

From public leadership to civic leadership: How place-based innovation can help societies recover from COVID-19

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Abstract

Societies across the world now face at least four major challenges at once: 1) The COVID-19 health emergency; 2) A sharp economic downturn arising from the pandemic; 3) The global climate and ecological emergencies; and 4) Disturbing increases in social, economic and racial inequality. This paper argues that effective approaches to tackling complex challenges of this kind require not just improvements in international, national and multi-level governance, but also a significant expansion of the power and influence of place-based communities and civic leaders. An opening section discusses the complex nature of the current challenges facing public leaders and suggests that, if societies are to recover from COVID-19 and be better prepared for future disasters, the values guiding decision-making will need to shift towards caring for people and the planet. A second section discusses why place matters. Attention then turns to the role of leadership in responding to the new possibilities that are now opening up, and it is argued that 'civic', or place-based, leadership, as distinct from 'public' leadership, should be given more attention in leadership practice as well as in the scholarly world of leadership studies. A framework for conceptualising place-based leadership – New Civic Leadership – is introduced. This explains how civic leaders can draw on the power of place to advance a progressive approach to policy making. The next section is a short case study. Marvin Rees, who was elected as Mayor of Bristol, UK in 2016, has been using the New Civic Leadership framework to guide his inclusive approach to city governance. This strategy, known as the Bristol One City Approach, is described and evaluated. A final section identifies emerging themes for leadership and public management studies.

Key words: Civic leadership, city leadership, place-based innovation, collaborative governance, Bristol One City Approach

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Introduction

In my new book, *Cities and communities beyond COVID-19*, I suggest that societies across the world now face at least four major challenges at once: 1) The COVID-19 health emergency; 2) A sharp economic downturn arising from the pandemic; 3) The global climate and ecological emergencies; and 4) Disturbing increases in social, economic and racial inequality (Hambleton 2020). Various writers have claimed that complex challenges of this kind require not just improvements in international, national and multi-level governance, but also a significant expansion in the power and influence of place-based leaders. For example, Barber (2013) claims that city mayors, singly or jointly, are more capable of responding to transnational challenges than nation states because they are not mired in ideological infighting and sovereign rivalries.

It seems clear that scholars working in the fields of public leadership and public management have paid insufficient attention to the importance of place. For example, Van Wart (2013) conducted an extensive review of scholarship relating to administrative leadership theory in the period 1992-2011. This study examined the content of 878 journal articles and it is noticeable that place does not feature. Jackson examines more recent public leadership scholarship and concludes that, while place may be mentioned by public leadership researchers, it rarely becomes the focal point of scholarship (Jackson 2019). He is convinced that place is too important a component of leadership to be sidelined in this manner, and he praises Guthey *et al* for making a strong case for a place-based approach to leadership research:

‘A place-based approach requires scholars to think of organisations not only as strategic enterprises in a global economy, but as buildings and grounds peopled by humans with bodies who live in places and communities that have complex ecological, social and political histories. A shift towards place-based thinking may lead to scholarly research and management practices that deal more effectively – at local levels – with such thorny issues as social justice, global climate change, alternative energy and economic inequality to name but a few’ (Guthey *et al* 2014, p.62)

It would be misleading to suggest that leadership theory has paid no attention to place. On the contrary, the literature on city and regional leadership has expanded in recent years (Collinge *et al* 2010; Hambleton 2015; Sotarauta 2016). Moreover, a new handbook on city and regional leadership provides an international examination of the inter-relationships between geography and leadership, and outlines theories and methods relating to the study of place-based leadership (Sotarauta and Beer 2021).

This paper offers a contribution to this relatively new vein of scholarship and it is hoped that other researchers may be encouraged to add to our understanding of the relationships between place and leadership. The immediate context for this discussion is provided by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The disease has had a devastating impact on the world. At the time of writing, according to the COVID-19 Worldometer, over 140 million people have been infected and over 3 million people have died (Figures as at 16 April 2021). The scale of human suffering is difficult to comprehend and it is distressing to discover that the disease has been particularly effective in really hurting the people in society who are already vulnerable. At the same time, the lockdowns have created an enormous upsurge in social solidarity, with a spectacular increase in the number of people providing help and assistance to neighbours and needy groups of various kinds. Across the world we encounter heart-warming stories of how local communities have responded with great imagination to the disruption in food supply chains and taken steps to help the most vulnerable in society. It is worth noting that almost all these creative, community-based problem-solving activities have taken place at the local or hyper-local level – they are place based.

The presentation unfolds in five steps. An opening section discusses the complex nature of the current challenges facing public leaders and suggests that, if societies are to recover from COVID-19 and be better prepared for future disasters, the values guiding decision-making will need to shift towards caring for people and the planet. The next section considers why place matters if, indeed, it does. Attention then turns to the role of leadership in responding creatively to the new possibilities that are now opening up. It will be argued that ‘civic’, or place-based, leadership, as distinct from ‘public’ leadership, should be given more attention in leadership practice as well as in the scholarly world of leadership studies. A framework for conceptualising place-based leadership – New Civic Leadership – is introduced. This explains how civic leaders can draw on the power of place-based feelings and commitments to advance a progressive approach to policy making. Marvin Rees, who was elected as Mayor of Bristol, UK in 2016, has been using this New Civic Leadership framework in his prize-winning approach to the governance of the city. A short case study discusses the Bristol One City Approach, an innovative approach to collaborative city governance. A final section identifies emerging themes for leadership and public management studies.

COVID-19 opens a new political window

In his insightful book *The Establishment: And How They Get Away With It*, Owen Jones provides a revealing account of the role of right-wing think tanks in reshaping the political discourse about the role of the state in Britain and the USA, in the period since the 1970s (Jones 2014). He explains how these think tanks operated as ‘outriders’, extolling extremist, even dangerous, ideas that right-leaning politicians could then draw on. He rightly gives attention to the so-called ‘Overton Window’. Named after Joseph P Overton, the late Vice-President of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, based in Michigan, US, this window concept claims to describe what is politically possible, or reasonable, at any given time within the prevailing politics of the day.

The window analogy is, in fact, rather helpful, as it suggests that those seeking bold change, in whatever direction, need to think beyond the

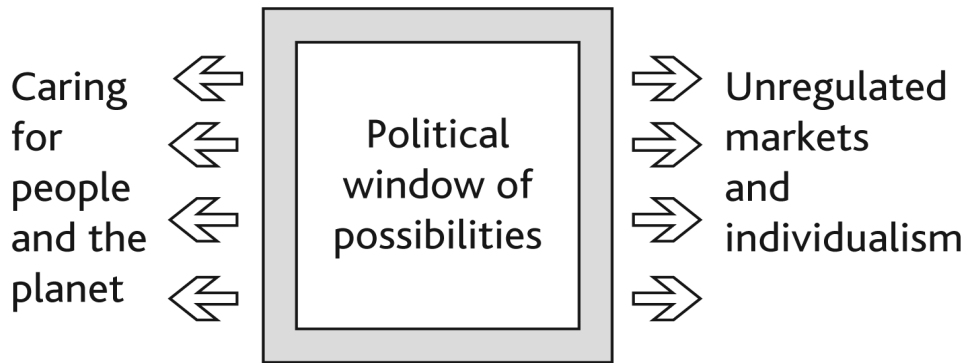
development of new policies. Radical reformers need to work out how to move the location of the window in the direction they favour. The chief problem with Overton's version of the window is that it misunderstands the nature of freedom in the modern world. In line with Overton's position, right-leaning politicians take the view that weak, or minimal, government is superior to strong government – at root they claim that 'less government' delivers 'more freedom'. The state does, indeed, limit individual freedoms, usually to bring about significant societal benefits. For example, anti-pollution laws limit the freedom of polluters to ruin the natural environment, and laws banning physical assault and murder limit the freedom of violent individuals to do harm to other people. City planning laws prevent individual landowners from executing developments that would have devastating impacts on neighbours and society at large. Even those on the right of the political spectrum recognise that not all individual freedoms are good for society.

However, the experience of living through the COVID-19 calamity teaches us that the very framing of this debate about 'freedom' is misconceived. Focusing attention only on individual freedom is a peculiarly narrow, even bizarre, way of conceptualising freedom. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that we are all inter-dependent. During the last year or so societies across the world have favoured remarkably strong intervention by the state to meet the COVID-19 challenge precisely because citizens value freedom – meaning freedom from sickness, freedom from suffering, and freedom from death. These radical shifts in public perception of what really matters in modern society suggest that we need a more capacious way of measuring and evaluating state intervention – one that goes well beyond the simplistic question 'Is this state limiting my individual freedom or not?'

The suggestion I wish to make here is that we can build a useful measure of governmental performance by focusing on the concept of caring for others and for the planet.¹ In her book *Caring Democracy: Markets, Ecology and Justice*, Joan Tronto argues that care, not economics, should be the central concern of democratic life (Tronto 2013). She explains how societies now face a caring deficit, and the COVID-19 pandemic has shown her analysis to be prescient. By drawing on the well-established literature on eco-centrism (Eckersley 1992) we can add to caring for ourselves and for each other the critical importance of caring for the natural environment on which we all depend.

Figure 1 presents a new way of considering future political choices, one that steps beyond the outdated framing provided by the Overton window.

Figure 1: A new window of political possibilities



Source: Hambleton (2020) p. 67

The COVID-19 pandemic has already prompted a rethink about the role of the state in many societies. The window of possibilities is not just being rethought, it has already moved. Take the UK. Announced on 20 March 2020, by Rishi Sunak, the Chancellor, the British government introduced a 'furlough scheme' – officially called the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme – to help employers pay their workers during the lockdown. In effect, this arrangement involved the state paying 80% of the salary up to a maximum of £2,500 a month. As a result the UK state was, by 12 May 2020, paying the salaries of 7.5 million workers who were temporarily laid off by 900,000 companies, with the cost amounting to £10 billion at that point. A right-leaning Conservative government has, then, presided over a remarkable expansion of state intervention in society.

On an altogether difference scale consider the radical steps already taken by newly elected US President Joe Biden. In March 2020 he signed into law a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package, and it is clear that his strategy goes well beyond a massive short-term stimulus package. Various commentators have concluded that President Biden is '... overturning four decades of hostility to big government, replacing it with an expectation that if citizens are living economically precarious lives then it's the job the state to step in' (Freedland 2021). President Biden has plans to go much further – he intends to reverse some of President Donald Trump's cuts to corporate tax rates and spend a further \$2 trillion on rebuilding crumbling US infrastructure, a move that will not be opposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The COVID-19 calamity has, perhaps, signalled that at least some world leaders have now decided that radical ideas for expanding the role of the state are welcome:

'If the old Washington consensus believed in small states, low taxes and balanced budgets, the new Washington consensus believes in activist governments, inclusive growth and a green new deal' (Elliott 2021).

There are signs, then, that political window of opportunity is moving, in some countries at least, towards caring for people and the planet. This, in turn, can

be expected to expand the political space available to public leaders. This shift has important implications for public leadership studies and, in particular, for the exercise of place-based leadership.

Why place matters

There are many reasons why place should play a much more prominent role in public policy making. Some of the reasons stem from recognising the flaws in remote, centralised decision-making, while others arise from the demonstrable advantages of adopting a place-based approach. I have discussed these reasons in detail elsewhere (Hambleton 2015, 79-107). In relation to the downsides of centralised decision-making it is well documented that higher levels of government, meaning those exercising decisions above the level of the city or locality, tend to be more disabled by departmentalism than more local levels of governance. For example, James C. Scott, in his insightful book, *Seeing like a state*, shows how national governments, with their functional, single-purpose departments, have difficulty comprehending what needs to be done precisely because their briefing systems and 'ways of seeing' are distorted - not surprisingly, this leads to disastrous errors in decision-making (Scott 1998).

A recent rather troubling example drawn from the UK context can illustrate this point. In 2020 the UK Conservative government, as it developed its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, decided to adopt a highly centralised approach. It disregarded elected local authorities and local public health directors, and granted numerous, multi-million pound contracts to distant private sector companies, organisations completely detached from places and lacking any place-based knowledge and understanding. For example, in May 2020, without any due process, the UK Government appointed Dido Harding, a businesswoman closely connected to the Conservative Party with no experience of public health policy making, to lead the privatised COVID-19 test and trace programme. This incredibly expensive and highly centralised programme, which is costing UK taxpayers £37 billion over two years, failed to deliver the central promise of averting a second COVID-19 lockdown. In a withering analysis the all-party Public Accounts Committee of the UK House of Commons concluded that there is still no clear evidence that this centralised test and trace system is working effectively (UK Public Accounts Committee 2021).

Turning to the advantages of place-based decision-making we can note that Magnusson (2011) builds on Scott's analysis and argues that to 'see like a city' has many advantages over 'seeing like a state'. He argues that, in particular, it involves positioning ourselves, as inhabitants, not governors. By building on Magnusson's analysis we can identify three main reasons why place should be a central component of public leadership.

First, place has meaning for people. To claim that place is significant in modern life could seem to be an odd, even out-of-touch, way of viewing the modern world. Some may feel that, because the internet and mobile phone technologies have transformed our abilities to communicate across space –

not to mention the way globalization has altered economic and social relations across the entire planet – talking about the importance of place is to swim against the tide. In my view, those holding this view are misguided. The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us that much of life remains, and will always remain, stubbornly place-dependent. Place forms an important part of our identity as human beings and it contributes to our sense of belonging (Tuan 1977; Castello 2010; Bell and de-Shalit 2011; McClay and McAllister 2014). To argue for recognizing the significance of place for our psychological wellbeing is not to contest the value of personal connections made digitally across space.

Second, place provides the spatial basis for the exercise of democracy. In an important sense elected local authorities provide the democratic building blocks that underpin nation states and, ultimately, international democratic institutions. The longstanding and fundamental arguments for local government are relevant to this discussion of the relationships between place and local democracy (Gyford 1991). There are several dimensions to these relationships but three stand out and, whilst they overlap, they are distinctive. First, local governments contribute to political pluralism and support political education as they act as schools in which democratic habits can be acquired and practiced. Local political engagement can enhance the overall quality of both representative and participatory democracy in a country. In relation to leadership development these local settings can provide a good way of drawing people from a diversity of backgrounds into local civic life. Second, and closely related, local governments can facilitate the growth of self-organising capacity in local communities (Gilchrist and Taylor 2016). As mentioned earlier, the COVID-19 pandemic has stimulated a remarkable upsurge in place-based civic action and local governments have played a vital role in encouraging and supporting these developments in co-governance and the co-creation of local solutions. Third, local governments can improve the responsiveness of service providers to the diverse needs and requirements of different communities, an argument that gathers additional weight in complex multicultural communities. Jane Wills, in her study of localism in the UK, draws on these three arguments, and others, to suggest that the rise of localism ‘... was generating new potential for collective organisation, self-government and new forms of political authority that could then contribute to the wider good of the whole’ (Wills 2016, p.207).

A third argument for valuing place relates to effectiveness. Places are different and policies and practices need to be designed to respond to these differences. Local leaders understand these differences better than those working in distant central government departments. More than that, as we shall see in the discussion of the Bristol One City Approach, presented later in this paper, enlightened civic leadership is, at root, collaborative. It stems from the direct experience of local actors listening to each other, sharing knowledge and understandings, and co-creating new solutions. There is a two-fold advantage here. Strong local government can lead to the co-creation of solutions suited to local communities. In addition, having a diversity of geographical power centres in a country adds to the innovative capacity of that country’s governance. With the rise of international policy exchange

between and among localities/cities in different countries the dispersal of power adds to the civic capacity of the world as a whole (Campbell 2012).

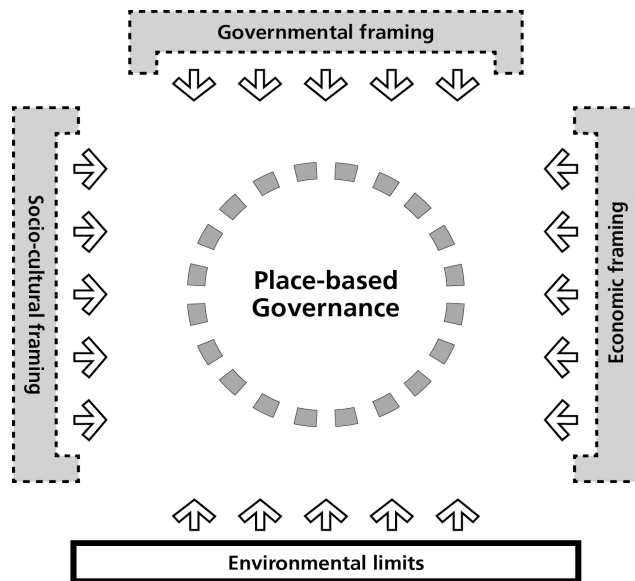
Arguably the most important reason why place should be given more attention in public policy making stems from the need to combat place-less power. By place-less power I mean the exercise of power by decision makers who are unconcerned about the impacts of their decisions on communities living in particular places. Over the last thirty years or so the forces of globalisation have delivered a spectacular increase in the power of place-less decision makers. Consider for a moment the remarkable growth in the scope and scale of multinational companies operating on a global basis. Many of these companies have developed strategies that play localities off against each other. A central driving force is, as often as not, to extract private profit from particular places, and the consequences for social, economic and environmental justice have been dire (Mason 2015; Monbiot 2016). In the next section we will examine how place-based leaders are tapping into the power of place in order to respond to these various challenges.

Place, power and the New Civic Leadership

The COVID-19 pandemic is, of course, a global calamity. However, at the same time, it is not so much a single phenomenon as a multitude of specific outbreaks affecting different localities and communities in very different ways. While the steps taken by national governments to respond to the COVID-19 challenge have dominated the headlines, it is the case that thousands of cities and localities across the world have played, and are continuing to play, an enormously important role in responding to the crisis and in helping societies recover. Local leadership has the major advantage of being able to tap local knowledge and understanding. Moreover, civic leaders, inside and outside the state, are uniquely well placed to support and orchestrate local community-based efforts to meet the needs of diverse vulnerable groups and invent new ways of doing things.

When exploring how elected local governments and other place-based actors might respond to societal challenges, it is important to understand the potential constraints on local political action. It is naïve to believe that elected local leaders are free agents able to respond directly and compassionately to the views and priorities expressed by their citizens. On the contrary, various powerful forces shape the context within which civic leaders operate. These forces do not erase the possibilities for local leadership. Rather, they place limits on what local leaders may be able to accomplish in particular countries and localities at particular moments in time. **Figure 2** provides a simplified picture of the four sets of forces that shape the world of place-based governance in any given locality.

Figure 2: Framing the political space for place-based governance



Source: Hambleton (2015) p.114

At the bottom of the diagram are, what I take to be, the non-negotiable environmental, or planetary, limits. The scientific evidence on climate change suggests that ignoring the fact that cities and local communities are part of the natural ecosystem is irresponsible, and failure to pay attention to environmental limits will store up unmanageable problems for future generations (Girardet 2008; Jackson 2009; Bulkeley 2013). This side of the square is drawn with a solid line because, unlike the other sides of the square, these environmental limits are non-negotiable.

On the left-hand side of the diagram are socio-cultural forces - these comprise a mix of people (as actors) and cultural values (that people may hold). Here we find the rich variety of voices found in any city or locality. The people of a given city, or locality, will have different views about the kind of place they wish to live in, and they will have differential capacities to make these views known. Some, maybe many, will claim a right to the city (Lefebvre 1967; Brenner *et al* 2012). We can assume that, in democratic societies at least, elected leaders who pay little or no attention to these local political pressures should not expect to stay in office for too long. Expression of 'citizens voice', to use a phrase deployed by the famous economist Albert Hirschman, will see them dismissed at the ballot box (Hirschman 1970).

On the right-hand side of the diagram are the horizontal economic forces that arise from the need for localities to compete, to some degree at least, in the wider marketplace for inward investment and to attract talented people. Some writers argue that owing to local resource deficits and the need to maintain a

competitive position, cities have become dependent on higher levels of government and private investment for survival (Peterson 1981). On this analysis, localities become ever more dependent on external forces, effectively helpless victims in a global flow of events. However, various studies have shown that, contrary to neoliberal dogma, it is possible for civic leaders to bargain with business (Savitch and Kantor 2002).

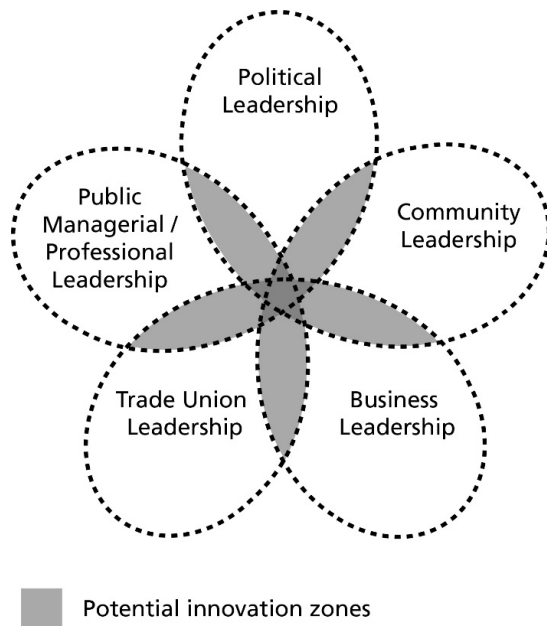
At the top of the diagram, we find the legal and policy framework imposed by higher levels of government. In some countries, the framing grants substantial autonomy to elected local governments, in others the central state virtually tells local authorities what they can and cannot do.

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 3**, 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.

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

Figure 3: The realms of place-based leadership

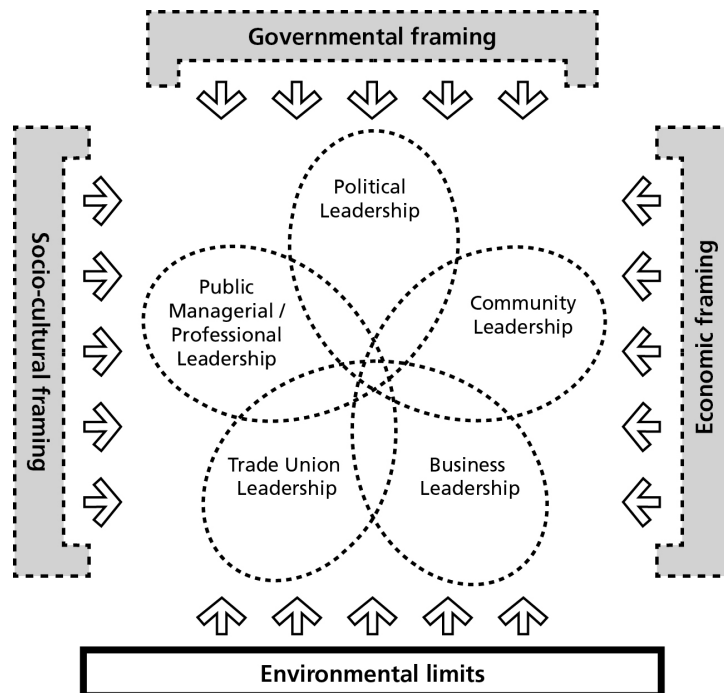


Source: Hambleton (2015) p.127

It is fair to say that the areas of overlap in **Figure 3** 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 innovative 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 behaviour 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. Having explained the five realms of place-based leadership it is now possible to advance the presentation by locating the five realms within the context of the wider power struggles discussed earlier – see **Figure 4**.

Figure 4: Place-based leadership in context



Source: Hambleton (2015) p. 97.

These ideas on New Civic Leadership resonate with recent scholarship on various aspects of place-based leadership. For example, Harrow and Guest (2020) have used New Civic Leadership concepts to offer a critique of the efforts being made by some UK universities to engage more effectively with their local communities. In essence, they argue that many of these university efforts to be ‘truly civic’ do not go far enough in developing effective approaches to place-based co-leadership and collaboration. Other scholars are expanding our understanding of place-based leadership by offering insights based on case studies (Bolden *et al* 2020; Roberts 2020; Sancino and Hudson 2020; Worrall and O’Leary 2020). The next section offers a short account of an example of New Civic Leadership in action, an initiative known as the Bristol One City Approach.

New Civic Leadership in action: The Bristol One City Approach

Marvin Rees began to develop the idea of creating a Bristol City Office in the summer of 2015. At the time he was competing to be selected as the Labour Party candidate to run for Mayor of Bristol in the May 2016 local election. In the simplest of terms his City Office concept represents an attempt to unite public purpose in the city. It seeks to bind together all those who care about the city in a much more effective collaborative effort. The approach is strongly place-based in the sense that it draws inspiration and enthusiasm from the positive feelings people have about the place where they live.²

In a headline on his campaign website in August 2015 Rees signalled the nature of the shift he had in mind: 'Bristol shouldn't be run from the council chamber'. This, in itself, was a radical statement for a politician seeking public office. In various speeches he 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 social, economic and environmental progress.

In the autumn of 2015, shortly after he was selected as the Labour Party candidate for mayor, I had my first detailed conversation with Marvin about city governance. He had read my book on *Leading the Inclusive City* (Hambleton 2015) and we discussed ways of putting his City Office idea into effect. Marvin found the concept of realms of civic leadership to be particularly helpful – see **Figure 3**. He told me that he saw this figure as a 'flower diagram' and that the City Office should be located at the heart of this growing flower. In his mind the City Office needed to draw insight and energy from all the five realms of place-based leadership shown in the diagram.

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 and this gave the Labour Party a majority of four on the 70-seat city council. The mayor and all councillors were elected for a 4-year term.³ The stage was set for a radical shift towards a much more collaborative approach to urban governance in Bristol.

Bristol: historic, vibrant, divided

Bristol is a vibrant city with a rich heritage, a lively arts scene and an established reputation for innovation within the creative and high tech industrial sectors. In 2017 *The Sunday Times* rated Bristol the best place to live in Britain describing it as 'a small city that feels like a big city' and stating: 'We sum the city up as cool, classy and supremely creative.'⁴ When this news came out Mayor of Bristol, Marvin Rees, said: 'Pinpointing what makes Bristol special isn't easy. It's a combination of many things from the people to the place itself, but at the heart of it is our cultural diversity and independent spirit.' It is noteworthy that residents of the city, population 463,000, speak over 90 languages. The city contains over 4,000 heritage, or 'listed', buildings and has a number of famous historic destinations that make the city attractive to tourists, notably the Clifton Suspension Bridge and the SS Great Britain.

History tells us that Bristol's rise in prosperity was linked to its port, especially to the importation of tobacco and wine and to its active participation in the slave trade. Bristol's involvement in the slave trade was, in fact, substantial, and Edward Colston (1636-1721), a Tory Member of Parliament, was a particularly active slave trader (Dresser 2016). This local history came to international attention when, on 7 June 2020, Black Lives Matter protesters

pulled down a bronze statue of Colston and, to the cheers of onlookers, dumped it into Bristol Harbour.

Despite the relative economic success of the city the evidence shows that Bristol has become, to use Charles Dickens' famous phrase, 'a tale of two cities'. It is troubling to record that social and economic inequality within the city has grown in the period since 2010. A study carried out by Bristol City Council in 2019 found that Bristol has some of the most deprived areas in the country sitting right next to some of the least deprived areas in the country.⁵ Some 15% of Bristol residents (70,000 people) live in the most deprived 10% of areas in England. Marvin Rees drew attention to these disparities when he campaigned to become Mayor of Bristol in 2016, and he has promoted efforts to address them in his One City Approach to city leadership.

Marvin Rees – Mayor of Bristol since 2016

The citizens of Bristol decided in a referendum, held in 2012, to introduce a mayoral model of governance - a city government led by a directly elected mayor. The details of this radical change are set out elsewhere and need not detain us here (Hambleton and Sweeting 2014; Sweeting and Hambleton 2017).⁶ Born in 1972 Marvin Rees is mixed-race and has a working class background. He was brought up by his mother, living at various times, in St Paul's, Laurence Weston and Easton, all relatively deprived neighbourhoods within the city. He is rooted in the community and social networks of St Paul's and has a long history of civic activism, notably in relation to youth work. Rees ran as the Labour Party candidate for mayor in 2012 and lost to George Ferguson, an independent candidate, by 6,094 votes.

As mentioned earlier he ran for office again and became Bristol's second directly elected mayor in May 2016. He was 45 years old and became the first ever directly elected mayor of black African-Caribbean descent to lead any European city. A young and charismatic black man, an individual who is directly descended from people who were enslaved, became the democratically elected leader of a city that had been a major player in the transatlantic slave trade.

Features of the Bristol One City Approach

We can summarise the Bristol governance innovation story by referring to four themes:

- 1) Beyond partnership working
- 2) Co-creating a One City Plan and City Funds
- 3) Boosting place-based leadership talent
- 4) Developing the collective intelligence of the city

1) Beyond partnership working – moving to the co-creation of solutions

As mentioned earlier, the City Office aims to mobilise energies from all five realms of place-based leadership – see **Figure 3** - for the benefit of the whole

city. The overlaps between these realms can, with the right kind of overall civic leadership, become powerful innovation zones, meaning spaces within which actors can co-create new ways of thinking and new solutions.

The central ethos is to focus on making an **additional** contribution over and above the activities of existing agencies and established collaborative arrangements. The City Office strives to add value by accessing networks and resources that otherwise would not be available. 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 on a regular basis. The first City Gathering, held in July 2016 in a public friendly science centre in the centre of the city, attracted 70 civic leaders. Since then, City Gatherings have taken place every six months or so. These 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. They identify topics for detailed attention by cross-sector working groups. These City Gatherings have been very successful in identifying priorities for attention and in building relationships between city leaders. The twelfth City Gathering, held in March 2021, attracted over 400 participants. It needs to be stressed that the City Gatherings are nothing like the conventional partnership working arrangements that used to exist in the city in the past.

The City Office has promoted and supported a large number of imaginative projects bringing together actors from the five realms of civic leadership. The issues for attention stem from the recommendations of the City Gatherings mentioned earlier. There are far too many City Office initiatives to list in this short account 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 was set up to develop ways of achieving this ambitious target. This inclusive approach brought in actors not normally involved in addressing homelessness, for example, local businesses. The initiative delivered 34 new bed-spaces within the 100 days. The collaborative work did not meet the ambitious target but extra bed-spaces were added and new working relationships were created.
- *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. In Spring 2019, when anticipated funding from UK central government for a Feeding Bristol Healthy Holiday 2019 programme did not materialise, Feeding Bristol, a civic initiative that gained charity status in 2018, 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 helping Feeding Bristol to deliver over 50,000 meals, provided by over 120 organisations, to 5,000 needy children, over the six-week summer period in 2019.⁷

- *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, and 2) The development of a citywide donation and distribution network of free sanitary products, with products being provided in community centres, GP surgeries, leisure centres and libraries in priority neighbourhoods.⁸

2) Co-creating a Bristol One City Plan and City Funds

A very 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, and cross-sector teams were set up to take the initiative forward.

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.⁹ 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 collective plan that see the city council's activities as part of a much broader civic effort. The plan enjoys the public support of a Bristol City Leaders Group – a group representing leaders from the five realms of civic leadership shown in **Figure 3**. The plan is reviewed on an annual basis and is rolled forward each year.

Additionally it is important to highlight two novel features of the Bristol One City Plan. First, Bristol is one of a relatively small number of cities in the world to take meticulous account of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed by every country in the world in 2015.¹⁰ The SDGs set out 17 goals and 169 targets in a blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future

for all by 2030. As part of the preparation of the One City Plan, Bristol conducted what is known as a Voluntary Local Review, which is, basically, an assessment of how well the city is doing on delivering the SDGs.

Second, the City Office has co-created a new way of funding delivery of priority elements set out in the One City Plan. 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.¹¹ The 2020 fund, worth £10 million, has focused on economic inclusion, community initiatives, child hunger and moving Bristol towards being a carbon neutral city.

3) Boosting place-based leadership talent

The third element in the One City Approach is the development of place-based leadership talent. The City Gatherings 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 rising leaders from the realms of leadership shown in **Figure 3**.¹²

Stepping Up, a citywide, award winning leadership programme, provides an example. Launched in 2017 Stepping Up is designed to encourage and support BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic), and other groups that have been held back by discrimination, to progress in their careers. The aim is to make the leadership of the public, commercial and voluntary sectors in Bristol much more diverse. Councillor Asher Craig, Deputy Mayor of Bristol, has taken a lead on developing this new programme and now over 60 organisations in the city are engaged in the Stepping Up initiative.¹³

4) Developing the collective intelligence of the city

Bristol has two universities – the University of Bristol and the University of the West of England, Bristol – and they have both been actively involved in helping to develop the Bristol One City Approach. Well before he was elected in 2016 Rees recognized that the two local universities could make a major contribution to the work of his new City Office. In 2017 he invited the author to explore possibilities with both universities for advancing academic engagement with the City Office and, in early 2018, a small team, bringing together colleagues from the two universities and the City Office started to meet on a regular basis.¹⁴ The team drew inspiration from the work of the Atlanta Studies Network, a grouping that links scholars at several universities in Atlanta with a variety of civic agencies in the city (Hambleton 2019).

University civic engagement in Bristol has been linked directly to the Bristol One City Plan, and the first Bristol Forum was held in March 2019.¹⁵ This one-

day 'free to attend' event brought together over 200 participants from across academia, the business, third and public sectors to explore the challenges facing the city and the city region and to develop potential solutions. Over 70 presentations and interactive discussions took place and new relationships were established and various projects initiated.

The Bristol response to Covid-19

The One City response to the Covid-19 emergency has many components, too many to cover adequately here. Fortunately there is more detail on the Bristol One City website for those who wish to follow up.¹⁶ While there are many good features in the Bristol One City Covid-19 communications strategy three should be highlighted. First, whilst the City Council is hosting this website, the information provided is both holistic and user friendly. There are direct links to services provided by all manner of organizations - charities, the NHS, the police, central government and so on. Second, much of the information is place-based and specific to Bristol. For example, there is information for NHS staff and care workers about how to park for free in City Council car parks and in Resident Parking Zones. Third, the information is rapidly updated to take account of changing circumstances, and the communications team makes extensive use of social media.

The Mayor has been issuing a coronavirus information and advice newsletter ever week and, on top of that, the Mayor delivers a regular video update. Although short these videos communicate key messages very clearly. It is obvious that the Mayor is broadcasting his advice from his home and this conveys an immediacy that many people, also constrained by lockdown, can relate to. It is important to refer to Can-Do Bristol, a citywide platform for volunteering and social action. Launched by Mayor Rees in 2017, long before the Covid-19 outbreak emerged, the platform has been incredibly effective in organizing voluntary efforts when the pandemic struck the city.¹⁷

Turning to Bristol's strategic efforts relating to post Covid-19 recovery it is difficult to overstate the importance of the six cross-sector boards set up to deliver the One City Plan. They provide the collaborative foundations for the creation of imaginative proposals and solutions. The six boards relate to: Connectivity; Economy; Environment; Health and Wellbeing; Homes and Communities; and Learning and Skills. Thus, for example, the One City Economy Board, which started work in September 2019, is co-chaired by a Deputy Mayor and the Director of Business West (the local business association). The Board, which brings together representatives from all the realms of civic leadership shown in **Figure 3**, is actively delivering initiatives and projects designed to rebuild the Bristol economy in a more inclusive and more sustainable way.¹⁸ After the pandemic hit the country the Economy Board started meeting once a week and it launched *A One City economic renewal strategy* at the City Gathering on 26 June 2020.¹⁹

Meanwhile the One City Environmental Sustainability Board, which first met in July 2019, has prepared a One City Climate Strategy designed to develop a carbon neutral Bristol by 2030.²⁰ Extinction Rebellion, the increasingly

influential, global environmental movement, has endorsed this ambitious strategy.²¹ In May 2020 Bristol City Council, in line with steps taken in many other progressive cities around the world, announced plans to free the historic centre of Bristol from motor traffic (Morris 2020).

Lessons from the Bristol One City Approach

Before identifying key lessons emerging from the Bristol One City Approach to city governance it is important to refer to the damaging impact of central government policies on all local authorities in the UK. The Conservative Government has sustained a decade long attack on local democracy and local public services (Hambleton 2017; Latham 2017). In the Bristol case the cut in central government financial support to the City Council was from £201 million a year in 2010/11 to £45 million a year in 2019/20 – that's a 78% cut. Central government's misguided commitment to so-called 'austerity' meant that the City Council, alongside local authorities across the country, was forced to cut public spending and local services dramatically.

Despite the constraints Bristol has developed an innovative approach to city governance and this has received international recognition. 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.²² As well as delivering a 100,000 euro cash prize to the city this award suggested that Bristol's innovative approach to collaborative governance was, indeed, breaking new ground.

Lucy Jones (2018), in her study of earthquakes, identifies three important lessons from her own research and from the disaster studies literature as a whole. They are all visible in the Bristol One City Approach. First, having good local governance arrangements in place before, during and after a disaster saves lives and underpins societal recovery. The civic leaders involved in developing and delivering the Bristol One City Approach will be the first to say that it can be improved. Indeed, this urge to innovate is central to the strategy leaders have developed. Nevertheless, the evidence presented here suggests that Bristol's good governance arrangements are serving the city well.

Second, competent and committed place-based leaders can make a huge difference to governmental performance. Empathetic civic leaders can make an emotional connection with other actors – they know their city and are well placed to spur collective action. The hundreds of civic leaders who participate in Bristol City Gatherings provide formidable leadership capacity. These leaders come from all five realms of civic leadership shown in **Figure 3**, and they are only the tip of the civic capacity ice berg.

Third, the disaster studies literature suggests that cities and localities that look ahead, and develop a far-sighted vision for their area, are far better placed to respond to a crisis. They don't have to suddenly agree a vision and develop a collaborative strategy – they already have one. The Bristol One City Plan

took over two years to co-create and, because it has substantial stakeholder buy-in, it provides an excellent platform for post Covid-19 recovery. More than that, because institutional arrangements were carefully built to deliver the plan, via City Gatherings and the creation of thematic boards, good relationships across the realms of civic leadership were already in place before the Covid-19 emergency struck. It is these relationships that are making a major contribution to the resilience of Bristol today.

Emerging themes for leadership studies

This is a conference paper, not a finished academic article. It follows that the remarks set out in this closing section are best seen as tentative suggestions and questions for discussion. They are certainly not conclusions. I welcome reactions to these ideas both at, and after, the conference.

A central claim set out in the early part of this paper is that the COVID-19 pandemic opens up new possibilities for societal advance in general, and for the development of new kinds of societal leadership. I titled Chapter 1 of my new book 'No going back' for a reason (Hambleton 2020). Yes, most of us want a return to some kind of normality, in the sense of being able to leave our homes as and when we wish and to engage in social and other activities. Many people would like to be able to return to work and, ideally, have a satisfying job and a secure future. These are reasonable hopes. However, the COVID-19 calamity suggests that returning to '2019 normality' may not be wise. The pandemic raises fundamental questions that deserve to be explored.

This paper suggests, and this is, of course, a judgement, that the COVID-19 pandemic may be opening up a new political window, one that is presented visually in **Figure 1**. This new window advises that, as part of the recovery from COVID-19, civil society, businesses, trade unions and governments would do well to focus much more attention on **caring** – caring for others and caring for the natural environment on which we all depend. The contagion has, perhaps, helped us rediscover that we are all part of a single organism. Tobias Jones, a British author, offers the following insight:

'The penny has dropped that wellbeing isn't individual but social. We are not actually independent at all, but dependent. We can make each other sick and we can try to make each other well. We've understood that a healthy community isn't merely human, but also its soil, its water, its air' (Jones 2020 p.14)

If this insight is on the right track it seems clear that the post COVID-19 era could well lead to significant rethinking in many societies of the appropriate role of the state in shaping societal outcomes. Leadership and public management scholars should be encouraged to contemplate these new possibilities and to bring their insights and knowledge to the public square.

What specific insights for the development of leadership studies stem from this paper? Here I offer five suggestions or prompts for thinking. These are inter-related but can be readily listed for the purposes of exposition.

First, is 'public leadership' a good way of describing what's needed? It is worth asking if, in the post COVID-19 era, we should review the language we use to describe different kinds of leadership. Should we be moving away from 'public' versus 'private' ways of conceptualising societal problem solving towards more inclusive models? One of the problems with the use of 'public', as an adjective to describe certain kinds of leadership, is that it may not be particularly appealing to private sector actors – they may think 'public' is not for me, I'm a 'private' actor. We can at least ask the question whether 'civic' is more inclusive than 'public'.

Second, while there are signs that interest in the role of place in public policy may be starting to rise, it remains the case that a 'civic', or place-based, perspective on leadership studies, and public management studies more generally, is not receiving the scholarly attention that it deserves. Very few articles in leadership and public management journals make any reference to place. This is somewhat surprising when it is recognised that there are several reasons why place matters in public policy, including: 1) better performance when compared with centralised models; 2) expression of human identity; 3) underpins democratic vitality; and 4) is essential to governmental effectiveness. If place does, in fact, matter how do we encourage leadership scholars to pay more attention to it?

Third, the New Civic Leadership framework presented in this paper addresses power relations in a direct way. Can the distinction between place-less power and place-based power set out in this paper help leadership scholars advance their understanding of the way power dynamics impact on the leadership efforts they are studying? At the outset of this paper I highlighted the four major challenges now confronting societies across the world: 1) The COVID-19 health emergency; 2) A sharp economic downturn arising from the pandemic; 3) The global climate and ecological emergencies; and 4) Disturbing increases in social, economic and racial inequality. Effective approaches to tackling these challenges require a sophisticated understanding of power relations if progress is to be made.

Fourth, in my work with city and community leaders in different countries and contexts I have found the concept of innovation zones, as illustrated in **Figure 3**, to be popular with practitioners. The claim here is that a key task of civic leadership is not (after all) to develop new policies, but to co-create innovation zones, or entirely new spaces for dialogue and learning. These zones, if well constructed and led, can **in turn** lead to the co-creation of far better policies and practices than would otherwise be the case. Would more research on the co-creation and leadership of innovation zones in public policy be desirable? The evidence from the case study of the Bristol One City Approach presented in this paper indicates that bringing together leaders from the different realms of place-based leadership can be extremely productive. Indeed, it may even be that innovation zones can transform the governance of a city.

Fifth, can academic understanding be conjoined more effectively with actors exercising leadership in a locality? Scholars studying leadership and public management are, in my experience, often rather good at straddling the boundary between academe and policy/practice. Indeed, the quality of much of their scholarship depends on them being able to do this. But universities in many countries have, in truth, little understanding of the real value of engaged scholarship. For example, reward systems and promotion criteria, notwithstanding the rhetoric about valuing the 'research impact' of scholarship, are in many universities rather outdated. I am reminded of the insights provided by Ernest Boyer in his Special Report for the Carnegie Foundation on the nature of scholarship. Boyer was ahead of his time in arguing that:

'New understandings can arise out of the very act of application... Such a view of scholarly service – one that both applies and contributes to human knowledge – is particularly needed in a world in which huge, almost intractable problems call for the skills and insights only the academy can provide' (Boyer 1990 p. 23)

Many universities now claim to be 'civic' universities. This is a noble aspiration and some progress is being made on this front. But perhaps there is a question here for academics studying leadership and public management. If place-based leadership matters are there ways in which the leadership of your university can take steps to give more support to scholars wanting to contribute to local leadership development?

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Endnotes

¹ This argument is elaborated in Hambleton (2020) *Cities and communities beyond COVID-19. How local leadership can change our future for the better*. Bristol: Bristol University Press, pp. 61-69.

² For a more detailed account of the Bristol One City Approach see Hambleton (2020) pp. 107-132.

³ The COVID-19 pandemic has, in practice, altered local government electoral cycles in the UK. All local elections scheduled for May 2020 were cancelled. In the Bristol case this meant that the mayor and all the councillors elected to serve for four years in May 2016 were asked to continue to serve until May 2021.

⁴ *The Sunday Times Best Places to Live Guide*, 19 March 2017.

⁵ Bristol City Council (2019) *Deprivation in Bristol 2019*. October. Bristol: Bristol City Council. More:

<https://www.bristol.gov.uk/documents/20182/32951/Deprivation+in+Bristol+2019.pdf/ff3e5492-9849-6300-b227-1bdf2779f80>

⁶ The author co-founded with Dr David Sweeting (University of Bristol) the Bristol Civic Leadership Project in 2012. This bi-university action/research project has published several reports on Bristol's mayoral model of governance. More: <http://bristolcivicleadership.net>

⁷ For more details of the Feeding Bristol Healthy Holiday Programme visit:

<https://www.feedingbristol.org/healthy-holidays>

⁸ For more details on Period Friendly Bristol visit:

<https://www.periodfriendlybristol.org>

⁹ The Bristol One City Plan was launched in January 2019 and rolled forward in January 2020 and in March 2021. For more details visit:

<https://www.bristolonecity.com>

¹⁰ The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the United Nations Member States in 2015, provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>

¹¹ For more details on the City Funds Board visit:

<http://www.bristolcityfunds.co.uk>

¹² For more details on Bristol City Office leadership programmes visit:

<https://www.bristol.gov.uk/mayor/city-office-leadership-programmes>

¹³ The Stepping Up programme has been short listed for a Local Government Chronicle (LGC) national award for promoting diversity and inclusion. See:

<https://www.bristol.gov.uk/mayor/stepping-up-programme>

¹⁴ The author chaired this team, which came to be known as the Bristol Forum Planning Team.

¹⁵ The Bristol Forum was co-organised by the City Office, the University of Bristol and the University of the West of England, Bristol. More: <http://bristolforum.org.uk>

¹⁶ For more on the Bristol One City Approach visit: <https://www.bristolonecity.com>

¹⁷ For more on Can-Do Bristol visit: <https://candobristol.co.uk>

¹⁸ For more on the work of the Bristol One City Economy Board:

<https://www.bristolonecity.com/economy/the-economy-board/>

¹⁹ For more on the Bristol economic renewal strategy: <https://www.bristolonecity.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/One-City-Economic-Recovery-Statement-of-Intent.pdf>

²⁰ For more on the work of the Bristol One City Environmental Sustainability Board:
<https://www.bristolonecity.com/environment/the-environment-board/>

²¹ Extinction Rebellion, as an organisation, does not endorse any particular political parties but they have backed the Bristol One City Climate Strategy. More:
<https://xrbristol.org.uk/2020/03/11/our-support-of-the-one-city-climate-strategy-is-beyond-party-politics/>

²² More on European iCapital 2019: https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/funding/funding-opportunities/prizes/icapital/icapital-2019_en