



Interview: Regeneration in Lincoln: An interview with Tom Blount and Laura Dunne from Lincolnshire Co-operative Society

Mike Wistow

How to cite this article:

Wistow, M. (2023). Regeneration in Lincoln: An interview with Tom Blount and Laura Dunne from Lincolnshire Co-operative Society [Interview]. *Journal of Co-operative Studies*, 56(2), 44-47. <https://doi.org/10.61869/KBSU6276>

Regeneration in Lincoln: An Interview with Tom Blount and Laura Dunne from Lincolnshire Co-operative Society

Mike Wistow

The UKSCS conference 2023 was supported by Lincolnshire Co-operative Society and included guided tours of the Lincoln Science and Innovation Park, and The Cornhill Quarter, developments led by Lincolnshire Co-op in partnership with key organisations across the city of Lincoln, UK. Mike Wistow interviewed Tom Blount and Laura Dunne to find out more about these developments, the Society's unique approach to regeneration, and their reflections on the advantages of being in co-operation for over 160 years. Tom Blount is the Director of Lincoln Science and Innovation Park. Laura Dunne is Head of Marketing and Membership for Lincolnshire Co-op. Much of the conversational style of the interview has been deliberately captured in this article to give a sense of the excitement and passion that Laura and Tom have for their work, the Society, and Lincoln.

One of the charitable objects of the UK Society for Co-operative Studies (UKSCS) is to promote the exchange of information and experience on co-operative studies and research. Over the past three years, we have interviewed a number of individuals from the co-operative movement whether they be involved in research, writing books or, more broadly, in national developments. These *Co-operative Conversations* have proved to be not only interesting to the participants and those attending, but also to the *Conversation's* interviewees. UKSCS is particularly keen to share positive developments and lessons learned that others might find useful. We felt there was such positive feedback from the walks round Lincoln at the UKSCS Conference in February 2023, that we wanted to share it more widely. Tom and Laura, today's conversationalists, have also agreed that the themes from the *Conversation* can be written up for the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* for a wider audience.

I'm delighted to have Tom & Laura here for a few reasons. One, The Cornhill Quarter impact assessment of May 2023 and the quote "increasingly it's been seen among some local and national sources as an exemplar of regeneration" — a very positive report. Two, my long personal connection to Lincoln and the fact that it is unrecognisable now to when I left in 1998. I came back in 2015 and the city has a strong identity now, particularly since the university opened. I asked the question if you look at what you're doing — economy, regeneration, culture — from engineering to high-tech and modern, can you give a summary of the Science Park and Cornhill Quarter Developments?

Tom Blount is Director of the Science and Innovation Park. He spoke about the importance of 'core values' and creating innovation environments:

I always talk about core values. It's not an accident that the wealthiest places have the richest innovation environments. There's a natural relationship between highly skilled and motivated people, and the ability to generate wealth, and this benefits the entire economy, not just those who are highly skilled. Science and technology has been viewed as an economic benefit lever for around 50 years now. The idea is that if you can concentrate a rich cluster of companies together, you'll get a magnifying effect from the cluster, which in turn creates wealth.

He continued by explaining the aspirations behind the Science and Innovation Park:

The University of Lincoln and Lincolnshire Co-op created the technology park to transform the traditional, slow-moving economy [in Lincolnshire] which was creating problems such as being a net exporter of young talent. In general, people tended to leave young and come back to Lincoln when they're old and this doesn't create a dynamic economy. The university wanted an opportunity for academics to work with industry and generate jobs for graduates. For the co-op, it was the idea that transformation is a local process of bringing people together. In other words, creating opportunities for 'water cooler moments' and having access to highly developed skills, specialist finance and so

on. Other partners have joined, such as the Lincolnshire NHS Trust. The Science Park has promoted creative thinking, attracted highly skilled people, created a flexible space that can be turned into different spaces, and an ethos that focuses on collaboration as a means to innovation. Over the last 10 years, £34m invested in the site, which has allowed for 13,000 square metres of space, and a significant number of graduate jobs. It has had a huge impact on the city and county. Lincoln is now a location where science and technology is at the forefront.

Laura Dunne is the Head of Marketing & Membership in Lincolnshire Co-op, having joined in 2011. The Cornhill Quarter project started in 2016 and here Laura reflects on the aspirations behind the development:

Lincoln wants to be the best small city. We've a great heritage and historical roots, but the Cornhill part of the city was quite neglected, with older buildings that people had attempted to redevelop at various times, but which got more dilapidated as time went on. Lincolnshire Co-op owned the vast majority of the buildings in the Cornhill area, which gave us an opportunity to look at it holistically in 2016.

We had a *place-making* agenda — what does the city offer and what does it need? How to make the best of the area for the residents, visitors and future residents? We worked with partners (co-operatively) this time, having learned that going alone in the previous regeneration attempts didn't work. So it was a collaborative combination of private sector, the City Council, Historic England, and developers, with the aim of making it the best it could be.

Quality was another thing. We needed to have a good mix of tenants to create variety and high quality building materials so that the area looked attractive. Because the investment happened after the retail investment boom, we were able to respond to the recent trend for smaller shops that are located in buildings with character. The tenant mix has been carefully thought about. It is a mixture of national and local, with a mix of food, retail, and entertainment. Another important feature is that rent was in some cases agreed on a turnover basis — we all have skin in the game — and this makes it very co-operative. These are the things that makes the development special.

The anchor tenant model doesn't work anymore. Lincoln has the transport hub (railway and bus station) in Cornhill, so that brings people to that area of the city and the ripple effect of the phased development has raised expectations of what can be done. It helps to attract investment in Lincoln and attract good people to work there. The mix of old and new is part of the attraction. And of course being a co-op means we could take a long term view rather than look at shorter returns.

I was struck by the fact that the developments are two very different spaces and yet they are both descriptions of the regeneration of 'whole city' spaces. The other thing that struck me was the complexity, both of the developments themselves, but also the complexity of working with partners. This is a notoriously difficult area to succeed in, but Laura and Tom both talked positively about it, so I asked them to tell me some more about their experiences of partnership working.

Tom began by saying that "regeneration can't happen in isolation". He reflected:

We've been fortunate in that we're working with the same sets of partners, which is a feature of Lincolnshire anyway. The lack of public transport in and out of the county means that the county is self-reliant, almost like an island economy. People know each other and trust each other. They can also see the links between building developments, transport, and attracting people and investment to the city. The Science Park is interesting across generations because people from every generation work there, from retirees coming in to coach young entrepreneurs, to mid-career people who decide to start their own business, and young graduates in their first jobs. The graduates historically left the city to go to university and did not return because there were no relevant job opportunities. Providing them with the experience of good work and a good social life is essential to retaining people in the city.

Laura added that "the master plan was to focus on what the city needs". She explained that the wish-list of regeneration projects was a long one:

It was a long list and a small number of partners were determined to plug away at it, to create a legacy. It's the commitment of a small group of partners that has really created the regeneration.

Listening to them, it occurred to me that lots of people try and fail, but Lincoln is succeeding. When I think about what Lincoln was like when I left, and what it's like now, the changes are obvious and visible. Lincolnshire Co-op has succeeded, I suggested. So I asked them to tell me some more about the what the co-op as a co-op brings to it? Does it help in terms of the complexity?

The importance of place was something that Laura highlighted:

We're a regional co-op, so it's all about Lincolnshire. We've been around 160 years so we have that longevity, trust, and credibility. Members know that we'll be true to our word in terms of finance and people. We have a lot of experience with property, being a big landlord and knowing lots of different industries in the county. So regional means that we're obsessed with Lincolnshire and we'll do everything to develop the communities, either directly or in a supporting role. We are happy to be the engine room behind the scenes. There is trust in the brand.

Tom shared similar reflections on trust and longevity:

There's a certain degree of luck as well. Events, assets etc. landed at the right time. There's only so far you can get with luck though. We have individuals who have been in post for a good amount of time in the different partnerships, who knew each other, trusted each other, put aside egos and worked together to create a roadmap that allowed us to be opportunistic as opportunities arose. The co-op's organisational role [in the regeneration] is unusual in that its ethos chimes well with the public sector ethos (doing good things in the right way) and that makes it easier to talk to the public sector. But then the co-op also has commercial expertise, which adds to the partnership and helps do things that the city council might struggle with. Finally, it is a long term investment. We can do 30-40 year business plans that wouldn't normally stack up in the usual 7-10 year property investment cycle. We understand long-term value. All those things are crucial to our success.

You mentioned elsewhere that Lincolnshire Co-op is "a catalysing body". What intrigues me is that 74% of your tenants are members of Lincolnshire Co-op. When tenants are working with the co-op, how does that effect governance arrangements? I asked Laura to tell me some more. She explained:

We're a regional co-op and because of our public footprint in Lincolnshire, with 200 outlets, plus tenants and existing relationships, there are not many areas in the county that don't have someone from the co-op there. We've been here for 160 years. Lincolnshire is not a particularly transient place, so lots of people know the co-op or have worked with or been in a community organisation that was supported by the co-op. We're prevalent everywhere so we need to have a consistent approach, a commonality of trust, so that people know what to expect and what it feels like. What is the difference between a co-op offering and another? Why is it special and better? We have an audience of 1 million people, so the benefit is that the more people use the co-op, it self-perpetuates. There's still room for improvement, but the bedrock is there.

It's trying to say "what do we know and how do we know it?" and not getting stuck in industry silos because we're talking to the same members who use the different co-op services. People's expectations change, so you have to be open to what they need, so it's about being close to members and listening to what they want. Being flexible for members, joining the dots and understanding what members want.

When I asked Tom to answer the same question about governance, he suggested that:

It creates challenges certainly. There are two main stakeholders in the Science Park — Lincolnshire Co-op and the University of Lincoln — and they are different organisations and cultures, which can create tensions. On the one hand, this encourages us to challenge ideas, but on the other, it makes things complicated in terms of explaining issues in terms that all stakeholders understand. The multi-occupancy Science Park needs the right mix of jobs, sites, businesses and if you get that right, stakeholders will buy into it.

As the conversation was drawing to a close, I asked what's next, whether in terms of long-term investment or new models. Laura explained the big picture:

We've got a purpose of bringing together ideas, energy, and resources to make life better in our communities. So together we are providing and supporting valued services for Lincolnshire, helping to grow the local economy, caring for our health and wellbeing, and looking after our local environment. Where is the next opportunity to build impact? What might create a ripple effect? Some of it might be organic and evolutionary, and others might be starting from scratch. Being in a co-op is not prescribed. We can do whatever we think will create value for Lincolnshire. We'll play our part for whatever helps the county.

Tom focused on long-term planning. He explained:

Back in 2020 we made the decision to double our site. So we've come to the end of the initial £10 million pound investment in that. Large business, supply chains, access to market — these are all issues we are focusing on. Cyber security and defence are one key area and the other opportunity is in health care. We've one diagnostics development (health) and another in security. This will give the park long term viability. We're also thinking about satellite sites around the county, so that we can help the wider the county rather than just the city. Putting tendrils out into the rest of the county.

Thank you both enormously.

The Interviewer and Author

Mike Wistow was elected as Chair of UKSCS in October 2022, having been a Trustee since 2019. He has a long history of involvement with the public and charitable sectors. He has previously been a Trustee in a Community Arts organisation, a College of Further Education and a charity working in Criminal Justice . He has been a senior manager in public sector bodies and is the founding Director of Aegir Consulting Limited which has worked with various organisations to develop and implement longer-term strategies. Mike organises the *Co-operative Conversations* series for UKSCS.

The Interviewees

Tom Blount is the Director of Lincoln Science and Innovation Park. Laura Dunne is Head of Marketing and Membership for Lincolnshire Co-op.

Further Information on the Developments

<https://www.cornhillquarter.co.uk>

<https://www.lincolnsiencepark.co.uk>

<https://www.lincolnshire.coop/property/investing-in-our-community/cornhill-quarter>

<https://www.lincolnshire.coop/property/investing-in-our-community/the-lincoln-science-and-innovation-park>