

# Total Place offers a special opportunity

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The 'whole area' approach to service provision, adopted in the Total Place initiative, was Sir Michael Bichard's idea. LGC asked him about its progress

## **LGC: Are you surprised by the amount of interest Total Place has generated?**

Sir Michael Bichard: I've been pleasantly surprised by the enthusiasm it's produced, but I think we must manage expectations. It's not the answer to all of our current problems but it is an opportunity.

## **Have the aims of the programme developed differently from the way you anticipated?**

Not really. The aim was to give as much freedom as possible to the areas to develop their own style, tone and vision. I've seen my role as trying to maintain the space for them to do that. There's always a danger that it becomes just another national initiative. No one wants that to happen but sometimes we all lapse back into our old ways.

## **The pilots submit work tomorrow for the pre-Budget report. Are there any really interesting approaches?**

Some of the work Croydon and Manchester are doing around early years services looks pretty interesting. But we must remember that one of the main objectives was to try to get feedback on how government can work differently to facilitate more sensible planning and delivery at a local level.

## **Have you run into obstructions from Whitehall departments? We hear complaints about the Department of Health.**

I'm happy with the response we've got from Whitehall departments. You can't expect everything to slot into place immediately. There will be some departments that are more committed than others initially. I'm confident the Department of Health is going to be a positive part of this. They need to be because they are so critical to delivering joined-up services for a lot of priority groups locally. But I have no indication they are not going to be involved.

## **There has been unease about Tribal's involvement in an ill-defined role. Do you share those concerns?**

I think the issue about Tribal is in danger of being blown out of proportion. It's a piece of work. It was commissioned and maybe there could have been more consultation about the commissioning. But I don't even see it as being core to what we are trying to achieve here. There will always be examples of things that don't go exactly as you'd want them to but so far this programme has been a success. We can all lapse back into our stereotypes if that's what we want to do, but it won't help clients locally.

## **Have you had any indication from the Conservatives that they plan to take on the work the pilots have done and continue this programme?**

I've not had any specific discussions with them on that matter. But if you look at the statements they've made on localism and devolution you would have thought Total Place was along the right lines. I think Total Place is trying to do the things most parties are talking about – to get sensible joined-up action to the local level and agencies.

## **Does measuring the true costs of what the state currently does risk missing what really adds public value?**

I tried to explain to [maverick management consultant] John Seddon when he came in – as I know this is his line – that Total Place was not primarily about counting costs. The only reason we included it was that, certainly in Cumbria, it was quite a motivating factor to find out, in their case, that more than £7bn a year was being spent in their area. It also brings home what a 1% increase in cost effectiveness can achieve. But it is an exercise that needs to be gone through quickly before moving on to the real questions of what are the key priority issues for this area, how can they be tackled more effectively and how can we reduce costs while doing that.

## **Four months into the programme, what is your vision of where it will lead?**

We are getting to the crunch time in terms of whether we are going to get realistic ideas about how government can change the way it operates to make life easier on the ground. Total Place was never about producing one simplistic model for the future. But it could be a very important input to how whoever is in government goes about looking for the savings that are going to be necessary in the next decade.