



A briefing note from The Ideas Mine

'Duty to Involve', Total Place and the Third Sector

Context

The three Labour administrations in power between 1997 and 2010 put considerable emphasis on social justice and democracy objectives that influenced the way many policies were developed and delivered. The strengthening communities agenda was strongly influenced by both of these overarching themes leading to numerous initiatives to tackle social and economic exclusion and to empower local communities through increased awareness of, and involvement in local decision-making.

As knowledge and experience of working to strengthen communities was built up, there was an increased recognition that these two areas of intervention are complementary, and indeed, that there is great synergy between them. The third sector has an acknowledged role to play in promoting economic and social inclusion by providing community engagement, personal developmental, skills and job creation services. It is also being seen as valuable ally for local and sub-regional authorities wishing to involve communities in decision-making.

The previous Labour administration also sought ways to improve delivery of services to local communities. Part of a wider public service reform agenda, this has led to greater involvement of community and voluntary organizations as a conduit to reveal the priority needs of communities, and even to help deliver cost effective services to those communities. The move to improve local service delivery was accompanied by pressure to achieve increased value for money, for example through sharing back office costs between agencies.

The global financial crisis has led to the most severe public funding crisis experienced since the Second World War. It has increased the emphasis within the public sector on the need to deliver 'more for less' and therefore the importance of 'best value' commissioning. Alongside the 2009 Budget, the Treasury issued a report from its Operational Efficiency Programme calling for £9 billion in efficiency savings across the public sector. It introduced the Total Place pilots that aimed to make services more client focused and to make savings through the joining up of local delivery of publicly funded services. A final report on the pilots issued in March 2010 set out the then Government's proposed actions to support further roll-out of the Total Place concept and encouraged local authorities to continue or start planning for this joined up approach to service delivery.

Post-election Possibilities

The result of the election is unlikely to have a major effect on the general thrust of policy for community empowerment and providing best value.

In the wake of the 'expenses scandal' and perceived loss of faith in politics by the public, all parties are keen to stress the need for greater accountability of public servants and services to the people.

"Real change comes not from government alone. Real change comes when the people are inspired and mobilised, when millions of us are fired up to play a part in the nation's future..." David Cameron, foreword to Conservative Party Manifesto

Both coalition parties are signed up to the principles of devolving power to communities where appropriate and have stated their support for Total Place. Indeed Caroline Spelman, then Conservative shadow spokesman on Local Government, said they would 'be bolder and move faster' in implementing a Total Place approach if returned to Government.

As stated above the impact of reduced public sector budgets is being and will continue to be felt across the board, but the possibility of public spending being cut deeply and quickly as promised by the Conservatives, raises the spectre of the economy moving back into recession, further reducing the income available to local authorities. Initial analysis of the coalition agreement suggests that the mix of commitments to ring fence budgets and to tax changes (in particular the £10k threshold for income tax) will lead to even larger proportional cut for departments other than health and education.

Local authorities are already considering how to reduce their wage bill and will want to concentrate on what the senior management and councillors believe are the priorities. An approach promoting community engagement and empowerment and Total Place would be highly beneficial in setting joint priorities with communities and delivering cost effective services jointly with partners. However, there is a danger that it would be seen as an expensive, 'nice to have' initiative rather than a change of culture necessary for local authorities to thrive in the near future. Building a case for change that demonstrates the social and economic benefits for councils and communities at the start of the project is therefore vital.

Duty to Involve - Community Empowerment

Providing the right infrastructure for communities to influence local decisions is obviously the domain of local and regional government. Local authorities already have a statutory duty to inform, consult and involve local people in the design and delivery of services and functions that may affect them or be of interest to them. This is known as the "duty to involve", part of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and the government's broader community empowerment and place shaping agenda. Since April 2009, each local authority should have the means to consult about the delivery of a particular service or function.

Empowerment of a community does not occur overnight, nor as a result of initiatives and projects. It happens when the institutions of the state make an ongoing commitment to share power with the communities they serve as part of their normal working processes. To encourage more local authorities to become 'empowering authorities' in this way the previous Government chose 18 local authorities (two per region) to form the Network of Empowering Authorities. They were supported in an 18 month programme to test approaches and identify good practice. In the North East, Newcastle and North Tyneside City Councils were members of the network.

The network has produced a framework based around three pillars that describe the nature of a high-performing empowering authority:

- Developing a business case and mainstreaming empowerment
- Working with diverse communities and neighbourhoods to identify and address priorities
- An active role for councillors in community empowerment

Total Place - Client Focused, Cost Effective Services

Empowering communities could rightly be seen as a valuable achievement on its own. But it is also one of the necessary, preliminary steps to introducing the Total Place approach in any area. The concept of Total Place is based around the need to save costs (e.g. by sharing back office and property costs or combining staff resources) combined with the ambition to provide more client focused services (e.g. through One Stop Shops).

In order to deliver more client focused services agencies must fully understand what clients' needs are both in terms of types of services and how they are delivered. The best way to achieve this is through a close working relationship with the communities affected, which can only be achieved when those communities are confident enough to make their demands known and trust that their views will be heeded.

Total Place should not be implemented solely as a means to identify cuts in public sector staff, however if cuts have to be made it is a way to help prioritise where they should be made. The Institute for Government believes that cuts should not just happen within agencies but that there is duplication and overlap amongst agencies delivering services and there is a case for rationalisation across the delivery network¹.

Thirteen areas ran Total Place pilots during 2009-10 including Durham (focusing on housing) and Gateshead, South Tyneside and Sunderland (focusing on the safety and health of young people and children). The approach requires local authorities and their partners to identify a specific area and take a 'whole system' approach to delivering public services to individuals in that area. Taking a 'whole system' approach entails initial mapping of all expenditure (for example on healthcare, social services, and tackling worklessness) and analysis of the make-up and needs of communities within the area. The agencies involved in delivering those services will then work together to provide a more joined up system of access to support for individuals.

Mapping of resources in the two pilot areas in the North East revealed expenditure over £4 billion in Durham and £5 billion in Gateshead, South Tyneside and Sunderland, therefore even relatively small efficiency savings across the whole system would lead to a substantial contribution to budget cuts. Gateshead, South Tyneside and Sunderland have estimated that a shared approach to Crime Safety Partnerships could achieve £1.8 million savings per annum across the three authorities².

The final report of the pilot programme³ claims

¹ Regeneration and Renewal, 08.02.10, p21

² 'Total place: a whole area approach to public services', HMT and DCLG, March 2010

³ Ibid.

“(Total Approach) has demonstrated the great value that can be gained for citizens and taxpayers by putting the citizen at the heart of service design, and working together to deliver better outcomes, greater value for money, and eliminate waste and duplication” (p. 67)

The third sector is already involved in delivering local services and therefore should be actively engaged by the public sector in any Total Place approach. However, as the public funding crisis bites deeply it is an opportunity for the third sector, and particularly social enterprises to consolidate and expand their role as providers.

Both coalition parties expressed their conceptual support for social enterprise in their manifestos, therefore the encouraging environment enjoyed by the sector for the last five or so years should continue. However, both the public and private sector will be under pressure and the market place is likely to become increasingly competitive. Social enterprises will have to make sure they are truly enterprising in the way they run their ‘businesses’ and can demonstrate the added value of commissioning their services.

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