



Leading places in changing times

A distinctive approach to public service innovation developed by Robin Hambleton and Su Maddock

Our approach is to work alongside strategic leaders to create opportunities for transformative, place-based innovation.

Our perspective

The conventional wisdom now guiding current public service reform efforts, particularly since the Budget plans announced on 22 June 2010, is that public service leaders should 'do more with less'. Leaders of public services across the country are being urged to find ways of reducing public spending. In this difficult environment there is a risk that thinking in central government, local government and in public agencies will become dominated by cutback management. This would be to miss an opportunity.

In our work with innovative localities in various parts of the country the focus is on doing 'more with more'. In these areas the approach involves a strong emphasis on the state working with other actors to come up with new ways of supporting the resilience and wellbeing of local communities. A 'more with more' approach recognises that every community contains untapped resources of knowledge, skill and enthusiasm. There may be less public spending in the coming period but this is only part of the picture. The local quality of life can be enhanced if local enterprise and people's capabilities can be released. Such an approach requires a new settlement between the public and the state.

In an era of resource constraint public leaders should not become obsessed with providing existing services for less money. Rather they should focus on redesigning services with the public to generate better and more innovative solutions.

Many local leaders are already shifting the mind set to treating people as a resource and co-designing services in a way that generates more creative solutions through greater involvement. Existing services often have little or no impact on poor health, reoffending, climate change etc. These challenges demand innovation, experimentation and local involvement.

In our view the central challenge for civic leaders today is not 'doing more with less'. Rather it is to shift the mind set to '**doing better with people**' - it involves treating local people as a resource and working with them to generate more creative solutions.

Emboldening local leaders

Good governance depends on the ability to reflect on the whole system and to be able assess what is working for whom and why. This means being able to scrutinise the way existing practices impact on people's capacity to respond more creatively and being able to make connections where before there was fracture. It is through mature partnership and collaborative practice that bridges are built and new services and thinking develops. This is true at all levels - in communities, in localities, in government and internationally.

Solutions to problems stem from the creation of new connections and relationships rather than from introducing new structures. Social enterprise has been one way of reuniting public value with business enterprise. Another interesting connection is the shared interests of those in the voluntary sector and in small businesses.

Over the past ten years local government has developed mature partnerships. In particular, Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) and Total Place have learnt to develop shared strategies and practices. They have also drawn attention to the impact of government interventions on communities as well as on individuals, on the limitations of concentrating on single funding streams and on the need for more emphasis on impact and outcomes. The focus on place, rather than institutions, has demonstrated the need for whole systems thinking. Perhaps, Total Place's biggest impact has been on the way central government works. Whitehall is now much more aware of the creative potential of local leaders.

Place shaping has always depended on the quality and imagination of local leaders and on their ability to collaborate with one another, but also their ability to connect with local people and work with government. As steps are taken to enhance the powers of local government the time is right to embolden local leaders.

Our approach to local leadership

In our view 'civic leaders' are to be found both inside and outside the state. In the past many approaches to reform focussed on modernising the state. This is important, but it is only part of the solution. Current challenges – particularly the pressures on public spending – require fresh thinking that bridges state and non-state action. This is why we focus on leading places, rather than just leading organisations. It's helpful to distinguish three 'realms of local leadership':

- Elected politicians are important civic leaders and we have extensive experience of working with councillors, elected mayors, MPs and Ministers
- Executives are also important civic leaders. The contribution of chief executives, senior local government officers and civil servants is starting to be recognised, and much of our work is focussed on enhancing the leadership role of public servants in leading places.
- In all the localities there are enthusiastic community leaders 'outside' the state, who are passionate about their communities and represent an untapped leadership resource. They may be community activists, business leaders, voluntary sector leaders, leaders of religious organisations, higher education leaders and so on.

It is in the spaces where the leadership realms overlap that innovative work occurs - because this is when people stimulate each other - we call these areas 'innovation zones'. A simple Figure can illustrate this model.

Figure 1: Civic Leadership - a conceptual framework



Our role in innovation

As well as focussing on place-based leadership our work concentrates on public service innovation. Existing services often have little or no impact on intransigent problems like disaffection with education, reoffending, and climate change etc. These challenges, which affect all communities, demand innovation, experimentation and importantly, working with local people in new ways.

Public service innovation is not 'rocket science' – it is about public servants getting close to local people and local problems and being much more emphatic in taking account of the lived experiences they encounter. This approach is sometimes called 'customer insight', but the use of the word 'customer' constrains the useful thinking that can stem from this approach. The important lesson we draw from promoting innovation in various settings is that it is the experience of service users - of the mentally ill, the unemployed, young people, families with complex needs and so on - that should drive fresh thinking. Efforts to personalise public service provision involve shifting from delivering a standard level and quality of service to working with a person or family to identify solutions matched to their needs. The challenge for public servants is to find a way to tackle the major challenges facing society by working with people. Our approach to innovation starts from these principles.

In particular, we work with leaders to develop narratives, strategies and approaches that will align working practices with what people actually want. This is not easy to do, as transforming operations and services requires the building of trust and commitment to new ways of working. We have learnt that leadership at all levels is critical to transformation in any organisation - and that inquiry, collaboration and perseverance are essential. Innovation is a journey not a one off event. It involves learning from mistakes, and sometimes going down blind alleys before coming up with great solutions. We have found that innovative leaders scope the whole system, seek expert advice, explore and rethink resources, recognise service users as a resource, seek out invisible assets and make connections.

About Robin Hambleton and Su Maddock

Robin Hambleton and Su Maddock have held senior positions in government – in both local and central government in the UK – and have exercised public service leadership responsibilities in a variety of organisations.

Robin Hambleton is Professor of City Leadership at the University of the West of England, Bristol. He has wide experience of city leadership, democratic innovation and change management in local government and public sector organizations in the UK, the USA and in numerous other countries. He has been an Adviser to UK local government ministers, a consultant to Select Committees of the UK House of Parliament, and has written national guidance documents for councils in England, Wales and Scotland. He is Director of Urban Answers. More: www.urbananswers.co.uk

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Su Maddock was Director of the Whitehall Innovation Hub funded by BIS to stimulate innovation across Whitehall, the hub has become a model internationally. She is a Senior Fellow in MBS and a Visiting Professor at the University of the West of England. She has extensive experience in public service innovation across services and an international reputation for public leadership and innovation. A social activist and entrepreneur earlier in her life, she also has community organising and social enterprise experience and an interest in mental health and wellbeing.

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