks, the existing Innovation Alliance networks, more inclusive.

Catherine:

There's a key point here around partnership working, and I think that's coming out in all of your points around, actually this isn't just about one organisation leading the charge in this space, the public sector has a role, whether that be kind of policy making, the private sector's got a role, the voluntary sector's got a role, how do we take the positive learnings from that, and further and embed it in the work that we're doing. But also how do we measure success in this space?

Monder:

What I've noticed over the last five years in particular, is that we've got leaders of lots of influential organizations. We've got one here, we've got the chamber, the mayor, who get it. So if there's this openness, willingness to engage and to

work out between us, measures of success that are meaningful to us, then that's a huge task.

For example, let's say the ethnic minority business population is, I think it's about 16 percent in the West Midlands. So you might say the measure of success then is there needs to be 16 percent participation in business support. And for me, that's really quite superficial. That's not successful. For me, it's well, what kind of businesses?

Where's the value being added? And you develop those metrics together, meaningful metrics for this city and for this region. So I would say, I would put a lot of emphasis. When we're talking about inclusive innovation, but by thinking more holistically about what our policy objectives are, you know, what does it mean for this region?

What does it mean for this institution? I think that is the start to develop much more meaningful measures of success. But I would say that we've, we've got lots to build on.

Pam:

One of the things that we're looking at at the moment is having an ESG framework for innovators, which allows us to almost, uh, allow any organization in the innovation ecosystem, so whether that's a small business, or a large business, or a sport organization, a university, whoever it is, to baseline, draw up a set of measures and then monitor their own performance against ESG criteria.

So, we're trying to develop a way that individual organisations within that ecosystem can measure themselves, because everybody's going to have to be part of this. Which brings me to another point that will drive all of this, which is about investment. Because investors increasingly are interested in, in ESG.

So there's a good moral reason to do all this. We've talked a lot about the good economic reason to do all of this in terms of creating new businesses and developing existing businesses. But importantly, if we're going to get investment into this region, we're going to have to start doing this. So there's a kind of business imperative to do this and to improve it systematically.

James:

Birmingham long had a sort of branding issue and the West Midlands for that matter as well. So I think we've seen the balance beginning to tip a little bit in the last few years and things like the Commonwealth Games and what that did for the region in terms of what people thought about it.

But also the pride that people said they had to be a Brummie again, or, you know, from, from the West Midlands, I think is a really great thing. And so. There needs to be some kind of campaign here about how do we want to talk about these things? How do we want to market ourselves as a, as a city and as a region? And what's the central thread to all of this? Because we're all sat around this table as people who live and work in this city.

We know the tech sector is great here. But I think for people who aren't from this region, do they know that, right? I imagine that it's not quite as acutely known outside of Birmingham as it is in. So. That's where I think we need to be better is about shouting about where are the areas of success? Where are the opportunities and all this kind of thing? And having, you know, a central sort of brand for Birmingham is going to be really important to achieve that.

Catherine:

So. With that in mind, how do we harness that energy and think about increased devolution for the region?

Monder:

One of the most welcome trends is this commitment to devolution. I think we've got an election coming up later in the year. I think both candidates are very firmly committed, and I think the trend is only going to be accentuated.

That's a huge plus. And to your point, I think That sort of political development I think can fast track some of the initiatives we want to see because if someone at that level does get it, does prioritize it, their scope for action is going to be enhanced because they've got they've got great powers.

We have to be very agile, we have to be fleet of foot, and in terms of this agenda, I don't think we should be sort of afraid of having a policy learning culture where we pilot initiatives, and fail quickly if they don't work. But then we will have accumulated that learning. I would like to see that type of policy learning culture embedded where we sort of are quite entrepreneurial in terms of our policy, because that's the kind of population we need to be responsive to, which is fast moving, dynamic, and our policy arrangements need to reflect that.

Learning, piloting, learning, piloting. And I think if we have that culture, we are, by definition, becoming inclusive and we're also becoming innovative.

Pam:

I definitely like the policy learning, policy learning, um, environment that you're talking about. And that's critical for innovation.

It's critical for the complexity of the innovation ecosystem that we've already talked about. I think we have to learn how to scale things then as well. So there is a problem with initiative itis. We'll try that. We'll try that. And we're always trying new things and people really not knowing where they are because we're always trying something new.

So once we've. tried and tested and something's worked. We then have to kind of go for it and properly scale it. Otherwise we're making the ecosystem more complex than it needs to be because they just learn about a new program and it's finished. So as well as being fleet of foot and dynamic, we need to have some consistency.

James:

I think we need to be pragmatic as well about recognizing that, that I think absolutely leadership in the city, the energy that we have from leadership. If we could bottle Andy Street's energy, we could probably solve the global energy crisis, right?

But so there is a, there is a lot of energy at the top level for sort of filtering and diffusing. This commitment to innovation downwards, but it's it's tough times out there for people at the moment. You know, we're going through a cost of living crisis. We're all feeling the impact of austerity policy over the last, you know, 14 years and so on.

And I think inclusive innovation means that we can't just rely on that top down energy. Because it will, it will peter out before it reaches the people who are most in need of the social mobility that innovation is supposed to offer.

Catherine:

A hundred percent. And, you know, there's lots of. Physical development in the city at the moment.

We're seeing partnerships between Aston University and Bruntwood. We're seeing the HS2 development. We're seeing some of the tallest buildings we've ever seen, and also we're seeing developments from a policy perspective around inclusive innovation around the Innovation Accelerator. So I think my first question is how do we keep people included in that fast growing development of the city and make sure that people understand and know it's for them, but then also five years from now.

How might we tell this story through someone's eyes who is excluded at the moment from our innovation ecosystem?

Monder:

I think James mentioned just now the importance of ensuring that the communities are part of this discourse. Absolutely. And I'm not convinced that they are, you know, I spoke earlier about Productivity Institute identified three core factors for the productivity lag and chronic underinvestment.

one of them. And I don't think it's no coincidence that since 2010, it's taken a big hit. And we've also talked about this sort of short term nature of policy and investment. Pam, you mentioned it. That has a particular impact on institutions and policy, but it has a really deleterious impact on communities because Where's the investment in communities?

Now there's this awakening to the importance of skills and skills development, right? But that's going to take a long time. to percolate through. So to answer your question directly, one sort of measure of success would be that skills gap isn't there, and there's that opportunity there. That investment has to be in communities.

That has to be in skills. That has to be in sort of empowering and valuing and bringing in the ideas. of communities that have traditionally been excluded. So, for example, the community hub idea that Pam mentioned. I mean, I think that stems from a realization that ideas can come from anywhere.

Marginalized communities have brilliant ideas. So the answer for me would be the amount of investment that goes into those communities as much as it is the investment in tech.

Pam:

The important thing is that we're on a trajectory, to use an overused cliché, we're on a journey. We're kind of committed to working together on this.

We're going into this with our eyes and ears wide open, where we want to understand what we've done well in the past and be honest about what we've not done well in the past and be open to new ideas, new suggestions. And I think this is one of the places where the collaboration with the Connected Places Catapult is really powerful because you have, you're talking to similar people to us across the whole country, whereas I don't necessarily speak to people like me across the whole country all the time.

So you can bring that national perspective and good practice to bear on it. So I don't know where we'll be in five years, but I kind of feel it'd be somewhere better.

James:

The realities of the infrastructure investment, if you speak to people who are currently, you know, feel they're more excluded, is that they look at things like HS2, they see all the money being poured into it, they hear the news about how great this is going to be for Birmingham, but they think it's not, it's never going to be for me though, is it?

And so are we getting the fundamentals right? You know, it's really great to be good at the big and flashy, But it's only good so far. You have to be able to do the really, really basic stuff right, you know, and I think that's where we are not particularly good in this country at investing in public infrastructure and keeping it running.

That will continue to be a challenge until we do see more investment in that space.

Catherine:

Brilliant. So I want to thank Pam, Monda and James for being on the Connected Places podcast. I am leaving this conversation. Inspired. I've learned a lot. I think there's some brilliant success stories around Birmingham and the West Midlands that The rest of the UK can learn from in terms of embedding inclusive innovation, and I can't wait to work with you more

CPC Sting

Ivor:

Well, that's all we have time for in this episode.

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Theme Music on this episode is by Phill Ward Music

This is Connected Places.

I'm Ivor Wells.

Thanks for listening.
