At next month’s RTPI Planning Convention, speakers will explore ways in which planners can contribute to the creation of more prosperous and more inclusive communities. One theme to be spotlighted is how to develop the role of planners in civic or place-based leadership.

Since becoming RTPI president, Stephen Wilkinson has stressed the importance of outgoing public leadership in advancing the cause of inclusive city and regional planning. In January he told The Planner: “Building substantial new developments is a highly complex process and, ultimately, the planner is an essential part of that process, bringing people together to change places. So if there’s one skill deficit we need to address it’s about leadership.”

There is, indeed, a leadership gap. This is partly because planning theory has consistently failed to consider the role of leadership in delivering effective city and regional planning. This is a startling omission when it is clear that planning professionals often refer to the role of leadership in bringing about high-quality urban development. And there are many good examples of planners as civic leaders – my recent book (Leading the inclusive city) has 17 inspirational stories drawn from 14 countries.

What I found was that successful leaders bring their own personalities and enthusiasms to the task and develop their own leadership style. There is no fixed model. Nevertheless, leadership analysis can advance understanding of how progress is made, and lessons can be identified.

But what is leadership? A long-established view, now past its ‘sell-by’ date, sees it as a top-down affair in which senior people issue instructions to subordinates. This tends to picture leaders as heroic figures, charismatic individuals with a vision and followers.

A contrasting view, facilitative leadership, emphasises the importance of leaders listening to diverse views and building coalitions. In this model leadership is not about ‘knowing the answers’ and encouraging others to follow. Rather, it is the capacity to spot talent and release collective problem-solving capacity.

My own definition of leadership is ‘Shaping emotions and behaviour to achieve common goals’. This definition draws attention to how people feel, and it emphasises the collective construction of common purpose.

Leadership in placemaking

It is incontestable that place-less power has grown significantly in the last 30 years or so. By this I mean the exercise of power by decision-makers who are unconcerned about the impact of their decisions on communities in particular places.

Planners are place-based leaders. In an important sense they can contribute – with others – to checking the exploitative...
tendencies of place-less power. My research has identified four main forces that frame the space for local agency: environmental, economic, socio-cultural and legislative. But how is effective leadership exercised within this frame?

In any given locality there are likely to be five realms of place-based leadership reflecting different sources of legitimacy:

1. Political – people elected to leadership positions by the citizens.
2. Public managerial/professional – public servants appointed by local authorities, governments and third sector organisations to plan and manage public services, and promote community well-being.
3. Community – ordinary-minded people who give their time to local leadership activities.
4. Business – local business leaders and social entrepreneurs with a stake in the long-term prosperity of the locality.
5. Trade union – trade union leaders striving to improve the pay and working conditions of employees.

Leadership in Planning

A critical role in bringing different perspectives together.

Emerging leadership themes

Making Equity Planning Work (1990), co-authored by a city planning director (Norman Krumholz) and an academic (John Forester) is a book on equity planning that offers useful insights into civic leadership. With the election of President Trump, it is attracting renewed interest in the USA.

Krumholz, formerly planning director for Cleveland, Ohio, says: “To be effective, planners need powerful friends and allies, and coalition building must be an essential part of their strategy if they actually want to accomplish anything. Coalition building is key. “But I offer two lessons to modern-day planners,” he adds. “First, they must want to do equity planning and not focus simply on physical planning and managing big data. Second, they must want to try to protect the poor and their neighbourhoods and be willing to take some political risks in the process.”

Three lessons emerge from these analyses of leadership:

1. Values in planning matter. Spatial planning, if it means anything, is about serving the public interest ahead of serving the interests of private capital. At a time when authoritarian forces in society appear to be gathering, the importance of planners standing up for progressive thinking relating to social, environmental and economic equality is more important than ever.

2. Leaders matter. Local leaders are familiar with what matters most to local people. Planning professionals are well placed to advocate for intelligent policies that strive for community well-being, caring for the natural environment on which we all depend.

3. Planning scholars should give more attention to leadership in planning. Do this, and articles that draw lessons from successful place-based leadership would become a mainstay of The Planner in coming years.

Robin Hambleton is Emeritus Professor of City Leadership at the University of the West of England. His book, Leading the Inclusive City: Place-based Innovation for a Bounded Planet is published by Policy Press: http://policypress.co.uk/leading-the-inclusive-city

Robin and Christer Larsson will be speaking at the RTPI Convention on 17 June.

Progressive planning in Portland

Portland, in the US state of Oregon, has an international reputation for progressive planning. A city of 619,000 in a metropolitan area of 24 million, it has long-standing commitment to sustainable urban development.

“Over the past eight years, Portland has shifted its focus to not only advance traditional planning and sustainability, but also to more fully understand issues related to equity, displacement and social justice,” says planning and sustainability director Susan Anderson. Anderson (centre right) and her team worked closely with then mayor Sam Adams to create the Portland Plan, adopted in 2012. This bold and innovative citywide document puts equity at the heart of strategy and provides a framework for housing, economic development, environmental and transportation plans. For example, the city’s commitment to social equity was embodied in its 2035 Comprehensive Plan and its Climate Action Plan.

New mayor Ted Wheeler is building on the work of his predecessors and playing an important role in the Network of American cities opposed to divisive policies proposed by President Trump. For example, shortly after taking office in January he reaffirmed the importance of Portland’s role in the Sanctuary Cities movement. “Under my leadership as mayor, the city of Portland will remain a welcoming and safe place for all people regardless of immigration status,” he said. Anderson says planning can play an important role in advancing social and environmental justice.

“Effective leaders are able to share their vision, engage people meaningfully, mobilise resources and work to empower people from throughout their community to reach shared objectives,” she says. “Navigating the political, neighbourhood and business forces is essential, along with collaborating with public and private sector champions.”

Portland Plan 2012

www.portlandonline.com/portlandplan

Going green in Freiburg

Dynamic municipal leadership has established the German city of Freiburg as a world leader in sustainable urban development. The city – population 120,000 – and the commitment to green values by a buoyant economy built around – among other things – renewable energy, has had a significant impact on quality of life. Daeschke formed a particularly strong relationship with Social Democrat Dr Ralph Böhm, Freiburg’s mayor from 1983-2002.

Community activism is, arguably, the driving force in the politics of the city. Any commitment to green values and collective purpose is highly developed. Daeschke believes that planners need to come up with a clear vision and excellent ideas for progressing that vision – but to always remember that someone might have better ideas. “You have to be open and demonstrate that you are listening. People must have trust in you.”

Planners he says, “should develop an emotional bond with place. They should, he says, “stay put” for a time because it can take years to bring ideas to fruition. “Planners have to be long distance runners,” he says. “Continuity, sensibility and a tireless dedication are very important qualities, but to be successful planners need to have the courage to work with local political leaders to take the longer view.”

The Freiburg Charters for Sustainable Urbanism 2002 www.academyforurbanism.org.uk/freiburg-charters

Low impact, high sustainability in Malmö

In 1994, civic leaders in Malmö, Sweden, faced a formidable challenge. Traditional industries like shipbuilding were in decline and the established economic structure of the city was, in effect, collapsing. Elected leaders, with support from officers, responded imaginatively. Under mayor Rimar Reepalu, a vision was developed that imagined Malmö as a harmonious modern, environmentally aware city.

The initiative was on responding to climate change through a programme of eco-friendly regeneration of the old industrial area. As new residents arrived in the city, the commitment to social sustainability and inclusion emerged to sit alongside environmental sustainability. “The structure of the city is crucial to our approach to climate change,” says Malmö’s planning director Christer Larsson (above right). “Through careful planning designed to ensure mixed-use developments close to railway stations we can reduce the need for car travel and improve access for residents to job opportunities.”

A Comprehensive Plan for Malmö was adopted in 2000 and updated in 2014, to grow the city with the smallest possible environmental impact and high-quality development clusters around public transport nodes, and the plan aims to create an appealing city that is socially, environmentally and economically sustainable. Larsson believes that planners can make a valuable contribution to civic leadership: “Good planning involves facilitating a process where different views, opinions and interests are integrated into a balanced result – creating new buildings, public spaces and living environments.”