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## **Rallying the power of place**

There are six elements to Bristol's pioneering collaborative approach to leadership

Robin Hambleton, emeritus professor of city leadership, the University of the West of England, Bristol and director, Urban Answers

Largely unnoticed by our national media, local authorities across the country are actively creating new forms of collaborative governance. As reported in these pages, much imagination is being shown and there is an encouraging diversity of approaches to place-based leadership and civic innovation.

For example, Wigan MBC, LGC's 2019 Council of the Year, should be praised for combining collaborative leadership with imaginative community involvement. It is not alone. Many local authorities recognise the importance of this place-enthusing agenda, particularly at a time when national government is dysfunctional, mired, as it is, in ideological infighting.

What concepts might help us understand how to develop really effective place-based leadership?

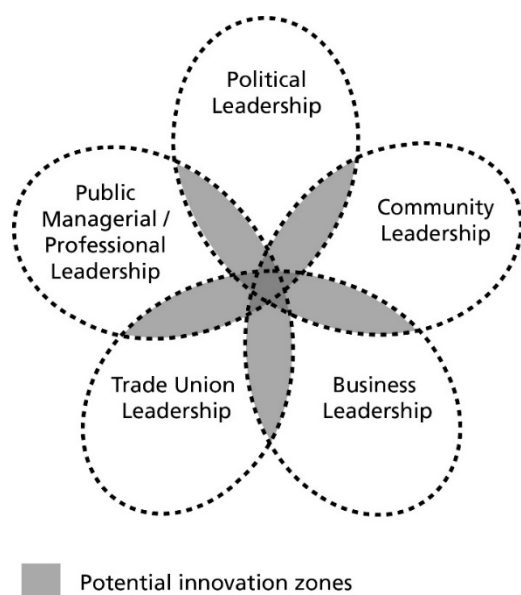
### **The New Civic Leadership**

My recent collaborative research with some of the most innovative cities and places in the world suggests that successful civic innovation requires local leaders to see themselves, not as leaders of an organisation, but as leaders of their place. It is clear that local authority leaders, officers as well elected members, can play a critical role in promoting this shift in thinking away from services and sectors towards a concern for place and the quality of life of communities. Such an approach can open up asset-based ways of working with local actors and stakeholders, and can drive radical innovation and problem solving.

We are witnessing the emergence of what I call New Civic Leadership (NCL), a way of thinking and operating that is now displacing the outdated concept of New Public Management (NPM). Practice varies but, in simple terms, 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 NCL conceptual framework, presented in the diagram, highlights the role of local leaders in facilitating public service innovation. It suggests that, in any locality, there are likely to be five overlapping realms of leadership, with leaders in each realm drawing on different sources of legitimacy.

## The realms of place-based leadership



These leadership roles are all important in cultivating and encouraging public innovation and, crucially, they overlap. The areas of overlap can be described as innovation zones. Here different perspectives are brought together, enabling active questioning of established approaches.

These ideas proved attractive to Marvin Rees (Lab), elected mayor of Bristol City Council, and in the period since 2016, he has worked with civic leaders from all five realms of leadership to orchestrate a new way of governing the city.

### The Bristol One City approach

In the simplest of terms, the Bristol One City approach is an attempt to unite civic purpose in the city, one that seeks to bring together all those who care about the city in a much more collaborative effort. A new city office, located at the centre of the diagram, draws strength from all five realms of civic leadership and is charged with spurring the delivery of the approach.

Mr Rees rejects simplistic top-down leadership models and stresses that effective place-based leadership requires an inclusive, flexible approach, one that involves a process of opening up conversations with different stakeholders and one that involves risk-taking and experiment.

We can summarise the Bristol's approach by referring to six elements:

- *City gatherings*. These feature 100-200 civic leaders and have been held on a regular basis since the city office founders' meeting in July

2016. These highly interactive ‘city conversations’ take place every six months, with participants working in cross-sectoral teams to examine the challenges and how to tackle them. Participants represent big local organisations (for example, the two universities, major businesses, the NHS, police service and trade unions) and a wide range of voluntary and community-based bodies and activists.

- *Innovation zone.* Mr Rees has created a physical innovation zone in city hall on the same floor as the mayor’s office. People from any of the five realms of leadership who are working on the One City Approach are invited to work in this open plan office space on Tuesdays.
- *Collaborative projects.* Project groups are set up to address challenges identified by the city gatherings. An early example is provided by the Street Homelessness Challenge project. A project group, chaired by the city office director, was set up in 2016 to try to create 100 extra beds for homeless people in the first 100 days of 2017. This approach brought in actors not normally involved in tackling homelessness, for example, businesses. This effort created 34 new bed spaces within 100 days and, just as important, has built lasting improvements in collaborative relationships.
- *One City Plan.* A major effort during 2017-18 was to develop a ‘big picture’ strategy for Bristol’s future development, one that looks forward to 2050, and one that local public and private agencies have committed to working towards. Launched at a city gathering in January 2019, the One City Plan has attracted international interest.
- *Place-based leadership.* The city gatherings identified the importance of developing and delivering new kinds of civic leadership programmes, ones that target under-represented groups. The city office has orchestrated a step-change in the provision of place-based leadership programmes – ranging from courses for under-18s to advanced leadership programmes for experienced leaders.
- *City funds board.* Established in 2018, the city funds board brings together representatives from communities, business, finance, the public sector and the two local universities. It is developing match-funding initiatives to focus finance, via repayable loans and grant-giving, on the priority areas set out in the One City Plan.

### **Pointers for the future**

Research on Bristol, as well as other cities, suggests that effective local leaders are able to connect to place-based feelings of loyalty and civic identity. Senior leaders have a key role in setting the tone and encouraging imaginative risk taking. Research suggests that innovation zones don’t just happen. Rather, civic leaders wanting to break new ground need to be proactive in creating them.

In my next LGC article I will turn to discuss a further dimension of local leadership – the development of place-based leadership ‘beyond’ place.

*Robin Hambleton, emeritus professor of city leadership, the University of the West of England, Bristol and director, Urban Answers*

*His recent book is **Leading the Inclusive City**. More:*

<https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/leading-the-inclusive-city-1>

*For more on the **Bristol One City Approach**:*

<https://www.bristolonecity.com/>