

FINDINGS

PUBLIC SECTOR INNOVATION AND LOCAL LEADERSHIP IN THE UK AND THE NETHERLANDS

This study explored the role of place-based leadership in tackling social exclusion, drawing directly on the experience of three innovative cities – Bristol and Swindon in the UK, and Enschede in The Netherlands – to generate new insights into radical changes to public services.

Key points

- A growing number of local authorities are adopting a more fundamental approach to public service reform in the face of disillusionment with traditional approaches and intense budgetary pressures. Some are pursuing an agenda of cutback management, seeking to achieve 'more with less'. In contrast, the three cities in this study have focused on achieving 'more with more' by developing innovative ways of working collaboratively to advance social inclusion.
- Civic leadership is not confined to the local state. Leaders in three realms – political, managerial/professional and non-state (community and business) – all have a vital role. If public services can be co-created by state and civil society working together imaginatively, it may be possible to expand resources to improve local quality of life, even when state spending is in decline.
- The experiences of the three cities involved in the research confirm that, with the right kind of civic leadership in place, areas of overlap between different realms can provide valuable 'innovation zones' – spaces where people with different backgrounds and perspectives come together to co-create breakthrough practice.
- Essential skills and capabilities for transformative collaboration include personal resilience, emotional literacy, and willingness to take risks (and hold risk on behalf of others). Trust and authenticity are valued; people (residents and staff) are seen as a resource, not a problem. Training to develop these skills within local government is vital.
- Radical public service innovation involves a process of social discovery, not a template to copy. However, documenting the process by co-creating 'innovation stories' can inspire others to follow this lead.

The research

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INTRODUCTION

This Anglo-Dutch action-research project examined place-based leadership in three innovative cities: Bristol and Swindon in the UK, and Enschede in The Netherlands. It aims to throw new light on the roles civic leaders can play in advancing social inclusion by engaging in radical public service innovation.

The findings presented here have been co-created in two senses. First, the research bridges the worlds of academia and practice – researchers have collaborated with practitioners to construct an ‘innovation story’ documenting the approach to public service innovation in each city. Second, the research develops new understanding by engaging in international dialogue. People from two countries, with different experiences have shared their ideas and co-created new ways of thinking about civic leadership.

The research questions

By comparing innovative place-based leadership efforts in three cities the project set out to address three questions:

- How does place-based, or civic, leadership contribute to public service innovation and social inclusion?
- What factors influence the effectiveness of civic leadership in different settings?
- What international lessons can be identified about the strengths and weaknesses of alternative approaches to place-based innovation?

Going beyond cuts management

The difficult economic outlook means that many governments, including the UK Coalition Government, are making sharp reductions in public spending. Public authorities are now engaged in an aggressive search for ‘efficiency savings’ and public leaders and managers are urged to ‘do more with less’. This research suggests that the narrow vision of cuts management lacks wisdom. The cities in this report are not driven by the mainstream ‘do more with less’ philosophy now dominating policy making in many countries.

Rather, these cities are working to co-create new solutions to the problems of social exclusion by adopting a ‘more with more’ approach. By emphasising the importance of collaborative working that releases the community and business energies of the locality, the cities are building new kinds of relationship that can lead to an expansion of the total resources available to improve the quality of life in an area, even if state spending is in decline.

Innovation stories

This research developed a new way of reporting on practical experience. At its heart is the idea of an ‘innovation story’ – a document co-created by scholars and practitioners working together. These stories focus on the following three topics.

The Digital+Green City Initiative, Bristol. This is a key part of Bristol’s effort to position the city as a leading European example of a low-carbon, digitally connected city. The Innovation Story examines the emergence and development of the policy and focuses on how it is being applied to foster social inclusion in the city’s Knowle West area.

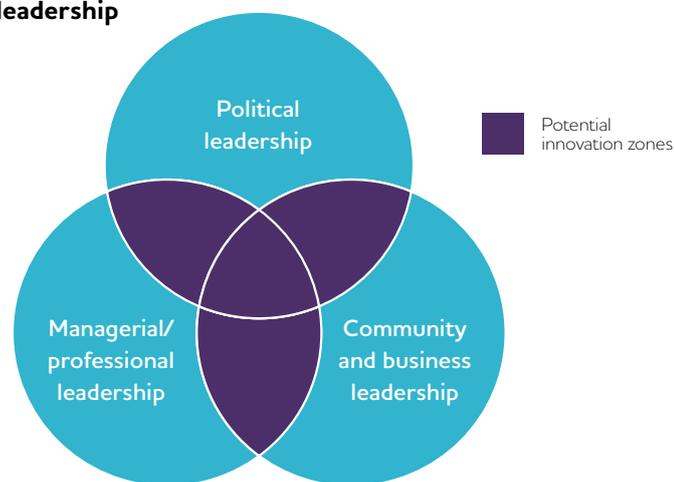
The Social GP Programme, Enschede. This experimental programme in the Velde-Lindenhof area aims to improve the life chances of over 600 residents of one of the most deprived neighbourhoods in The Netherlands. Social General Practitioners (GPs) are working with a limited number of residents to empower citizens to improve their own life chances.

The Swindon Life Programme. Swindon Borough Council and local agencies (health, police and others) are working with Participle (a social enterprise) to develop a new approach to family intervention. The programme is working with a limited number of families with complex needs to bring about long-term positive change, not just for 'problem families', but also for other members of the community and government services.

The three realms of civic leadership

The research discusses and defines four concepts that are rarely brought together in an extended discussion: place, leadership, innovation and social inclusion. This paves the way for the presentation of a model of the three realms of place-based, or civic, leadership.

Figure A: Realms of civic leadership



Leadership in each realm stems from a different source of legitimacy:

- **political leadership** – people elected to leadership positions by voters: directly elected mayors, all elected local councillors, and Members of Parliament.
- **managerial/professional leadership** – public servants appointed by local and central government and third sector organisations to plan and manage public services, and promote community wellbeing. These officers bring professional and managerial expertise to local governance. They may work in the state or at arm's length from it.
- **community and business leadership** – civic-minded people with the time and energy for local leadership activities: community activists, business leaders, voluntary sector leaders, figures in religious organisations, higher education leaders and so on. Their potential contribution to civic leadership is particularly important.

Innovation zones

The research suggests that civic leadership in all three realms can play an important role in developing the 'more with more' approach. The areas of overlap between the different realms of leadership have emerged as critical to the public service innovation process. As shown in Figure A, these areas of overlap are innovation zones – areas where people with different backgrounds and experiences come together to engage in creative dialogue.

Figure A aims to highlight the importance of connecting the different realms and the idea that people moving outside their familiar 'comfort zones' can make significant discoveries. This research suggests that wise civic leadership can orchestrate the emotions and behaviour of people to promote a culture of listening that can, in turn, lead to bold innovation.

The research identifies five critical factors behind public service innovation: leadership; developing a co-creation ethos; redefining what it means to be a public servant; understanding ways of navigating the obstacles to innovation; and challenges associated with building on innovation. In practice, these five themes are highly inter-related.

Lessons for policy and practice

Specific lessons for policy and practice emerged from the research:

- Imaginative political leadership of 'place' is crucial for public service innovation; political leaders are uniquely placed to drive public service innovation because of their position, profile and legitimacy; but Place leadership is multi-level and multi-sector; chief executives, senior managers and team managers are also important, as are non-state leaders with a commitment to enhancing local quality of life.
- Emotional engagement appears important to the innovation process; how people feel about efforts to change public services matters enormously yet this dimension is often neglected;
- Fostering a culture of innovation in organisational behaviour is critical; leaders need to demonstrate how to work collaboratively, give people permission/encouragement to take risks and try out new ideas, and manage fear of failure;
- Supporting catalysts for innovation – identifying and valuing experienced outsiders, external drivers of momentum, potential 'innovation zones', people skilled at spanning boundaries, etc.
- Recognising the value of international exchange as a way of questioning established approaches;
- Using innovation stories – sharing experience in an accessible way without offering it up as a 'replicable example'; places and social needs differ and so too should the local co-creation process.

The authors conclude that radical co-creative public service innovation is a process of social discovery.

About the project

Academics from the University of the West of England, Bristol and the University of Twente worked very closely with practitioners from the three cities to document the processes the cities have used to inspire fresh thinking.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

The main report, **Public sector innovation and local leadership in the UK and The Netherlands** by Robin Hambleton and Joanna Howard, is available as a free download at www.jrf.org.uk

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