



Total Place: Is it total nonsense?

22 September, 2009 | By John Seddon

My understanding of the conversation I had with Sir Michael Bichard differs from his.

I fully accept Total Place is not primarily about counting costs - as he explained - but my point to him was that counting costs teaches you nothing.

At a time of severe austerity it is incredible that 13 councils are being encouraged to spend £250K each on an exercise that will lead to no useful knowledge.

Total Place is focussed on a significant problem. Local services are subjected to fragmentation, duplication and high levels of unnecessary cost; there is considerable scope for improving services and driving out costs.

And that was my key message in our conversation, if you cut costs you often create costs, costs only fall when you drive them out.

To drive costs out you need to understand and remove the causes.

Once again, Total Place shows an understanding that the causes of costs are in the ways government requirements interfere with service design and delivery.

As far back as 2005 I wrote a report for Ivan Lewis (then minister for adult social care) and David Behan (then head of CSCI) explaining how the requirements of CSCI and the DoH fragment social care provision and create poor services with high costs.

The same knowledge is being put to use in Wales, where the result will be more people being cared for in their communities, retaining independence and dignity and not – as is the case everywhere – being put in expensive and unwanted residential care.

The first step in Total Place should be to understand demand from our communities.

Following citizens' demands through the various service providers illustrates powerfully how services are fragmented and brings into clear view the ways in which central requirements impede service delivery and create costs.

From this position of knowledge constructive change can occur.

Sir Michael, by contrast, believes that collectively realising a large sum (total costs in Cumbria were £7bn) will motivate people to do something. But what might they do?

I expect many will be attracted to the plausible but flawed ideas associated with economies of scale (shared services, back offices). And these too will create costs.

Total Place lacks sound method. It is a last-ditch attempt to improve services from a regime that fails to recognise that it is the regime itself that creates costs.