The Bristol One City Approach to city governance: New Civic Leadership in action

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Abstract

The One City Approach to city governance in Bristol, UK is designed to unify civic purpose in the city: it is ambitious, inclusive and innovative. In 2016 the new, directly elected Mayor of Bristol, Marvin Rees, decided to work with a wide range of civic actors and community leaders to develop this collaborative approach. The New Civic Leadership, a conceptual framework developed by the author, provides the intellectual underpinning for the One City Approach. This article outlines the New Civic Leadership model, summarises the steps taken to deliver it in Bristol and draws out lessons for future practice and scholarship.

Keywords: City governance; inclusion; innovation; civic leadership; local democracy; collaboration; Bristol

1. Introduction

It is not noteworthy to suggest that the challenges facing modern cities are complex, often perplexing and, much of the time, annoyingly difficult to solve. Civic leaders in different countries and contexts know this well enough, but it has not stopped them from pioneering new forms of collaborative governance designed to address these challenges in innovative ways.

It is almost fifty years since Rittel and Webber (1973) published their influential article on planning theory arguing that the problems facing modern societies are, at root, problems that cannot even be definitively described. This is because there is often insufficient agreement about the public good, still less about how to bring about social progress. There is much wisdom in this article, and the authors make a helpful distinction between so-called 'wicked' problems and 'tame' problems. 'Tame' problems may be complicated but they can probably be resolved in a step-by-step fashion because there is

only a limited degree of uncertainty, they are akin to puzzles (Grint 2010). A 'wicked' problem is altogether more complex, not least because there is no clear relationship between cause and effect, and the various stakeholders in the policy process have competing ideas about how to solve the problem. The Covid-19 pandemic provides a current and enormously troubling example of the challenges civic leaders face when so-called 'wicked' problems arise.

An unintended consequence of some scholarly analysis of 'wicked' problems is that, while it certainly provides valuable insights on the nature of the challenges facing social reformers, it can also appear, at times, to offer relatively few positive suggestions on how to address these problems. This can be frustrating for policy makers and activists. It is, perhaps, quite reasonable for them to throw down the gauntlet to scholars and ask: 'OK, thanks for the analysis, but what do you think we should do?'

The practice articles in this journal address this challenge by attempting to bridge the worlds of practice and academe in a fairly direct way. This article, which is in line with this tradition, unfolds in three steps. First, the article introduces the New Civic Leadership model. This conceptual framework, which stems from the author's work with innovative cities in different countries and contexts, provides the intellectual underpinning for the Bristol One City Approach. Second, the steps taken by civic actors in Bristol to deliver a One City Approach are outlined. A final section draws out potential lessons for policy, practice and scholarship.

2. The New Civic Leadership

The New Civic Leadership (NCL) involves strong, place-based leadership acting to co-create new solutions to public problems by drawing on the complementary strengths of civil society, the market and the state. The details of this model are set out elsewhere (Hambleton 2015). In essence, it highlights the role of local leaders in facilitating public service innovation. As shown in **Figure 1**, it suggests that in any given locality place-based governance is likely to comprise five overlapping realms of place-based leadership, with leaders in each realm drawing on different sources of legitimacy:

- **Political leadership** – referring to the work of those people elected to leadership positions by the citizenry

- **Public managerial/professional leadership** – referring to the work of public servants appointed by local authorities, governments and third sector organizations to plan and manage public services, and promote community wellbeing

- **Community leadership** – referring to the many civic-minded people who give their time and energy to local leadership activities in a wide variety of ways

- **Business leadership** – referring to the contribution made by local business leaders and social entrepreneurs, who have a clear stake in the long-term prosperity of the locality

- **Trade union leadership** – referring to the efforts of trade union leaders striving to improve the pay and working conditions of employees

Figure 1: The realms of place-based leadership

Potential innovation zones
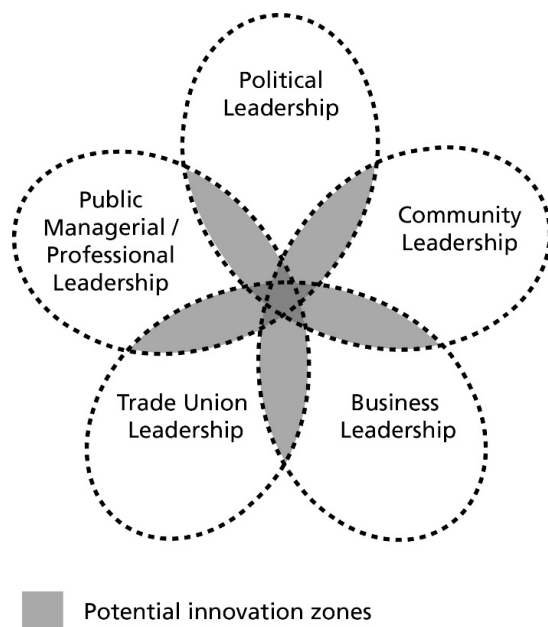
Source: Hambleton (2015) p 127

These leadership roles are all important in cultivating and encouraging public service innovation and, crucially, they overlap. The areas of overlap can be describes as innovation zones – areas providing many opportunities for inventive behavior. This is because different perspectives are brought together in these zones and this can enable active questioning of established approaches.

It is fair to say that the areas of overlap in **Figure 1** are often experienced as conflict zones within cities, rather than innovation zones. These spaces do, of course, provide settings for power struggles between competing interests and values. Moreover, power is unequally distributed within these settings. This is precisely why place-based leadership matters. The author's research on urban governance in several countries suggests that civic leadership is critical in ensuring that the innovation zones are orchestrated in a way that promotes a culture of listening that can, in turn, lead to innovation (Hambleton 2015). Civic leaders are, of course, not just 'those at the top'. All kinds of people can exercise civic leadership and they may be inside or outside the state. The author's definition of leadership is: 'Shaping emotions and behavior to achieve

common goals' (Hambleton 2007, p. 174). This definition puts emotions centre stage and stresses the importance of the co-creation of new possibilities. Lastly, the NCL framework highlights the role of external political and economic forces in shaping the political space available to local actors, but this is not the focus of attention in this article.

The idea of New Civic Leadership presented here resonates with recent scholarship highlighting: 1) The way that the power of place has been neglected in modern public leadership studies (Jackson 2019; Sotarauta 2019); 2) The growing importance of local systems leadership in public administration (Bolden et al 2020); and 3) The realization that universities are well placed to expand their contributions to local civic leadership (Harrow and Guest 2020).

3. The Bristol One City Approach

Marvin Rees began to develop the idea of creating a City Office, to underpin a One City Approach to the governance of Bristol, in the summer of 2015. He was, at the time, preparing to compete to be selected as the Labour Party candidate to run for mayor in the May 2016 local election. He was keen to offer some fresh ideas on how to go about the task of city governance. In the simplest of terms, Rees's idea of a City Office is an attempt to unify public purpose in the city, one that seeks to bind together all those who care about the city in a much more effective collaborative effort.

In various speeches Rees explained that, while elected local government is enormously important in city governance, it is the way that public organisations work in creative collaboration with other interests in the city that holds out real promise for making progress in tackling current social, economic and environmental challenges. Well before he was elected Rees took the view that the New Civic Leadership framework, outlined above, could provide the intellectual underpinning for the City Office concept. When he first saw **Figure 1** Rees told the author that he saw it as 'a flower diagram', and that his City Office should be located at the heart of the flower.

In the May 2016 mayoral election Rees, and the Labour Party, won a resounding victory. Rees attracted the votes of 68,750 citizens, a figure that was over 29,000 more than the incumbent mayor, George Ferguson (an Independent politician). The local election also saw the election of 37 Labour Party councillors. Councillors in Bristol are elected on a ward, or geographical area, basis and the result provided the Labour Party with a majority of four on the 70-seat council. These politicians, including the mayor, were elected for a 4-year term.

The stage was set for Rees to try to create a City Office and deliver a One City Approach. It is possible to summarise the main features of Rees's City Office way of working by referring briefly to seven elements.

1) City Gatherings

From the outset Rees wanted to create a programme of inclusive City Gatherings of civic leaders, the idea being to draw together leaders from **all** the five realms of place-based leadership shown in **Figure 1** on a regular basis. The New Civic Leadership model suggests that City Gatherings should not necessarily take place in the local authority municipal building and, on 23 July 2016, the first City Gathering was held at *We the curious,* an indoor, public-friendly festival of science located in the heart of Bristol.

City Gatherings, which now take place every six months, are not conventional public meetings. Rather, they are designed to create highly interactive 'city conversations', with participants working together in cross cutting teams, to examine the major challenges facing the city and to explore ideas on how to tackle them. The first City Gathering was expected to bring together around 30 civic leaders. In the event the location had to be changed to a bigger venue as over 70 civic leaders wanted to participate. The ninth City Gathering, held on 10 January 2020, attracted over 300 civic leaders. The City Gatherings have developed an influential role in stimulating the co-creation of new ideas, in identifying issues for priority attention and in building social networks and civic capacity.

2) Innovation zone in City Hall

Shortly after being elected Rees created an innovation zone in City Hall, just outside the Mayor's Office. People, from any of the realms of civic leadership shown in **Figure 1**, who are working on activities relating to the City Office agenda, are invited to work in this space on Tuesdays. In addition, the City Office organises occasional presentations and workshops on Tuesday mornings. The creation of this space, clearly an innovation zone within the New Civic Leadership model of co-governance outlined earlier, is a simple cost-free step that has already enabled a good deal of informal communication to take place between stakeholders from the different realms of place-based leadership.

3) Collaborative projects

The third element in the One City Approach is to create and deliver specific City Office-led collaborative projects on pressing issues. The City Office has promoted and supported a large number of imaginative projects bringing together actors from the five realms of civic leadership shown in **Figure 1**. The issues for attention stem from the recommendations of the City Gatherings mentioned earlier. There are far too many initiatives to list in this short article but to illustrate the approach here are three examples:

- *The Street Homelessness Challenge project*. Arising from concerns expressed at the first City Gathering, Rees asked, in late 2016, local leaders from the five realms of civic leadership to work together to create 100 extra beds for homeless people in the first 100 days of 2017. A project group, chaired by the City Office Director, was set up to develop ways of achieving this ambitious target. City Office partners launched a 'spectrum of activity' to tackle homelessness (Morris 2017).

This inclusive approach brought in actors not normally involved in addressing homelessness, for example, local businesses, including the local bus company. The initiative delivered 34 new bed-spaces within the 100 days, as well as arrangements to deliver two double-decker buses to provide 20 additional emergency bed-spaces.

• *Feeding Bristol Healthy Holiday Programme.* The City Gathering, held in January 2019, expressed concern about food insecurity in the city and, in particular, the worrying fact that children from poor families do not receive free school meals during holidays. People at the gathering praised the achievements of the Feeding Bristol and FareShare effort to provide 2,000 needy children with 15,000 free meals during the 2018 summer school holidays. In Spring 2019, when anticipated funding from UK central government for an expanded Feeding Bristol Healthy Holiday 2019 programme did not materialise, the City Office launched a community-based effort to raise funds. This initiative raised £125,000 from over fifty organisations in a matter of weeks. The collaborative model developed by Mayor Rees was critical in enabling the delivery of over 50,000 meals, provided by over 120 organisations, to 5,000 needy children, over the six-week summer period in 2019.[1]

• *The Period Friendly Bristol initiative.* The January 2019 City Gathering also identified an injustice that many didn't know existed in Bristol. Many women and girls were being denied period dignity, with little or no access to menstrual products. The City Gathering decided that a new collaborative initiative to tackle period poverty should be one of the top three priorities in 2019 for the new Bristol One City Plan. Led by Councillor Helen Godwin, Cabinet Lead for Women, Children and Families, this initiative has brought many new voices into the discussion, including the experiences of young people. Key achievements so far have been: 1) A major effort to address period stigma through education, including the production of a film presenting the views of teenage girls and boys that is now being used in schools across Bristol and more widely, 2) The development of a citywide donation and distribution network of free sanitary products, with a pilot effort launched in 2020 to distribute products to community centres, GP surgeries, leisure centres and libraries in priority neighbourhoods.[2]

4) The Bristol One City Plan

Arguably the most important achievement of the Bristol City Office is not just the co-creation of the first Bristol One City Plan, but also the securing of civic commitment to delivering it. The idea of developing a shared long-term, vision for the future trajectory of the city emerged from discussions at several of the early City Gatherings. It became the focus of attention at the fifth City Gathering held in the conference facility at Ashton Gate, the home of Bristol City Football Club in December 2017. This highly interactive session developed a collective understanding of the main issues that needed to be addressed.

The Bristol One City Plan was launched at a City Gathering held in January 2019. This ambitious plan is designed to orchestrate the creation of a 'big picture' strategy for the future development of the city, one that looks forward to 2050, and one that agencies are expected to commit to.[3] The central aim is to create a city that is fair, healthy and sustainable. It is important to emphasise that this is not a conventional city council plan. It is a plan that enjoys the public support of a Bristol City Leaders Group – a group representing leaders from the five realms of civic leadership shown in **Figure 1**. The plan is reviewed on an annual basis and is rolled forward each January.

5) The development of place-based leadership

The fifth element in the One City Approach is the development of place-based leadership talent. The City Gatherings, mentioned earlier, identified the importance of developing and delivering new kinds of civic leadership programmes, ones that target under-represented groups in the city. The City Office was encouraged to orchestrate a step-change in the provision of place-based leadership opportunities – ranging from city leadership courses for young people (under 19s) through to advanced place-based leadership workshops for senior leaders from the realms of leadership shown in **Figure 1**.[4]

6) City Funds Board

A sixth feature of the model is the creation of a City Funds Board. In the period since 2010 central government has dramatically reduced financial support to local authorities in the UK whilst also strictly limiting the ability of councils to raise funds through local taxation (Latham 2017). Discussions at City Gatherings in 2017 highlighted these fiscal constraints and led to a suggestion that the city needed to create innovative ways of generating new funding streams to reduce poverty and create a sustainable city. Established in April 2018, the City Funds Board, which brings together representatives from communities, business, finance, the public sector and the two local universities, is developing new match-funding initiatives to focus finance via repayable loans and grant-giving, on the priority areas set out in the Bristol One City Plan.[5] The 2020 fund, worth £10 million, has focused on economic inclusion, community initiatives, child hunger and moving Bristol towards being a carbon neutral city.

7) The City Office itself

From the outset Mayor Rees wanted to create a City Office that would include people from, ideally, all the five realms of civic leadership shown in **Figure 1.** He imagined the City Office being at the heart of this flower diagram and he was clear that the City Office should not be viewed as a conventional City Council department. Rather, the idea was to create a very small team to exemplify the idea of collaborative working. In 2016, it was imagined that civic leaders in the various realms of leadership would be willing to second staff into this new City Office for significant periods of time. In practice, this

concept proved to be a hard sell to other civic leaders. In the early development of the City Office, in 2016-18, a city council officer acted as part-time City Office Director, and imaginative use was made of staff seconded in from various city partners for limited periods of time. This strategy, whilst imaginative did not provide sufficient resources or stability to ensure that the City Office approach would have a lasting impact. In early 2019 Mayor Rees, notwithstanding the budget reductions he was being forced to make as a result of spending cuts imposed by central government, found a way to fund a core City Office team of three full-time posts. This was a brilliant move. Three years of relationship building between civic leaders in Bristol had built collective understanding of what a One City Approach could achieve. The City Office team, which comprises talented individuals with very different backgrounds and skill sets, was able to access a very wide civic network of support and drive the initiative forward at an astonishing pace.[6] Looking ahead the challenge of how to co-fund the City Office remains a concern. The two local universities have engaged with the One City Approach by, for example, organizing a Bristol Forum to advance the collective intelligence of the city. But more needs to be done to attract long term funding to underpin the core team working at the heart of this collaborative approach.

4. Emerging lessons for practice and scholarship

This article has provided an overview of the work of the Bristol City Office and located the discussion within a theoretical framework, described as the New Civic Leadership. We now step back from the detail to reflect on what it is we are discussing and what lessons or ideas emerge for urban policy, practice and scholarship.

The first point to stress is that the One City Approach emphasizes learning and innovation. For example, at the City Gathering held each year, in January, progress with the delivery of previously agreed targets for the One City Plan is reviewed and fresh targets for the coming year are debated and agreed. Civic leaders are proud of their achievements but they are self-critical and know that the approach can, and must, be improved via a process of systematic annual review. In 2018 Marvin Rees, Mayor of Bristol, described the One City Approach in the following way:

> 'Nobody can deliver success for the city alone and collaboration with city partners is key to delivery. This is why I have set up the City Office and have brought partners together to develop a One City Plan with short, medium and long term actions aimed at building a city where nobody is left behind' (Rees 2018).

The New Civic Leadership framework suggests that place-based leaders can and, indeed, should, develop a deep commitment to partnership working, going well beyond the idea of conventional transactional exchanges. The Bristol One City Approach requires leaders to step beyond a narrow 'What's in it for me?' way of thinking.

Is there any independent evidence indicating whether or not the One City Approach works? Each year the European Union invites cities to put themselves forward for the award of European Capital of Innovation (iCapital). In September 2019, the Bristol One City Approach ensured that Bristol was recognized as one of the six most innovative cities in Europe (European Commission 2020). As well as delivering a cash-prize to Bristol this award suggested that Bristol's innovative approach to collaborative governance was, indeed, breaking new ground.

A number of themes emerge from this article for urban policy, practice and research. Four are highlighted here.

First, the evidence from this case study suggests that theoretical concepts and academic analysis can, at times, be rather useful to policy makers and practitioners. In this case a theoretical framework, New Civic Leadership, is actually being used directly by the mayor of a city and other civic leaders to enlighten their decision-making. The local universities have, in fact, played an important role in contributing to the development of the Bristol One City Approach in a variety of ways. For example, the first Bristol Forum held in March 2019 enabled a large number of researchers from both the local universities to engage directly with local civic actors.[7]

It is encouraging to note that academic interest in civic, or public, engagement has grown in recent years. The notion of 'engaged scholarship', pioneered by US universities in the 19th Century, is gaining adherents in other countries (Boyer 1990). For example, in the UK an independent Civic University Commission published an influential report that highlighted the neglect of place in UK public policy and advocated an elevated role for universities in local public problem solving (Civic University Commission 2019).

Direct scholarly engagement with urban policy and practice has been a core value of the European Urban Research Association (EURA), ever since it was launched in 1997.[8] It is now the case that many European urban universities are very active players in the civic leadership of the cities where they are located and this is to be welcomed. It is hoped that the concepts and experiences recorded in this article might be helpful to scholars who are engaged in bridging the worlds of academe and urban practice.

Second, if we return to the concept of 'wicked' problems presented in the introduction, we can, perhaps, question whether modern urban problems are always as unsolvable as some appear to claim. Yes, modern public policy challenges are certainly complex – and the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 provides an all too troubling example. However, innovative cities across the world, and Bristol provides but one example, are showing that it is possible to exercise place-based leadership in a way that can build collective understanding of the public good and, more than that, develop imaginative policy and practical suggestions to address the problems identified by local stakeholders.

Third, the analysis presented above suggests that successful civic leaders create innovation zones - meaning spaces that enable people with different backgrounds and experiences to come together, to raise their concerns, argue with each other, share insights, learn from the conversation, and by engaging in dialogue co-create new solutions. This is easier said than done – but it can be done! In Bristol innovation zones have been created in many different ways – in citywide City Gatherings, in local neighbourhood settings, in physical spaces within buildings, in online spaces linking people across space. It is possible that the New Civic Leadership framework set out here might provide the beginnings of a way of co-creating solutions to so-called 'wicked' problems.

Fourth, leadership can make a significant difference to the performance of an urban governance system. A longitudinal study of mayoral governance in Bristol has examined the impact of institutional design on, amongst other things, the leadership of the city (Sweeting et al 2020). This research shows that the directly elected mayor model of governance, introduced in 2012, has enabled successive mayors to exercise bold outgoing leadership. The evidence from this research suggests that Mayor Rees was able to use the convening power of the position of mayor to orchestrate the One City Approach. It would be desirable if future urban research could examine in more detail how civic leaders, in different cities, countries and contexts, have been able to use their convening power to achieve progressive social, economic and environmental outcomes.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

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Endnotes

[1] For more details of the Feeding Bristol Healthy Holiday Programme visit: https://www.feedingbristol.org/healthy-holidays

[2] For more details on Period Friendly Bristol visit:
https://www.periodfriendlybristol.org

[3] For more details on the Bristol One City Plan visit:
https://www.bristolonecity.com

[4] For more details on Bristol City Office leadership programmes visit:
https://www.bristol.gov.uk/mayor/city-office-leadership-programmes

[5] For more details on the City Funds Board visit:
http://www.bristolcityfunds.co.uk

[6] For more details of the work of the Bristol City Office see Bristol City Office. 2020.
One City Annual Report 2019. Bristol: Bristol City Office Team. More:
https://www.bristolonecity.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/One-City-Annual-Report-2019.pdf

[7] Co-organised by the City Office, the University of Bristol and the University of the West of England, Bristol the first Bristol Forum attracted over 200 participants. It aimed to bring together communities, researchers, businesses and civic leaders to enhance understanding of the challenges facing the city. More:
http://bristolforum.org.uk

[8] For more details on the European Urban Research Association (EURA) visit:
https://eura.org