

Leicester Builds Back Better Stories – Episode 001

Rob Watson [00:00:01] You're listening to Leicester Builds Back Better Stories, conversations about how communities across Leicester are planning for change following the pandemic. Over six programmes we'll hear from people at the forefront of civic society in Leicester, and we'll find out how they are planning to do things differently in response to Leicester's extended lockdown. For further information about each of the topics covered in the programmes, and extended versions of the conversations, go to the Leicester Stories website: <https://leicesterstories.uk>.

Rob Watson [00:00:37] The Covid-19 pandemic, and Leicester's extended lockdown, has got many people thinking about what happens next and how we get ready for the challenges of the future. I'm Rob Watson, and I've been chatting with people in Leicester over the summer about what they think building back better means, and what we may need to do if we're to be ready to face the next set of dilemmas. Are slogans like 'building back better', 'levelling up' and 'renew normal' just slogans; or do they represent a practical set of changes that will positively affect the way that we live, work, learn and go about our lives? Over the course of six programmes, we'll hear from people who are working to make sure we are ready to cope with the next set of challenges we're likely to face as a community. In this first episode, we'll hear from Kieran Breen, the CEO of Leicestershire Cares, and Julian Harrison, who promotes mental wellbeing awareness. Let's start off, though, with some views out on the streets, with Leicester Stories community reporter Ryan Clayton, who's been asking people what they feel about Leicester after the lockdown?

Ryan Clayton [00:01:44] Have you got the moment to answer some questions? Just walking around...

Voice [00:01:48] This just by voice, isn't it?

Ryan Clayton [00:01:49] Yeah, that's it. You know, we are just walking around asking people about Leicester today. How do you feel about the city?

Voice [00:01:55] Well, I've been living here all my life. I've lived away from Leicester as well. I don't think... I've seen a lot of changes over the years, decades, really. Um, I like it. I like it in the simplest way, really, you know. I know it's a city, but it's got a slight town mentality to it. It's not a full metropolitan, metropolitan city if you like. The diversity is there. I've got a family and friends in here. So it all kind of agrees with me. And being in the centre of England, you know, we're in the proximity where you can go south and north. So, for that reason, it's great, I reckon, yeah.

Ryan Clayton [00:02:31] I don't suppose you've got a moment to answer some questions?

Voice [00:02:34] Oh, well, I've lived in Leicester all my life. Leicester born and bred. I love it.

Ryan Clayton [00:02:39] Is there anything about the city that you feel makes it unique and stand out amongst other cities in England?

Voice [00:02:44] There's a lot of different cultures that live in harmony in the city, and people accept one another for what they are and who they are. I like the parks. I love the museums and we've got history.

Ryan Clayton [00:03:01] Is there anything about the city? I mean, you say you lived here all your life, is there any way you can go, anything you can do that makes it feel like home to you? It makes you feel like you belong.

Voice [00:03:10] When I go round the town and in the old Leicester market, it's not changed. And Town Hall Square, Bradgate Park in Leicestershire. I like it around there. And we've got some lovely parks. So much history with Richard III, when we found him. And of course, we got Leicester City, the best football team ever.

Voice [00:03:38] Sorry I didn't give you the Big Issue. I would be getting complaints if don't give the Big Issue over. Well, I love Leicester City. I'm not from Leicester City, and I moved here about two years ago, and I really like it. Obviously, we've been through all the lockdowns, but I do think Leicester gets an unfair press, because I feel like we've had it harder than anyone else. I when, say, Manchester started to get a hard time, they kicked off and suddenly they were left alone. I also think its our own undoing because we're good at testing, so obviously it's going to show up. But, I think now that we've sort of come through it all, it's taken a while for it to pick back up to get to where we were. I think it's a long road to get to where we originally were.

Ryan Clayton [00:04:24] I'm just walking around asking people about Leicester today.

Voice [00:04:29] Well we're local.

Ryan Clayton [00:04:29] Yeah, fantastic. I was just wondering how you felt about the city.

Voice [00:04:35] At the moment, pretty good, I suppose? Yeah, I like it.

Ryan Clayton [00:04:40] Is there anything about the city that you feel like makes it unique about, you know, as opposed to other cities in England?

Voice [00:04:47] Well we're diverse. We're diverse, aren't we?

Voice [00:04:51] We definitely are, yeah. I think it's quit, it is good for everybody who lives here. You don't have to worry about anything, which is pretty good, actually. What else can I say.

Voice [00:05:10] Kids have gone back to school by the way.

Kieran Breen [00:05:12] I'm Kieran Breen, I'm the CEO of Leicestershire Cares, and we are a local charity who tries to connect community, business and local authority so that nobody is left behind, and in the average year we work with about five or six thousand young people in schools, about four or five hundred isolated and vulnerable young people, and we support about sixty, to eighty community groups.

Kieran Breen [00:05:12] I think all of us at the beginning of the pandemic, I think a lot of people were scared, and we were... We'd gone to supermarkets, they didn't have toilet rolls, they didn't have spaghetti, but all of a sudden there was this outpouring of community action. And I think what happened was, we saw the steam ship of, if you want, local government, and government trying to work out what was happening, and the community got stuck in and started delivering and helping. But also, what became really obvious, fairly quickly, was the huge inequalities in society, and I think what happened was, it amplified, really, and exaggerated all that we knew that was wrong with our society, but also all that was good with it. And that is, there are huge inequalities, there are loads of people doing really vital jobs, who are getting poorly paid. And at the same time, we also saw there

are lots of really creative people who want to give back, and if you just make-way and give them a little bit of support, they are very happy to do that. And I think a lot of us felt at the time, this could be a critical juncture, a tipping-point, where perhaps we now say 'never again.' And in fact, of course, when Boris came out after having Covid-19 he did say, you know, we need to be a more compassionate and more resilient society. We must learn from this, etcetera, etcetera. I guess as we move on to the levelling-up agenda, the big question is, how are we going to do that? Is that commitment still there?

Kieran Breen [00:05:12] I think Build Back Better came out of a growing movement, certainly there were a lot of organisations saying that the way that we currently run our country, run our businesses, we look after our communities, is not working. And I think you could see Build Back Better was trying to build on what you might call a Green New Deal, concerns about our political system, concerns about inequality, concerns about in-work poverty, concerns about child poverty. You know, later it, it happened, but concerns about racism which grew into Black Liver Matter. So, I would say to you, and actually, if you put it into a historical context, you could probably say, since the 1970s with the rise of Globalisation, what has happened is, we have seen lots of communities becoming very poor. We have in fact seen, if you want, jobs offshored from, like you know, the kind of North of England, Midlands of England. Those Pounds leaving the country. They have come back to the South of England and made people wealthy. So, we've had growing inequality between the Southeast, London and you know, the Midlands and the North. But in addition to that, even in a small city like Leicester there are areas of relative, you know, where I live in Knighton people are fairly well off... houses. You go to St Mathews, New Parks, Belgrave, and people are really struggling. And you know, your life expectancy can drop by four to seven years in a ten-minute cycle across the city. And I think all of that came together. Okay, it's a slogan, Build Back Better, and we need to unpick that, but I think Covid-19 showed with absolute clarity that the way we are running our country isn't working, and people are being let down badly.

Kieran Breen [00:05:12] Well I think its erm, partly it depends on who you talk to. What I would say to you is, I think there is a growing agreement about the challenges. So, I think eighty or ninety percent of local politicians would agree that there is too much inequality, that having in-work poverty... it doesn't make sense if people are going to work, and they are still poor. In our city, forty percent of children are living in poverty. That we know there is, I mean green issues have come onto the mainstream. You don't have to be a hippy dancing in the field at Glastonbury to be concerned about the environment. So, there's a whole range of issues that have come up. If you look at, I guess the Brexit vote as well raised questions about globalisation, about the economy. I guess how you take that forward, there are those who would say that the way forward is to have Universal Basic Income, to have guaranteed levels of services, etcetera. There are others who might even say the way forward is to unshackle, you know, the state more, you know. Some people might look at all this creative, creativity and say that's why, you know, we don't need state provision so much, we just need to just empower local communities to get on with it. And I think that is where the interesting discussion is going to go, because I fear we know what the issues are, but most of us, or a lot of people are still grappling for solutions that... We are using methods to solve problems in the Seventies, to try and tackle solutions in the Twenty-First Century, and that's where I think there is a gap.

Kieran Breen [00:05:12] I think you can say there are issues in Leicester that are really prominent, so for example if you look at the economy in Leicester, we are dominated by small and medium enterprises. I think there are one hundred and twenty-seven thousand jobs in Leicester, in sectors that are looked on as being vulnerable. Okay, we, Leicester is built on a low wage economy, which means that people are at risk, that also led to people having to go to work during the lockdown in, kind of, factories, shoulder-to-shoulder, which led to a boom in Covid-19 infections. You put alongside that, we are a very multicultural society, and I think one of the things that, perhaps, lockdown has

brought home more than other issues, is, and as a community radio person you will know this, is how much people perhaps don't listen to the mainstream media. And I think it became very obvious there are communities here, who are listening to their news on Covid-19 from a webcast in Pakistan, or Somalia, and getting, you know... They are not part of a debate, they are in their own bubble, if you want, listening to what they want to listen to. I mean, I should say, that's the same, you could go into white working class communities. I mean we were all in a bubble. I read The Guardian, is that my bubble? But what we found out in Leicester was, superficially we are a united community, but clearly people are getting information from diverse sources, and we were unable to get information that would reach communities. And I guess one of the things that I've learnt from it, is not so much about nobody left behind, but it's about people not having a voice. What you realise is that certain voices have been left out, aren't at the table, aren't present. We haven't been communicating with them, and when we get a crisis like Covid-19, and it's important that we communicate and that we get information across to people, we haven't been doing that. And hence I think that's been part of the problems in Leicester.

Kieran Breen [00:05:12] I think some of the assumptions are in Leicester... Leicester is often held up as a picture-postcard city of multicultural success. And to give Leicester credit there is a fair amount of communities coming together, people working side-by-side, but I also think if you look at our politics, you know. On a first-past-the-post system we have a rock-solid local Labour government, local labour council. It gets elected every year, and to give them credit, they are all well intentioned, they are doing a good job, but I think, perhaps, people have taken their eye off their ball. There's loads of people not voting, not getting involved, you know. You can go into houses and people have got their satellite TV. They are tuned into other medias. They are not connected. I mean one of the things that came up during the lockdown was the whole stuff about modern slavery. We live in a city, depending on who you talk to, where there are two thousand to ten thousand modern slaves. If those figures are true? Let's even say it's one thousand, that's a horrific figure. And yet, it's kind of gone under the radar. I mean every so often there is a scandal, and it blows up, but why is that? How can that happen? Clearly there are sections of Leicester society living in an alternative world, by alternative rules, where, if you want, where the fabric of our mainstream society isn't reaching them, they are outside it. And they really are being left behind and forgotten. And I think that's brought it home, and we need to really become much more aware of that.

Kieran Breen [00:05:12] I think Build Back Better is built on the premise that our society, our communities, our economies, our politics, isn't good enough. Therefore it suggests that we want change. So, I mean, I think that build into the statement. And my, and seeing that the Conservatives use the phrase, and you know, those on the left use the phrase, there seems to be consensus that where we are isn't good enough for a whole range of reasons. As for what change are we talking about, I think that's where, I mean, I guess this is where politics comes in. I think there is agreement around what the challenges are and, you know, inequality, looking at our economy, looking at political apathy, people being left out, looking at the issues of race and racism. Although if you take, for example, issues of race and racism there are, you know, there has been a report come out while we are here, saying that England is not a racist society, and lots of people can learn from us. And people are bitterly divided on that, you know. So, for example, you know, do we live in a society that is institutionally and systemically racist? And some people would say yes we are, and quote chapter and verse. And other people would say, you know, this is kind of Guardian reader woke talk that is trying to separate the nation and polarise it. And the reality is, there is no great big objective, you know, Wikipedia in the sky we can all go and check what is really happening. What I think we can say is, there are vested interests, and often... Where you sit in the car effects your view of the road. That's why, I guess, my theory of change, my model of change is based on business, community and local governments working together, accepting that none of us have the right answer, trying to forget our egos, silos and logos. And that's actually very hard, and moving forward by listening and learning. I would

also add, that I think outside people who are actively politically engaged, or actively involved in these issues, I think the vast majority of people, there is a sort of consensus that, most people say 'look, we want decent education, we want an economy that provides, you know, secure jobs with dignity, we want decent health, both physical and mental, and we want to live in a safe environment, both in terms of, I'm not going to get my head kicked in or my house robbed, and also I don't want to be breathing in toxic fumes. So around that, and a lot of people will say, and we think, it's really good if you set a business up and make loads of money, but we think you should pay your fair amount of taxes to help those who haven't. There's a kind of consensus around that. I think what happens is that as you start to get to people who are often the torch bearers, they have much more detailed and fine-tuned positions, and they, like, if you go on Twitter, these can kick hell out of one another. And I think we forget there is a fair degree of consensus, but our system doesn't really allow that consensus of people to emerge. And that's why I'm a strong believer in deliberative democracy, and having citizen's juries, and letting... I believe in the wisdom of our people, and bringing them together, and I think most people are much more consensual and willing to reach a compromise. And if you, say, have people belong to political parties or pressure groups who often just start attacking one another.

Kieran Breen [00:05:12] I would say, the only thing at a personal level, I think there are the issues that we need to tackle, child poverty is one, I think child poverty just feeds into everything else, you know. Poor children end up doing badly at school, children doing badly at school have more of a tendency to break the law, you know. But in addition to that, I really have a lot of faith in the ability of every-day people to come up with common sense solutions, and I would love to see deliberative democracy growing across our city and county, and by that, that's a rather fancy terms for saying everyday people, getting involved, being asked, being involved, encouraged and supported to make decisions about their community. And where we have money, rather than people in small rooms deciding that we are going to make this a better city by building a hotel or a bridge, or whatever, we actually say to people, how could we make your community better, how do you want this money spent? And I think people quite often have got the answers to those questions.

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Voice [00:17:55] Oh, yeah, I like Leicester. I grew up here, most of my life. I think it's a nice city. It's very like, it's small, but, you know, you can walk around the city centre.

Voice [00:18:07] Yeah, I love it. Everything is there really. A lot of people are like, yeah, they want to go to a bigger city, but I asked what is, what is not in Leicester and what they wanted? It is the first city I came to really because I came to study, but I find everything in here. I think it's cheap and it's nice. I like it.

Voice [00:18:27] Uniqueness wise? I think it's probably it's just the multicultural-ness of it. It feels more like I say, harmonious than, than other cities, because it's like a blend of people of different nationalities and everyone gets on. So that's probably very unique about it. And, uh, yeah, also back to the football club. I think that makes it unique because of the owners are some of the nicest owners, and everyone else seems jealous of the owners of Leicester City, because they're part of the team. So I guess the uniqueness, that's, that's probably about it.

Voice [00:18:57] Well, I've lived here for thirty-five years, unfortunately. I've been trying to get out of here for years, but I'm stuck here permanently. Looks like I want to die here.

Ryan Clayton [00:19:05] Not a positive impression then?

Voice [00:19:09] No, no. It's changed. This wasn't the way it was. I first came to Leicester in 1987, and this is not the same Leicester, right. It's culturally diverse. It's ethnically uncleaned, right, and it is one of the richest, ethnically diverse cities I've ever lived in. So I love it.

Julian Harrison [00:19:32] Yeah, I'm Julian Harrison, and I guess I am a self-employed equality and diversity consultant, but that's only half, really of what I spend my time doing. The other half is, is all related to mental health awareness and promotion of, of conversations, I guess, about mental health. So I guess it all comes from that sort of lived experience, experts by experience, whatever organisations call you different things, don't they? So, but it's all about just trying to get authentic voices of mental illness and mental health as part of the solutions to some of the problems and the challenges that people with mental illness go through all the time, really. So, yeah, I guess that's, that's part of the job. I run various groups myself. I do lots of social media stuff. I have a Facebook page that focuses on Mind Apples, which has things every day, even if it's just photograph.

Julian Harrison [00:20:40] Care as a verb, rather than care as an activity. Care as an approach rather than as a system. Care as a vision and aim, rather than care as a policy or active strategy. And I've lost count, mate, over the years of the number of care initiatives I've actually been to that bring certain people together. We talk a good game, we make our points known, it gets written up. It's evidence that an organisation is doing certain things. But then when you actually look down the line, and think, well, what happened to that initiative? You know, I was involved with ten, fifteen, twenty years ago. I didn't hear any more. Did, did it work? And then you see that that it worked for a short while, it involved certain more people. But then people either got disillusioned, or they weren't encouraged to come along and be with it and it folds. So care has got to be a personal example. But care has got to be active, and it's got to be, it's got to be the little things. So, you know, when you see things like food banks, stuff like that, you know, that's active care. When you see, you know, mental health groups going along and people being able to talk and helping encouraging individuals within those groups, that's active as well. Whether we call it care or whether we call it anything else, it I don't think it matters really, but I just think it's got to be active, because otherwise we lose sight, and we get back into those bad ways of working that said all the right things but didn't actually do them. If that makes some sort of sense.

Julian Harrison [00:22:24] Your conscious sometimes that, that people, if you ask that question, lots of people will say well I care for me, because if I don't care for me, no one else will care for me. I suspect there's a lot of... Some of those people are quite isolated because of their mental illness or other things, you know. But I think, I think, yeah. If you ask people fundamentally, who do you care for and asked them to make that distinction, I think you would get quite a stark conversation. And I think it's, it's a good analogy to use. I like to think that, you know, I care for more people than I probably realise sometimes. Sometimes there's an active care and sometimes, actually, people say that I'm involved in care. And I just think, well, I'm not doing anything, I've just, just put something on Facebook saying how I'm feeling today because of my depression, or how my OCD is impacting. And for me, it is about the public taking up the mantle and running with it and forcing change, I think. I think it's, it's, but people still think it's something external out there, that is someone else is responsible. Despite all the little initiatives that we get involved with, recycling and putting out dustbins in, you know, all those sorts of stuff, perhaps not buying certain things. All the stuff that we do, you know, we do to a certain extent. And my... Environmental change is something that that I was quite blasé about ten, ten years ago. But then I realised, my daughter lives in Sri Lanka, and she, she runs a surfing school, and a little bed and breakfast thing that goes with it. And every now and again, the school and all its, they go down to the Sri Lankan beaches and they clean up. And initially I thought great,

well done. But when I saw what they were cleaning up and how much they were cleaning up, just from local beaches, and they do this fairly regularly. So it's obviously accumulated stuff, made me realise, blimey, you know, this is, this is ridiculous. You know, we've got to do something about this problem. But I think mental health is in that metaphor, is in that metaphor, is in that, that stage as well. You know, if we don't do something about it now, when are we going to do something about it? You know, we've had a pandemic that has elevated mental health issues and mental health concerns to unprecedented levels. We see all the evidence... We've been in that pandemic of mental health for decades. We have for as long as I can remember there's been a mental health crisis. But this, this pandemic has focussed attention on it. The Build Back Better stuff has focussed attention on it. The Olympics has focussed attention on it. So professional sport is obviously doing various things, and we've got people, you know, saying various things. But, but I think, you know, the time is right now, if we truly want the society, not just for us, but for generations, that we need to take a lead from things like environmental issues, that if we don't take the lead, where are we going to be? We're not going to have a society that we want to into the future. So, so, yeah, I'm all for pressure from from the roots up with the, with the context that if you get, if you, if you actually use the systems in the way that they could be used, rather than the way they are used, we will have that pressure. And what I mean by that is, you know, every policy that I've ever been involved with from equality and diversity perspective, has talked about things like co-production and involving local people in this work, and all the rest of it, because people are the solutions to the problems. So, so it's about actually saying, well, you've told us that you want local people involved in these initiatives. We're now encouraging local people to be involved in these initiatives. How do we make sure that that involvement actually has an input, and an output, has an outcome, has a force, has a power behind it? And, and is not just, well, we've got some people around the table, they're going to say some things from a community perspective. People are going to nod their heads and go away, which is the traditional way we've done it. So, yeah, I just think the systems are there, and it's a bit like playing, playing these organisations at their own game. It's like you've said that you want people involvement - here of people. This is the voice. Leicester stories, you know, this is fantastic. You know, get people's perspectives onto the agenda of people and get people actively, not just saying things in places like cafes, but actually saying things in council chambers, political constituent meeting points, at organisational public meetings, conferences. It impacts on me, I want you to, I want to hear you to hear my voice, an authentic voice, and I want you to do something about it. That's the sort of thing that I want. And it's, you know, it's got to happen. Otherwise, we're, we're not going to build back better.

Rob Watson [00:27:18] You've been listening to Leicester Builds Back Better Stories, conversations about how communities across Leicester are planning for change following the pandemic. For further information about each of the topics covered in this programme and to hear extended versions of these conversations, visit the Leicester Stories website. <https://leicesterstories.uk>. Leicester stories is supported by the Audio Content Fund, and was developed with assistance from De Montfort University, the Documentary Media Centre and the Zynthia Trust. Thanks to Ryan Clayton for additional content production. This is a Decentered Media production by Rob Watson.