

The Guardian roundtable in association with Be Birmingham and the Audit Commission

# Overlapping interests

Total Place is a new initiative to examine how cutting out duplication in public service delivery can improve quality and reduce costs. But is this really a 'magic bullet' solution? **Mark Smith** reports from a recent debate

**A** Whitehall initiative in 1972 attempted to examine the total resources used in six cities, and to come up with a plan to "transform" them. The thinking was that only a root and branch review of local government expenditure would have the necessary scope to find innovative solutions to streamlining government services, promote partnership working and, crucially, save money.

Nearly four decades later, on the brink of deep public sector spending cuts, policy-makers are again attempting to squeeze efficiency and surplus cash from "the umpteenth weighing of a pig", as Total Place has been called. The aim is to identify and account for all public resources being deployed in the pilot areas, and then spend an extra £5m to see how they can be better managed. Each is focusing on one small area of spending, hoping to identify lessons that can be applied more widely.

At the heart of Sir Michael Richard's brainchild is a drive towards partnership working - finding out where agencies and services overlap, and how they can make early interventions to reduce long-term service costs.

A recent roundtable discussion convened by the Guardian, in collaboration with local strategic partnership Be Birmingham and the Audit Commission, asked whether the Total Place initiative could be the "magic bullet" the public sector needs to dig itself out of a spending black hole, without a collapse in local service provision.

The debate, which was held under the Chatham House rule that allows speakers' comments to be reported but not attributed, kicked off with the assertion that Total Place must have legs as an idea, because senior public sector managers are already dampening down expectations. The table first heard an account of the Birmingham pilot, where £7.5bn of public sector cash had been mapped out. "The idea was to follow the money, and see where it led us," a participant explained. "Families are facing a range of issues, some not interconnected, but the challenge was to dismiss short-term thinking to analyse the £7.5bn coming into Birmingham every year."

One way in which collaborative thinking is being put into practice in Birmingham is with the approach to drug and alcohol abuse and mental health. By focusing on preventive measures, Birmingham could save £400m over 15 years, according to US research. Hospitals have been trialling specific units for patients with alcohol-related problems, where they can be given preventive treatment, with co-ordinated interventions from across a range of agencies. Figures from the police reveal that a single murder costs around £1.1m in services, from investigation to the legal and social services work, so the scale of preventive cost savings - especially in reducing gang violence, for example - is parallel with the moral gains.

## Changing the culture

It was raised, however, that any savings made are hard to quantify. "It's a completely different way of working," said one participant. "The focus needs to be on changing the culture and behaviour within public services, rather than fixating on financial outcomes." For example, in Britain's many two-tier authorities, which authority should take the lead? Total Place had failed to provide a satisfactory answer so far, it was agreed, though there was also consensus that Whitehall needed to let go if the initiative was to reach its full potential.

One participant said, perhaps only slightly in jest, that if Total Place had any real ambitions, then the first thing it should do was change its name - which an incoming Tory government would probably do. This opened the debate to the political dimensions of Total Place. "If it is to happen nationally, it will have to be forced through politically. One thing politicians are good at is passing laws, and civil servants are good at being told what to do. If it was left up to the civil service to make these changes, we'd still be talking about it in four years' time." This statement was greeted by a mixture of knowing smiles and blank faces around the table.

Kent, one of the other pilot areas for Total Place, was discussed in terms of the progress made and the opportunities still to be taken. Kent, a two-tier authority with a £10bn budget, now has a single phone number and single web portal for all local government services. Getting even this far, however, has proved an



Public money used to spectacular effect at Birmingham's Artsfest event last year Photograph: Andrew Fox

## At the table

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**Peter Gilroy**  
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**Jim Graham**  
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**Nigel Keohane**  
Senior researcher,  
New Local  
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**Jackie Mould**  
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**Daniel Oppenheimer**  
Chief operating  
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**Mark Rogers**  
Chief executive,  
Solihull  
metropolitan  
borough council



**Andy Sawford**  
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**John Tizard**  
Director, Centre  
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uphill struggle, and more challenges lie in wait. An audit was done recently on all county and district council properties, and the result was "embarrassing". "Ask yourself a simple question: are we using these buildings efficiently? I mean, just think of all the separate reception areas."

A note of caution was struck about the widespread belief that increased efficiency and streamlining of services is the solution to the spending cuts. One participant insisted: "If any of the forecasts of the kind of spending cuts we expect are in the right ballpark, then there's no way it can be done simply through efficiency measures. It might have to come down to who gets it, and who doesn't." Another participant added: "We've been hearing the phrase 'more for less' an awful lot, but the truth might be 'less for less'."

## Evidence base

A key milestone in assessing the impact made by the Total Place trials will come early in December with the publication of the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA). The CAA is the new Audit Commission framework for the independent assessment of local public services in England, and replaces the Comprehensive Performance Assessment. "The CAA marks a huge culture step forward," said one delegate. "In December we'll be able to review the results of an assessment based on local priorities, focusing on all the public services in an area, rather than just the work of councils. It provides the basic framework for a real assessment of service delivery across the board."

But after all this time, can it be right that the government still wants more research and evidence about how it is spending taxpayers' money? One participant said: "As a society, we are weak on evidence-based policy-making. Much more serious consequence analysis is needed. Public services fail a lot of people at the moment, in quite serious ways." An interesting point was raised about the hot-potato issue of risk: can we now have a serious conversation about whether it is worth trying to cut down on risk to the most vulnerable children, if that results in unwanted outcomes for the huge majority? One participant asked: "How can we measure success or failure in a more intelligent way? What we are unable to do is weigh up the risk to all the other children of putting such tight regulations in place to save that one child.

What wider effect is that actually having? Part of the problem is that we can't have that conversation."

There was some concern about using spending figures on individuals and households to inform the debate, for fear that unpalatable truths could throw a spanner in the works of innovation. If we, as citizens, find out how much money our public bodies are spending, will we be horrified? The fact that 80% of social care spending goes to just 3% of families is not widely known. "Will the middle classes hijack spending and demand more?" asked a participant. "That's the kind of conversation district councils need to have, but there's a danger people might think they're not getting value. It's difficult to create language to engage the public about how we're making tax pounds go further."

Perhaps a more fundamental question for public service reform is where to draw the boundaries - literally, the geographic boundaries. Roads, transport and many other public services go across existing political borders. Delegates spoke of forming relationships that transcend district boundaries, but that still leaves the question of which geographical level innovations are best suited to Total Place's innovations. "We all assume there are impermeable administrative boundaries, but roads have a terrible habit of carrying on beyond these. At what geographic unit is it most effective to make decisions on transport infrastructure? It's certainly not at a county council level. It has to be at a regional/sub-regional level."

The debate is still raging. As one participant put it, there is a big fear that Total Place is yet another exercise in the public sector "talking to itself". But at least it's talking.



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