

# Overseas experience offers practical ideas

Drawing lessons from experience in other countries can help improve the quality of planning and local governance if they are adapted to local circumstances, argues *Robin Hambleton*



**Malmö: city renewal is based on strategy emphasising sustainable transport and resource use**

The RTPI Planning Convention has a strong international theme this year, which is to be welcomed. We can anticipate that future conventions will follow suit. We are living in a rapidly globalising community in which cross-national exchange can lead to spectacular improvements in planning and public policy.

The interest in boosting society's ability to draw on the experience of other countries goes well beyond the planning and related professions. For example, the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) are now promoting careful examination of the routes other countries have taken as a way of enhancing public service innovation across the board – from place-shaping and city leadership through to customer-driven service delivery and climate change.

At the heart of this expansion of interest is the belief that approaches and practices in other countries can provide a powerful stimulus to fresh thinking in the UK context. Since widespread innovation is taking place in thousands of local authorities across the world, it is relatively inexpensive for policy-makers to examine aspects of this experience and to learn from it. Why stumble blindly into a new policy initiative or approach

when there is so much tried and tested practice in other countries available?

It is perhaps surprising that despite the advantages of adopting an international outlook, we are still not particularly good at learning from others. At times, we find policy announcements that smack of "policy tourism". This flawed approach involves the hasty introduction of a policy instrument from another country ahead of any thoughtful evaluation of its merits. Planners need to learn to recognise and resist the over-enthusiastic quick-fix policy import.

Earlier this year, the IDeA and the LGA commissioned me to write a series of short articles on the theme of "international insights". The aims were to stimulate a more sophisticated conversation about the value of lessons to be learned from working with other countries and to offer advice on how to go about this in a way that delivers real benefits for UK local government. The practice-driven articles (see panel) have focused sharply on topics of pressing public concern in the UK.

In each case, the aim has been to identify an innovative city in another country that is breaking entirely new ground in relation to UK policy concerns. This is an attractive approach as it generates inspiring examples of innovation that can

## INTERNATIONAL INSIGHTS

**Melbourne** A 20-year place-shaping programme based on strong leadership, a quality design culture and managed delivery has transformed the city centre.

**Milan** An innovative approach to city-regional planning in Italy introduced the concept of "habitability" and drew on an open competition to generate ideas.

**Chicago** A three-digit 24-hour phone service has transformed citizens' access to public service providers, setting a precedent for pilot initiatives in the UK.

**Malmö** On its knees economically in the 1990s, the Swedish port city has been regenerated and is now seen as an example of sustainable urban development and renewal.

broaden thinking and spur bolder approaches. In all four cases, politicians and professionals in the selected cities are engaged in practice that can stretch the imagination of planners and policy-makers in the UK context.

A lesson-drawing approach involves more than describing the interesting practice encountered in a foreign city. It involves striving to understand why and how the policy innovation took place, examining the effectiveness of the policy on its own terms and identifying specific policy lessons for a UK audience.

The city of Malmö's climate change strategy illustrates the approach. In the early 1990s the bottom dropped out of the city's economy as the enormous shipyards of the past vanished. Between 1992 and 1994 the city lost a third of its jobs. Yet a decade or so later Malmö is rightly lauded as one of the most far-sighted cities in Europe for sustainable development.

In the Western Harbour area, pedestrians and cyclists have precedence over cars and the whole neighbourhood is carbon-neutral. To the south, in the Augustenborg eco-neighbourhood, a late 1940s housing estate has been transformed into a beautiful area of redesigned public spaces, renovated buildings and 10,000m<sup>2</sup> of green roofs. Around 70 per cent of waste is recycled and the rest used in energy regeneration.

In Malmö and the other three case studies, we can identify four valuable lessons for the UK. First, these innovations have all stemmed from very bold city leadership. Leaders have taken risks and backed their beliefs. Second, these local authorities are not ensnared in a hopelessly centralised performance management regime of the kind we have now developed in the UK. Local leaders have space to innovate in a way that UK local authority chiefs can only dream about.

Third, talented professional officers – planners, urban designers, public service managers, chief executives and the rest – have helped to develop ideas and, crucially, deliver out-of-the-box results. Finally, community empowerment has been vital, involving genuine learning and collaboration with citizens and service users.

*Robin Hambleton is professor of city leadership at the University of the West of England and director of Urban Answers. His new book, co-edited with Jill Simone Gross and published by Palgrave, is *Governing Cities in a Global Era: Urban Innovation, Competition and Democratic Reform*. The *International Insights* series is available at [www.idea.gov.uk/international](http://www.idea.gov.uk/international)*