

Less is more in the Total Place world

Taking an inward view is no longer a viable option, to reduce costs and improve services organisations must collaborate more, as the success of Calling Cumbria shows and the new Total Place initiative

- Jo Preece
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The announcement of Total Place in April this year, following on from the success of Calling Cumbria, was timely and welcome.

However, subsequent reports expressed concerns about the approach, its funding and administration. A fundamental question is why so much effort and attention has been directed at seamless service delivery in recent years, with so little apparent progress or sustained improvement.

There are many factors that discourage organisations from collaborating and inhibit seamless service delivery.

As long as individual organisations have their own diminishing 'pots' from which they are expected to deliver more and meet stringent performance and efficiency targets, they will tend to take an inward and short-term view.

There are exceptions, though, such as the Department of Health and Steria's joint venture, NHS SBS, which provides operational efficiency financial, accounting and payroll services to more than 100 primary care trusts, and has been a proven success. However, as a whole, shared service delivery through a more joined-up approach in the UK [public](#) sector has been meagre.

Technology is a key enabler of joint working; but it is not enough on its own. Most public sector organisations have more technology than they need or can manage efficiently. What is really needed is less, more consolidated and integrated technology, deployed effectively to simplify processes, allow more agile working and generate a better return on investment.

The less-is-more argument applies equally to governance and intervention, as the public sector is overwhelmed by frameworks and initiatives to monitor, measure and regulate its every move.

This amount of top-down control tends to inhibit innovation, driving instead an inward-looking culture of compliance in which the objective is just to 'tick the box'. What is needed is a different set of behaviours and a culture more focused on outcomes for citizens across public services, as opposed to the performance of individual silos. Total Place is looking like it may be the answer.

Challenging the prevailing attitudes and behaviours of an organisation or sector is neither quick nor easy, but is a necessary part of breaking through boundaries and joining up services.

Unfortunately, talk of shared vision, engagement and culture has become devalued and devoid of real meaning through over-use; everyone has vision statements, strategies and plans but it's all too easy to hide behind the words and carry on working in the same old way.

Nonetheless, the principles of effective change management still hold good, as people do need to feel involved if they are to be convinced to let go of long-held beliefs and behaviours.

Top-down change, even with strong and charismatic leadership, is rarely successful on its own in the longer term, as people tend to revert to old habits once the pressure is off.

Calling Cumbria appears to have been one of the first local leadership programmes to have really worked and there are a number of success factors that characterise and set it apart from other initiatives aimed at joining up public services.

These are all interrelated, but seem to come down to: fostering the right environment through openness and the opportunity to engage the community about what really matters to them; encouraging people to set aside their organisational identities and the institutionalised assumptions of one group about another; creating a collective identity which harnesses the energy and commitment of people proud of their place and of public services.

Although it's still too early to claim any headline-grabbing outcomes, Calling Cumbria provides a genuinely inspiring glimpse of the possibilities of cross-organisation collaboration reshaping local services to make them more responsive and tailored to local needs.

Such public sector partnership working is at the heart of Total Place, but can an initiative mandated from the top down create the environment, energy or commitment that true collaboration requires?

Initially the programme attracted comment for its apparently heavy-handed, bureaucratic approach and emphasis on spend and value for money, rather than services designed around the citizen and local communities. However, progress since then, as the pilots choose their themes and galvanise themselves into action, suggest that this is not just another Whitehall initiative.

In Calling Cumbria, much effort and energy was put in at a local level in order to understand and reach mutual agreement on issues and priorities, redefining customer interfaces and interactions. Facilitating this work will be key to the success of Total Place and there are encouraging signs that this is happening, as central and local government agencies pitch in together and the energy on the ground matches the political will for change at the top.

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