

Tackling climate change in Malmo, Sweden^{*}

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Innovation involves doing something nobody told you to do. This is because, by definition, when you innovate you invent something new. Nobody could have told you about it beforehand.

Accepting this simple proposition has profound implications for those in civic leadership positions – both nationally and locally. Ministers and local politicians, civil servants and local government officers, and, indeed, public service managers across the board, will need to shed some fairly well entrenched attitudes if innovation in public services is to flourish.

This is because the old ‘command and control’ or ‘target driven’ approach to leadership needs to be jettisoned. In simple terms, fostering a culture of innovation requires leaders to forget about creating management regimes that seek ‘conformance’, and to start fostering problem solving behaviour that breaks new ground in order to enhance public service ‘performance’. Shifting from ‘conformance’ to ‘performance’ models of leadership is demanding as it requires a deep shift in prevailing attitudes.

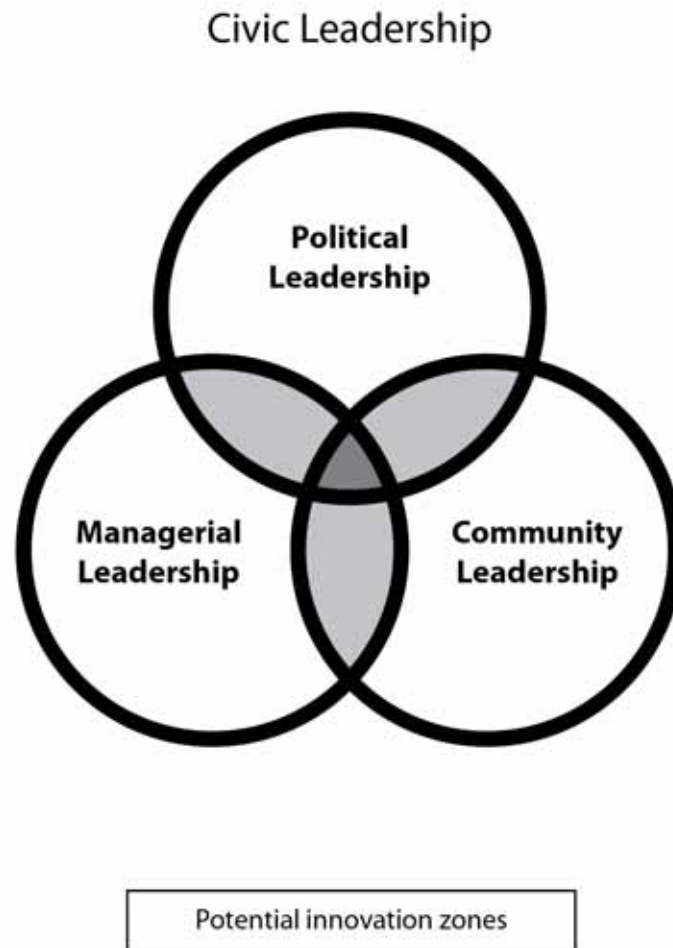
To advance fresh thinking in this area I make two suggestions. First, the public service innovation debate needs to pay more attention to the implications for leadership – local and central. Unless this weakness is corrected quickly the push for innovation could falter. Second, the UK debate on innovation can benefit from considering experience with innovation in other countries.

In relation to the leadership theme, it is important to recognise that ‘leadership’ is exercised by many players in the local government system. Council leaders and chief executives carry enormous leadership responsibility, but the good ones know that effective local authorities cultivate dispersed patterns of leadership - both inside and outside the organisation.

Figure 1 takes this idea forward and offers a new conceptual framework for thinking about locality leadership. It suggests that there are three overlapping groups of leaders all contributing to ‘place-based’ leadership in any given locality – elected politicians, appointed officials, and non-governmental leaders.¹

^{*} This paper first appeared as a chapter in Parker S. (ed) (2009) *More than good ideas: the power of innovation in local government*. London: IDeA/NESTA.

Figure1: Civic Leadership - a conceptual framework



There is a welcome expansion of writing by practitioners on innovation and many of these contributors have drawn attention to the importance of learning from service users.² They highlight the importance of discovering insights from those with experience on the ‘front line’ of service delivery. Professionals, local councillors, community leaders and others involved in working with local people represent an untapped resource.

It is helpful to extend this argument and ask what might be needed to make more of this resource. Thus, as well as giving more attention to the ‘interface zones’ between the state and the citizens it is there to serve, I believe we

should also look at the spaces between the different realms of leadership encountered in any locality.

There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that the zones of overlap between these realms of leadership provide fertile ground for innovation. Indeed, we can think of them as potential 'innovation zones' – see **Figure 1**. This is because actors operating in these zones, if they are open-minded, can discover different perspectives. Better than that, the processes of collaborative working that take place in these zones can spark fresh thinking and creative action. Aligning all forms of leadership – political, managerial, and community – can unleash powerful and far-reaching innovations.

We can explore this idea of 'innovation zones' by examining an example of very bold and successful locality leadership in Sweden. In the last decade or so civic leaders in the City of Malmo have promoted a startling amount of innovation, and this is partly because all three realms of leadership within the city have been brought together to good effect.

Malmo – from rust-belt to eco-city

In the early 1990s the bottom dropped out of the Malmo economy. The port city, located just across the water from Copenhagen, had grown to become the third largest city in Sweden. In the 1960s this successful industrial town had enormous shipyards that could rival any in the world. Now the docks and associated traditional industries have vanished.

While the Malmo fall from economic grace mirrors the decline of many UK industrial cities it was probably more dramatic and more sudden than many. In the three-year period 1992-94 the city lost a third of its jobs.

Anders Rubin, Deputy Mayor for Housing and Urban Environment, who has been an elected councillor since 1985 and knows Malmo's industrial past very well, put it graphically: 'In three years we lost everything. We went from industrial town to no industry town.'

A decade or so later and Malmo is lauded as one of the most far sighted cities in Europe for sustainable development. In an astonishing turn around the city has reinvented itself as an eco-friendly, multi-cultural city.

Malmo has an array of imaginative environmental initiatives delivering new ways of responding to climate change and is pioneering approaches and practices that will be of real interest to UK local authorities.³ So what's happening in the innovation zones?

Zone 1: political and managerial leadership – the Oresund Bridge and the city plan

The political leadership of Malmo should be given credit for being willing to set very high expectations in relation to innovation. Anders Rubin again: 'The disappearance of traditional industries was so fast and so complete that we

had nothing to be defensive about. We simply had to come up with a new approach. And we decided that the way forward was to create a modern city that was at the very top when it comes to environmental issues’.

Ilmar Reepalu, leader of the City, sums up the achievement of the last decade: ‘Our city used to be viewed as a declining, former industrial town on the periphery of Sweden. Now we have positioned ourselves as a modern city at the centre of the Oresund region knowledge economy’.

The construction of the magnificent Oresund Bridge linking Malmo and Copenhagen was, of course, a major strategic decision made at national level by the central governments of Sweden and Denmark, but local politicians and their officers pressed for it. Opened in 2000 the bridge, with its international rail and road links, is contributing to a reshaping of the socio-economic geography of the whole Oresund region.

Within this new regional context the political leadership has orchestrated the preparation and adoption of the Comprehensive Plan for Malmo 2000. Politicians and officers have worked closely together to develop a sophisticated urban plan providing for mixed uses within the city. Christer Larsson, the Director of City Planning, explains how the plan lies at the heart of the movement to create a sustainable city: ‘The structure of the city is crucial to our approach to climate change. Through careful planning designed to ensure mixed-use developments close to railway stations we can reduce the need for car travel enormously’.

Zone 2: managerial and community leadership - the Western Harbour

Politicians in Malmo trust their officers to get on with the job and the Western Harbour area provides an outstanding example.

This is a stunning development where urban designers, architects, environmentalists, structural engineers and city planners have been let loose. Even without mentioning the astonishing ‘Turning Torso’ tower – a 54 storey mixed use skyscraper designed by Santiago Calatrava – the Western Harbour represents a break through in sophisticated environmental design tuned to an urban context.

In line with demanding eco targets set down by the political leadership, the area is served entirely by renewable energy from sun, wind, water, refuse and sewage. Here, people on foot and cyclists have priority over cars, walls and roofs are covered with plants, and green roofs of moss-stonecrop sedum carpet are found on almost all properties.

The extensive hydrological features manage rain runoff and support a broad range of birds as well as creating a ‘city in a garden’ feel. And the whole neighbourhood is carbon neutral, mainly because the district heating system stores heat down in the limestone beneath the neighbourhood in the summer and draws on it in the winter.

Architects, planners and other professionals have worked closely with local people to create a truly innovative urban environment – one that now attracts visitors from across Europe.

Zone 3: community and political leadership – decentralised city services

In 1996, Malmö City was divided into ten geographical areas – each run by a City District Department. In common with similar efforts to introduce decentralised management in many UK local authorities in the 1990s, the aim is twofold: to develop and strengthen local democracy; and to improve public service responsiveness.

This decentralised approach is relevant to current UK discussions of community empowerment as it reminds us that organisational redesign is critical. Adding ‘empowerment’ mechanisms onto the ‘edge’ of unreformed organisational structures is a recipe for failure.

In Malmö the decentralised system enables city government to gain a comprehensive view of the needs of the population in a given district and gives citizens enhanced influence over conditions in their area. The four main areas covered by the City District Departments are: 1) pre-school and compulsory school, 2) health and medical care, 3) individual and family care, and 4) leisure and culture.

Decentralisation frees the political leaders to concentrate on strategic concerns. Anders Rubin put it this way: ‘I am not interested in driving the car of city administration. Other people should drive the car. My job is to work with my colleagues on creating the map so that we can ensure that the car goes the right way’.

Lessons for the UK

The strategy Malmö has pursued in the last ten years or so to tackle climate change provides an example of bold innovation. The city still has many challenges to confront – for example, connecting the eastern part of the city to the central area is a high priority for the City Planning Department. But few cities have been so effective in taking practical steps to tackle climate change.

The key lessons for the public service innovation agenda in the UK can be summarised as follows:

- Bold political leadership can establish a vision for a city that creates space for breath taking innovations that lead to striking improvements in the local quality of life
- Political leaders cultivate civic leadership across the entire city, and recognise that local leadership at the neighbourhood level is just as important as ‘big strategy’ leadership stemming from city hall

- Radical decentralisation of decision making to the district level enhances public involvement and service responsiveness
- Recruiting creative officers, and giving them authority to take risks, means councils are likely to come up with new solutions
- Recognise that powerful elected local authorities can make spectacular progress when it comes to innovation
- Strengthen the financial power of UK local government and discard the over-centralised performance regime created in recent years.

The Malmo experience shows that local councils can make a significant contribution to innovation in modern society, but only if the central state recognises the value of local government and respects the right of different places to do things differently. Swedish local authorities have much more power than their UK counterparts and they have the political legitimacy to experiment. This is the central lesson for those wishing to promote innovation in UK public services in the next decade.

Note

A longer article on Malmo, one that includes a more extended discussion of climate change as well as details of the innovations taking place in the Augustenborg area of Malmo, is provided in the [International Insights](#) section of this website.

References

¹ This framework is elaborated in Hambleton R. (2008) *Civic Leadership for Auckland: An International Perspective*. Research Paper for the Royal Commission on Auckland Governance, Auckland, New Zealand. Available at: www.royalcommission.govt.nz

² See, for example, Burton M. (ed) (2008) *Innovation through people*. SOLACE Foundation Imprint, July; Maddock S. (2007) *Creating the Conditions for Public Service Innovation*. National School of Government, The Young Foundation, NESTA, November.

³ More details are provided in Hambleton R. (2008) 'From rust-belt to eco-city', *Municipal Journal*, 19 June, pp 16-17 and, in longer form: www.idea.gov.uk/international