

Cautious success claimed in Cumbria

By Nicholas Timmins

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It is early days for even a big idea to have produced any large outcome. Most Total Place projects are pilots that have barely started.

But Jill Stannard, acting chief executive of Cumbria county council, which was one of the first areas to embrace [the concept](#), says it is already making a difference – even if the quantifiable results are modest so far.

The county, along with its six district councils, the police, the primary care trusts and the national park are jointly supporting Local Links – a clutch of one-stop shops that provide information on and access to all these services – not just the traditional council services – in one place.

Many more queries are being resolved in a single call, she says. That is undoubtedly saving time and money, for both the public agencies and local population, “but it is very hard to quantify how much that is”.

Cumbria’s partners are also piloting an initiative called Together We Can. Rather than picking off problems one by one, individual streets or areas are targeted and all the services go in at once over a week or so.

Potholes are filled, fly-tipping sorted, a “street doctor” is available from the NHS providing ‘stop smoking’ and other health advice, the fire service offers smoke alarms, buildings are cleaned.

The project is partly tackling problems, partly prevention, says Ms Stannard. “If we do things before complaints mount up we can do them quicker and more efficiently, although again it is hard to quantify the savings.”

Cumbria was already using some pooled budgets for health and social care. But Total Place has pushed the county and its districts into looking at sharing legal, financial and IT services, she says. That is something of an achievement, given that relations had soured after the county bid to become a unitary authority, in effect taking the districts over.

But she cautions against the idea being seen as a magic bullet.

“We are used to delivering traditional efficiencies,” she says. “The difficult thing is transformational change – how do we work together with different agencies to reduce duplication?”

David Clark, chief executive of Solace, the local government chief executives' organisation, also notes that Total Place was originally conceived, ahead of the recession, as a way of achieving better results, not necessarily of saving large sums.

"We have," he says in a [commentary](#) on the idea, "a tradition of burdening quite good ideas with excessive expectation."

Civil servants, he notes, "do not get Brownie points for scrapping programmes and giving the money to other ministers and departments", so the challenge of making this work is at least as large for Whitehall as it is for the myriad agencies in the public sector.

He adds: "If we are going to have less money for public services, we simply have to find some way of delivering them better and at lower cost."