



Total Place: Lessons Learnt

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1. Executive Summary:

This report brings together learning from the evaluation studies of previous government initiatives and interviews with key policy makers and commentators.

Key learning points:

- National programmes are helpful in focussing attention and accelerating progress but not sufficient. Change requires local leadership, accurate data, a local incentive to improve and access to ways to rethink and redesign services.
- National drivers are most effective when they are consistent over time. Constant change and redirection from the centre gets in the way.
- Some progress is apparent – the evolution of both local partnerships and central-local relationships has been necessary to give Total Place a chance of success.
- Good process design is an important element in success. Relationships are crucial – and successful initiatives are designed to bring localities together with each other and with key players in Whitehall to explore difficult issues - able to “hold” tension and discomfort.
- Over time, processes tend to harden - good dialogue is replaced by process monitoring. Localities need continuing permission to develop local solutions.
- Civil servants find it difficult to ‘buy into’ initiatives from other departments which cut across the national programmes for which they feel accountable. Without a sense of what they gain, other departments will find it hard to engage.
- Localities tend to respond with relatively incremental changes in practice – the pressure for “quick wins” favours options they already have on the drawing board.
- Unrealistic timescales create problems, particularly in partnership settings. Partnerships by their very nature have to build support carefully for radical change.
- The model of ‘pilot and roll out’ itself can be problematic, since the situation for pilots cannot be replicated in roll-out. Early high level sponsorship in Whitehall creates relationships and a quality of shared thinking that is hard to reproduce everywhere.
- Underlying mind-sets are predominantly based on ‘programme delivery’ – monitoring progress using red, green and amber lights – which may not work well in tackling difficult social problems. Systems thinking offers scope to deal with high levels of complexity, but we should recognise we are working with ‘open’ not ‘closed’ systems.
- Previous experiments in Cumbria, Norfolk and Suffolk succeeded because of the time spent building relationships, and engaging local people – and the clarity of focus on outcomes. The additional agenda of ‘efficiency gains’ may make it harder and slower to engage communities and staff.
- Political change is an important part of the equation – solutions cannot always be delivered through ‘managerial action’ – and political backing is essential.
- Leadership in these circumstances involves making space for dialogue between centre and localities – creating ‘real time’ data sharing, paying attention to the pressures and assumptions that underlie behaviours – and sustaining senior political and Whitehall backing to ensure that innovation can be courageous.

2 Introduction

The last ten years have seen an unprecedented focus on improving performance in localities. Initiatives include Best Value, Neighbourhood Renewal, Health Action Zones, Sure Start, Area Based Initiatives, the Beacons scheme, LSPs, Single Capital Pot, new Well-being Powers, Sustainable Community Strategies, Local Strategic Partnerships, Comprehensive Area Assessment, Intervention and Recovery programmes, the Innovation Forum, Local Public Service Agreements, Local Area Agreements, Multi-Area Agreements, Comprehensive Area Assessment – as well as a multitude of improvement initiatives within specific service departments. There has been an unprecedented level of evaluation of these by leading academics and consultancies – so what can we learn?

This brief study was conceived as summarising learning from some of the evaluation studies to inform Total Place, but in discussion with the Leadership Centre, we agreed that it would also be useful to interview some of the policy makers and academics who played a role in implementing or studying these initiatives. The people interviewed are listed in Appendix B.

The intention, in writing this ‘think-piece’ is not simply to contribute more research, but to mine the existing knowledge both in the academic and policy communities to ask “what do we already know about initiatives like this?” What impact does it have to set up 13 pilots in localities which are then ‘rolled out’? What have we learnt that can contribute to the success of Total Place?

We are keen that learning from previous studies helps both policy holders and senior civil servants at the centre, and senior players in localities. Can we improve our understanding of why difficulties arise for both the centre and localities? What are the pressures each faces? What patterns of behaviour are likely to recur? And what are the underlying forces and drivers, the assumptions and mind-sets which will shape events as Total Place progresses?

Learning about what drives change

The many evaluation studies that made up the ‘meta-evaluation of the local government improvement agenda’ have all tried to answer the question – ‘what do we know about what drives effective improvement?’¹

The evidence shows that while national initiatives are not sufficient to achieve change, they can be an important – even necessary – step along the way. The Evaluation of Best Value showed that a powerful government initiative helped to focus attention and ensure compliance - but it was never sufficient to achieve change. Four other factors were needed to achieve sustained change locally:²

- effective leadership at corporate level
- accurate data
- a strong incentive to improve

¹ The LGMA evaluation programme consists of the evaluation of over twenty major government policies between 2000 and 2006 – these are listed in appendix B. A meta-evaluation was conducted, across the whole LGMA agenda, involving new survey data and case studies and an examination of the interaction of government policies. Details of reports can be found on the LGMA page on DCLG website.

² See The long term evaluation of the best value regime- Final report p 17

- a readily available means of re-designing processes of service delivery.

Central initiatives are not always effective. Some of the most powerful drivers for change – such as CPA - have succeeded because of the consistency of messages and approach over time. It takes several years to sustain change at a local level, building support and understanding for new ways of working, developing new partnerships and introducing new delivery systems. All this hard work is disrupted by continual ‘fiddling’ from the centre.

Some initiatives in the past decade were seen as being too short lived – local authorities *“had often only just got used to one policy when it was replaced by another ‘bright idea’ from central government.”*³

“consistency and persistence seem to be all-important – if an initiative looks as if it will only be around for a year or two it won’t have much impact... many of the things that emanate from Whitehall only have a short half-life.. almost nothing worth doing can be done in less than a couple of years, but no initiative seems to last that long...it takes time to learn skills, to change systems, to redirect budgets – so if you constantly throw things up in the air you don’t get progress.” (interview with Geoff Mulgan)

While central direction may have been needed to move local authorities from ‘awful to adequate’, studies suggest that where capability for change is already strong, centrally driven initiatives can hamper rather than accelerate improvement. In the context of local partnerships, powerful ‘vertical’ accountability can hamper horizontal collaboration. As early as 2002, an evaluation of collaboration and co-ordination in area-based initiatives found that “central government sets a firm and often inflexible basis for local working and does much to inhibit innovation and new ways of working. The pressures of compliance with centrally set targets and performance measures discourage area-based initiatives from making links they might otherwise make”⁴ Studies looking at effective partnership working suggested that “Whitehall departments did not operate in a co-ordinated fashion and this made multi-agency working at local level difficult to achieve.”⁵ Change is needed at the centre, as well as in localities to improve ‘communication, clarity and consistency in dealings between the centre and localities’.⁶

The Cabinet Office’s report into public service reform concluded that ‘top down performance management’ has limitations; including ‘stifling innovation and disempowering staff on occasions’ and concluded that ‘it is vital to strengthen approaches based on capacity and capability’⁷

However, commentators stress the need for realism in any debate about devolution – and about the ‘realpolitik’ of Ministerial choices in a highly centralised government. While there is now greater talk about devolution, Ministers in the future are likely to still want to promise, and therefore to find out about, improvements in performance and value for money across

³ Martin, S The State of Local Services: Performance Improvement in Local Government; Final Report of the Meta-evaluation of the Local Government Modernisation Agenda, February 2008 p57

⁴ Collaboration and co-ordination in area-based initiatives Final Report to the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions 2002 p 124

⁵ Martin, S The State of Local Services 2008 p61...

⁶ Evaluation of take-up and use of well-being power, Research summary No 2008 P6

⁷ The UK Government’s Approach to Public Service Reform, Cabinet Office 2006

local and central government. Since 2002, evaluation reports have concluded that a 'tight/tight/tight' approach should shift towards a 'tight/loose/tight' with the centre agreeing explicit objectives, allowing local freedom in delivery, and ensuring evaluation assessed whether or not outcomes were achieved, without prescribing process. This need to loosen up process control was as important for local authorities, which tended to over-control local area based initiatives, as it was for Whitehall over-controlling local authorities.⁸

- *“Any sustainable improvement depends on a combination of some top down pressures and supports, some horizontal pressures and supports and some bottom up pressures and supports. Most good public services, for example the Norwegian health service or the Finnish school system, have subtle combinations of these ... they are never Stalinist and never laissez-faire”* (Interview with Geoff Mulgan)

Localities arguing that 'the centre should just leave us alone' are unlikely to get their wish, and many commentators don't believe they should.

The LGMA meta-evaluation identified three factors as helpful in securing improvement:

- Effective leadership
- External stimuli
- Appropriate external stimuli, tailored carefully for each individual context.

A series of barriers to reform were also identified:

- initiative overload resulting from too many government initiatives and too many changes in policies
- too much central prescription and regulation
- insufficient joined up working across central government
- ring-fencing and other restrictions on how other resources can be spent.⁹

The meta-evaluation concluded that applying more top down pressure for change was unlikely to generate further improvement. “The evidence suggests that there is a need for more sophisticated theories of improvement than those which have underpinned policies over the last 10 years.”¹⁰ A harsher economic climate and greater emphasis on efficiency would require “greater willingness to accept the risks inherent in experimentation and innovation; greater focus on the capacity to deliver through partnership working.... on authorities' community leadership role and on the capacity not just of local government but of a wide range of other agencies...central government departments may therefore need to develop greater capacity to work in a co-ordinated fashion.”¹¹

⁸ Collaboration and co-ordination in area-based initiatives Final Report to the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions 2002 p 125

⁹ Meta Evaluation of the Local Government Modernisation Agenda, Progress Report on Service Improvement in Local Government: Implications for Policy and Practice p 83; The State of Local Services: performance improvement in Local Government p8

¹⁰ Martin, S The State of Local Services 2008 p66

¹¹ Martin, S The State of Local Services p67

Learning about process

Where initiatives were unsuccessful long-term, it was often because they were seen simply as government ‘programmes’ without local buy-in. Despite the success of CPA, LPSAs and LAAs, the evaluation reported a sense of “overly bureaucratic process, top down prescription and inflexible frameworks reflecting a lack of trust in and understanding of local government within Whitehall.¹² More than half the authorities interviewed by the evaluators believed the governments approach to target setting had led their authority to focus on national priorities at the expense of local priorities.¹³

“One problems is that initiatives have lacked ownership and this has been reinforced by government imposing formulaic delivery mechanisms, so that people think they are forced to comply rather than being able to adapt to local circumstances – if the process is defined as well as the outcomes then it restricts the space for localities to be creative. If you define the steps that need to be taken, what space is left of innovation? An excessive target regime is the most obvious example of how this thinking has developed” (interview with Sir Michael Bichard

One example of top-down imposition of targets was given from the Health Action Zones, one New Labour’s first ‘area based initiatives’ in the early years of the 1997 government:

“The three boroughs of Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham came together to discuss how best to spend what was, in reality, not a great deal of money. The chief executive of Lambeth suggested that we target spending on improving the health of looked after children – a very badly served group of children with multiple health problems. I thought that was a great idea – highly focussed since there were about 1800 children looked after between us - but the centre had a key role in deciding whether that target would be appropriate – when we told them what we wanted to do they went away and then came back and said the target should be “all children” – which diluted the whole thing and when we stuck to our guns they tried to get us to focus on ‘the northern part of the area’ and a month later came back and said the target should be ‘children and their families!’ – which meant 300,000 people! It would have been a great idea – I still think we ought to do it fifteen years later... in the end the three boroughs gave up, and the money was spent on professional development.” (interview with Barry Quirk)

Good process design is an important element of success. A vital factor is the extent to which an initiative feels ‘co-designed’ by both the centre and localities. The considerable initial buy-in to the LAA process, for example, came from the sense that it was the brainchild of both local and central government (developed through the joint Innovation Forum). Even then, however, there was disappointment.

“the wider vision and ambition of LAAs as a joint endeavour between central and local government has yet to become real... the potential ‘governing’ role of LAAs as a dialogue on priorities and trade-offs between citizen and state as advocated by the LGA has not been allowed to materialise. Their potential is not yet being recognised.”¹⁴

Initiatives such as LAAs and LPSA began with different expectations and different goals from the centre and from localities. While for localities they were about building a new relationship

¹² Martin, S The State of Local Services p60

¹³ Martin, S The State of Local Services, P 57

¹⁴ New Routes to Better Outcomes IdeA May 2009 p 6-7

between the centre and locality – the centre saw them as instrumental ways to achieve improvements in local performance. Some complained about the need for greater ‘clarity’, but much of the eventual success was dependent on sustaining a plurality of goals in the early stages - keeping several different sets of motivation and goals in play for long enough for the process to evolve. Departments that ‘bought in’ because of a hope of efficiency savings came to recognise the value of effective partnerships on the ground – while localities that saw the gains in terms of central-local relationships began to achieve more in terms of social outcomes because of new ways of working.¹⁵

Often a new initiative begins with high-level sponsorship and a lot of senior civil service attention. In the early stages, the rhetoric is about flexibility and shared learning. Senior sponsors in Whitehall share a sophisticated analysis of the problems localities face. Later on, as schemes are rolled-out and delegated to more junior civil servants, much of that sophistication gets lost – the champions move on and the civil servants who conceived the scheme are replaced by others who understand it less and are under pressure to ‘run the programme’ – templates and pro-formas replace dialogue and the process hardens. Where ministerial and senior civil service engagement is sustained, and where a sense of listening and learning on both sides is built into the fabric of the programme, a far stronger sense of engagement can be built.

Unrealistic timescales

Problems are often created by unrealistic time-frames. Change takes time, often years, and yet to sustain ministerial and top civil service interest, results are often demanded within months! For example, LSPs were subject to anxious scrutiny after a few months, with junior civil servants asking ‘are they working yet?’ There was a serious discussion within Whitehall about whether or not LSPs should be ‘abolished’ within about eighteen months of the government initiative to set them up, because of concern that they had not yet achieved results. Should they be replaced by something else? - when the academic research was indicating that it took at least five years for a good partnership to begin to function in ways that could lead to changes in delivery.

Anxiety about ‘what is going on’ – particularly from lead departments but also from GOs, infrastructural bodies like IDeA, LGA, Leadership Centre etc - all keen to be part of the ‘show’ can lead to an avalanche of requests for information, meetings, monitoring reports and presentations – all of which begins to eat into the time needed for work to progress. There can therefore be an artificial timetable to comply with central demands well before the real thinking and work gets underway which might lead to change.

There are particular implications for initiatives that involve partnerships. Government departments are used to expecting fast responses from the local agencies with whom they most often work – but don’t recognise the very different circumstances when dealing with partnerships. Partnerships work if all partners feel engaged and trust each other to communicate effectively and share decisions. Often this trust takes time to build up, and since there are many people involved in each organisation, can be relatively fragile. Too many demands for rapid decisions and responses from the centre can force the lead authority to respond without having time to consult properly with partners – they begin to feel

¹⁵ See Long term evaluation of LAAs and LSPs – Developing Theories of Change p 10

excluded, suspicion grows about motives, the level of collaborative behaviour reduces and partners reduce their commitment and in the end the lead local authority begins to work in isolation, because partners can't be kept on board.

Problems with the 'pilot and roll out' approach

The approach based on setting up 'pilots' and then 'rolling-out' a national version has its own problems. In the first place, the experience of the pilots is not easily replicable. Pilots are usually volunteers, often from the most successful, best-led and most effective local authorities. They are most likely to be in the position to take-up the challenge of new ways of doing things, with effective partnerships and highly capable organisations. They have decided to play a role on the national stage and are therefore prepared for the difficulties inherent in conflicting national and local expectations, and have good relationships with the centre and government offices. On the other hand, as evaluators found, it proves impossible to compare pilots with a control group of other authorities – since local government doesn't simply wait around to see the effects of pilots before beginning to change. Some of the best authorities deliberately choose not to volunteer as pilots in order to have a quiet 'pilot' stage of their own, free from national requirements. Some actively shadow the pilot process – others are quick to learn.

The level of resource invested from the centre, and the seniority of the people involved means that in the pilot stage, localities get to work with senior people at Whitehall. Often practice exchange events are organised which enable pilots to share experiences and learn from each other. Localities invest heavily in the pilot stage, and this additional investment of time and energy strengthens local partnerships. Once an initiative is rolled-out this level of attention cannot be sustained – the practice exchange events are abandoned, Whitehall can't invest in dialogue with 300 localities in the way it could with nine, or thirteen. Localities are not able to sustain the investment of additional resources, and 'late adopters' seldom have those resources to invest.

Evidence suggests that is the quality of the relationships and dialogue that produces change – and yet it is these relationships that cannot be 'roll-out'.

Another problem relates to the sorts of issues that are often tackled by ambitious localities. These are not amenable to simple solutions that can be readily transferred from one area to another. Innovation comes from combining insights from facts and evidence and insights from people and processes.

“Important benefits for many pilots lie in the process they have gone through and the resulting alignment of delivery that had previously been talked about but never put into effect. Corresponding benefits for government lie in the opening of a dialogue where previously there was none”¹⁶

Finally, there is a danger of issue-creep. There is a tendency both at the centre and in localities to 'stuff everything' into the new initiative – using it as a 'catch-all' for all sorts of departmental priorities – Whitehall starts to add extra targets and localities begin to report on a wide range of changes that were already in the pipeline instead of focussing on a few carefully chosen issues on which to experiment. This weakens the learning, makes comparisons far harder and blunts the quality of learning.

¹⁶ Process evaluation of the negotiation of Pilot Local Area Agreements p 12

2. Learning about underlying behaviours

Some interviewees identified ‘problem behaviours’ at both local and national level. At local level, the behaviours were about gaming, passive compliance, asking for guidance and incrementalism. Scepticism at local level can lead over-laden officials to beaver away simply writing papers that tick the boxes, providing reports and project plans which seem compliant but without the spark of active engagement or commitment from decision makers. In the first stages of both LSPs and LAAs hapless middle managers across the country struggled to persuade both chief executives and politicians to attend early meetings.

Both politicians and managers can feel anxious about government intentions – an anxiety that translates into constant requests for clarification. Instead of offering reassurance, the response of civil servants is often to oblige with more and more technical guidance.

“At locality level, people need to stop whingeing about the mechanisms – stop asking for detailed guidance because it invites the degree of micro-management we are experiencing – it says we want everything to be defined and then we become dependent on central government to tell us to do everything.” (interview with Lucy de Groot)

“It’s a problem for local government as well, they tend to default to wanting to have a PID... gant charts, paper, service reviews – we’re saying – just forget the timetable.” (interview with Stephen Taylor)

“Local actors tend to move incrementally through each initiative – don’t use the opportunity to engage in more radical change – the pressure for an immediate result ‘quick wins’ means that people go for options that they already had on the drawing board.” (interview with Professor Gerry Stoker)

Problem behaviours at the centre mirror the problem behaviours at locality level. Senior civil servants can inflect decisions, but more junior staff lack the ‘system knowledge’ or the courage to take risks with process, or to make unorthodox judgements. The centre over-prescribes through guidelines and performance targets begins to specify process, to create pro-formas and templates – ostensibly to be helpful but in reality because of anxiety about ‘what they are going to get’ and how to feed back to Ministers.

Messages from the centre tend to be mixed, and while some key players have a narrative and a style that matches the rhetoric, too often others are cynical, sceptical or patronising.

“At the centre, people can behave very badly. The centre has done things in the past to make things harder – its about tone rather than substance – infantilising process....making people feel micro-managed and patronised – belittling leaders at local level...its often an obsession with detail – junior civil servants who have and sometimes misuse an authority over local government – always more about tone than content.” (interview with Stephen Taylor.)

Formal evaluation studies show that by 2006 fewer than a third of respondents reported that their relationship with central government had improved – only 11% believed that central government restrictions had lessened.¹⁷

Some commentators argue cheerfully that attempts to create a coherent programme are doomed to failure - *“a patchwork of action in different places at different speeds”* with

¹⁷ Martin, S The State of Local Services P57

colliding initiatives and resulting tensions is inevitable, and not necessarily problematic.
(interview with Phil Swann)

Interviewee after interviewee stressed the importance of relationships, both relationships within a locality and relationships between the centre and localities.

“Total Place won’t throw up what people are expecting – it won’t be rules and procedures that need to be changed – because that’s not where the problem is – its more about the tone of the relationship – the way DGs hold themselves in meetings, having enabling and supportive conversations rather than procedural conversations.. The message to DGs is that its all about you and how you behave and how you’re perceived and how you are... – it’s the nature of the conversation that matters – two people can leave different feel and impressions about how it feels.” (interview with Stephen Taylor)

Building relationships and changing behaviours is crucial, but as John Benington points out, there is much that can be done in creating the right ‘architecture’ to ensure that relationships thrive and problems are worked on in collaboration, rather than through tense negotiations.

Professor John Benington cites the example of the Community Development Projects as far back as the mid-1970:

“Total Place has some of the same aspirations in terms of content and design, a nationally initiated programme with twelve local authority pilots... at first the projects were isolated - and the Home Office got it wrong by trying to develop purely bi-lateral relationships... projects started to feel they were put into competitive relationships with each other ..and in the end built their own lateral relationships and staged a ‘coup’ wresting control from the Home Office. CDP failed at the beginning but got better over time as the projects matured and the centre learned.” (Interview with Professor John Benington)

The CDP offer a mixed lesson for those of us who remember it – it generated huge headaches and tension for the centre – but much of that tension was creative – the projects educated a generation into thinking differently about the role of government in community development.

Professor Benington contrasts this to an example of a well-designed change programme: Better Government for Older People, which involved collaboration between the Cabinet Office, twenty local authorities, twenty health authorities and many user groups:

“This was an initiative that continued over time, it wasn’t shut down after only a year or two. Collaboration between a small group at Whitehall and the front line was very good. Part of the success was setting up self-sustaining networks which generated new thinking by pensioner groups. To ensure that relationships worked well, we had to design a small parliament where the whole system met together, each of the projects was represented - inter-organisational networking meant that the learning was not only top down.. We put a lot of effort into creating a collaborative network design, and by getting it right from the beginning civil servants and Ministers were able to learn a lot.... I remember a final conference at Church House, Westminster, with five Ministers and lots of permanent secretaries and people from all over the country representing projects run by older people – there was a sense of real ownership. Alistair Darling, the Secretary of State handled it brilliantly – we had put forward 17 recommendations, and he said at the conference that they were serious recommendations and he wouldn’t respond on the spot, but if we held a recall conference six weeks later he would report back on what the government would do. Six

weeks later – he came back to report. It was very positive, and much of this was down to the ‘design architecture’ – whereby the government put itself – both politicians and civil servants – into the role of listener.” (Interview with Professor John Benington).

Other initiatives strove to create the right ‘architecture’,

“We tried to design this in at the beginning of LAAs – I used to chair the cross-departmental meetings on LAAs, and we got Director Generals and Grade 3’s negotiating directly with councils – by leading the whole negotiation they got a real sense of ‘total place. They had to think strategically across the agenda – it was a good model of practice” (interview with Lucy de Groot)

Professor Benington talks about creating *“a framework that allows local projects to feel genuinely given scope to explore and ask questions of the people at the centre,.”* and quotes Heifetz’s formulation of a “holding environment” in which tough problems can be addressed, safe enough to allow for stretching conversations.

“Sometimes we may need to turn up the heat – use conflict – the leadership skill is keeping levels of stress constructive. The BGO meetings were not cosy or comfortable; but because the architecture was right, we could deal well with tension and not avoid it.” (interview with Professor John Benington)

3. Underlying ‘mind-sets’, assumptions and motivations

The problem with programmes

Key players in initiatives of these kind are highly intelligent, experienced leaders – so we have to assume that unhelpful behaviours are not always about individuals ‘behaving badly’ and that practical structural and design problems are not ‘mistakes’ but are driven by systems pressures that it is very difficult to resist. It is important therefore to gain greater insight into the ‘assumptions and mind-sets’ that underpin the way that initiatives are designed and implemented.

“In international comparisons, the UK hasn’t improved ...’ and ‘the US – although containing some very good individual examples – often comes last in league tables of the major OECD countries in terms of public service performance ... (interview with Geoff Mulgan)

“...both at the centre and in localities, no-one ever gets promoted for completing the process, they get promoted for championing the initiative....We have turned the whole of life and politics into a programme management exercise – when civil servants meet together they work through a programme management list and score things as red, amber or green, instead of doing difficult thinking... it may give comfort, but this notion that life is a programme delivered by project management is dangerous, when in reality complex issues require an organic response”. (interview with Nick Walkley)

From the majority of my interviews came a shared analysis that the ‘problem mind-set’ was one that saw the solution to difficult problems in terms of a ‘new national programme’. If our aim is to achieve difficult social outcomes at the same time as achieving efficiency savings, then all agree that new, difficult, radical thinking is needed at both centre and at localities – with a far more creative dialogue between the two. But the dominant approach to delivery doesn’t achieve that.

*“Central government sets objectives and targets. Different public sector agencies deliver on them. This is done through a series of essentially master-and-agent relationships, forming a set of delivery chains with Whitehall at their hub. Each part of each chain can be measured and managed in terms of how it performs. Over time, every part of the chain is expected to demonstrate continuous improvement.”*¹⁸ It is this model that is seen not to work with complex social problems.

“It started before Blair, the Next Steps agencies were the first to introduce a mind-set that assumed that if you got enough data you could then produce a logically structured answer with an end point that could be turned into a programme – that began at A and ended at B and mapped all the stages in between – and that such a programme was better outsourced to managerial and consultancy experts.”

Over and over again, interviewees identified the problem of trying to achieve complex social goals through a programme – with a Project Initiation document, objectives, targets, milestones, task-lists – all be monitored as if the solutions were straightforward and success inevitable as long as the plan is followed. The reality is that often we are entangling problems within problems, we are groping to understand causality, we are not yet clear where and how to intervene, we are learning that state intervention can create as many problems as it solves, and while experiments are exciting they are as likely to fail as to succeed.

“There’s a problem in trying to find a single solution that can be rolled out. But the complexity of some of these problems means a tightly prescribed programme is doomed to failure. Localities should do it their own way... “

“The model that says we’ll do a pilot if it works we’ll roll it out, is a mechanical model rather than a systems model – won’t work”

Barry Quirk points out that many of the problems selected by Total Place pilots for ‘deep dives’ are not really about services – they are about *‘public harms and how to mitigate them’* – they are not amenable to old solutions. We need to think in very new ways.

Motivations and rewards

Crucial in any change are the motivation and rewards that hold the current system in place. What do the most powerful actors get rewarded for? To whom do they account? Heifetz says that the behaviour of leaders changes when “the expectations of their authorising communities change.”

Or as John Atkinson puts it *“relationships that exist are a function of the environment - they create the environment and the environment creates them. Global changes in the environment will result in global changes in relationships”*. Steady growth in public spending over the past decade offered very little incentive for change. Attempts to radically reform central or local government were unlikely to work without external drivers forcing change. In future years, at both the centre and in localities, impending cuts in public spending may be enough to drive change. Several interviewees, however, expressed scepticism about whether Whitehall was structured in ways that could enable these pressures to result in effective joined up working.

¹⁸ New Routes to Better Outcomes, IDeA May 2009 p5

“If you look at the evidence... for example the parliamentary scrutiny process, every select committee is departmentally focussed... of the forty-two NAO reports I looked at, only two of them involved officials from more than one department... none of the incentives or pressures reward the process of joining up.” (interview with Sir Michael Bichard)

... a whole range of departments never sign up for a new initiative... they may get politically bullied into it... departments don't say why they don't want to get involved, but they are primarily fighting to protect their own national programmes – focussed on delivery of ministerial priorities... they don't see this as helping them to achieve the outcomes they're held to account for. Top civil servants don't have the equivalent of local authority corporate governance with shared responsibility for outcomes. No-one thinks it's anyone else's responsibility to deliver another minister's goals. Public policy lives in silos.... Yet it's short sighted, because even if 90% of what a minister wants to achieve can be managed from inside the silo – that crucial 10% will need links to the wider world...” (interview with Lucy de Groot)

One possible lever for change is the growing recognition that for some important ‘wicked’ issues – the achievement of social outcomes that involve tackling complex and intractable social problems – the conventional departmental approach is not working. Already, attempts are being made to change the system of capacity building, reward, promotion etc to ensure that recognition of the failure of conventional approaches and a willingness to experiment is rewarded.

Stephen Taylor counsels against ‘blame’. *“If the tone is ‘the problem part of all of this is the civil service’ then you'll get a bad reaction. Instead it should be ‘good news’ – we've found a way of making your life much easier – a far better way would be to come and find out – get involved.”*

Professor Gerry Stoker suggests that similar ‘counter-pressures’ hold back change at local level.

“Incrementalism isn't simply about managerial timidity, it is driven by the power distribution in local political set-ups – established power relationships between councillors and officers means that they have already agreed a local agenda, and politicians want to ensure that when a new initiative comes up it doesn't challenge or undermine it.” (interview with Professor Gerry Stoker)

Managerial versus political perspectives

Some commentators pointed out that the mind-set that has predominated for the past decade has been managerialist in conception, often ignoring local politics altogether!

“much of the language of change is adopted from the world of business which doesn't read across into competitive politics. The language is depoliticised, tries to drain out the trade-offs and conflicts of intent in the political world.” (interview with Geoff Mulgan)

“There is a view that one can treat government as a sort of large PLC – with central government as the ‘board’ and local government as ‘subsidiaries... Any top down initiative is an attempt to ‘performance manage’ localities, but in governance terms that isn't the real relationship. Such models pay little attention to politics as the driving force for change.” (interview with Professor Gerry Stoker)

Professor Stoker quotes as an example of radical local government change the creation of the Mayor and Government of London:

“London has been transformed by having a London mayor! It took a more radical approach by national political leaders, and the spectacular capacity of political leaders in London to move into the space and take the initiative. No-one was held back by the status quo because it was a new institution – and created a paradigm shift... by contrast, its hard to think of anything that got better because of an initiative. If things get better it is because of sustained commitment among political and managerial leaders in a locality.”(interview with Professor Gerry Stoker)

Learning from previous “total place” experiments - Counting Cumbria, Suffolk and Norfolk

Interviews with some of the key players in experiments in Cumbria, Suffolk and Norfolk identified some important learning. Firstly, the areas were very different from each other – what worked in one place didn’t work in another and vice versa. The problems, resources, values, approaches available to solve local problems varied enormously and solutions had to be tailored to local situations.

Second, the learning was experiential – and the most powerful learning was by those who got involved in a process of analysis and problem solving – that was as true for senior managers in Whitehall as it was for managers at local level.

Thirdly, a crucial component of success was the time taken at the beginning of the process to build relationships and test the strength both of local partnerships and the motivation of local partners for change. In each case it took several months of patient conversations, interviews and meetings to build up a sufficiently strong shared motivation and support for radical thinking before any of the ‘real’ work began.

Fourthly, the motivation in both cases was to improve the circumstances for local people. These experiments took place before the context changed so radically into one of impending cuts in public expenditure, and were characterised by a powerful sense of shared commitment to improved outcomes for the community.

“these felt like locally determined events in response to local needs, so key stakeholders felt in charge of their own destiny.” (interview with Diane Neale)

Fifthly, these approaches took a whole systems approach – and recognised and brought into the conversations the multiple perspectives. There was real stress on learning and the learning process – in Norfolk over 25% of the budget was spent on learning, with an, interactive ‘learning log’ which enabled reflections to be shared and learning from the whole journey taken forward. These early pilots often involved large inclusive ‘whole systems’ events with up to 200 people, which proved to encourage creative thinking. There was often resistance to radical approaches at first, but they proved successful in getting people to think differently. The judgement was that the old ways of thinking were never going to achieve radical change – and only by thinking in new ways would change happen.

Colliding mind-sets – fragmentation at centre and in localities

One thing is certain, different leaders within any process of change carry very different assumptions and mind-sets – and without a language to surface and discuss these, hard to see how we will change government practice for the better.

Neither central government nor localities have a single personality or identity. There are many players at each level, with different motivations, priorities and constraints. Trying to understand what a 'locality' wants or needs is no less fraught with inherent tensions than trying to find out what 'the centre' wants.

"Theories of change" analysis within the evaluation studies of LSPs, LPSAs and LAAs identify several different motivations for a single initiative. Different players are interested in different aspects of the policy, and may have very different expectations.

For "Total Place", systems thinking brings a helpful change of mind-set that enables us to 'think well' in complexity and to understand the forces that hamper as well as drive change. Of course, in reality, different players think differently about the 'whole system' and their role in it. One can see a locality as a 'whole system' and hope to create conditions within which a locality can become aware of itself as a totality and begin to bend resources collaboratively to deliver better results. Alternatively, one can see a 'whole system' that encompasses central-local relationships – so that the civil servants sponsoring the programme are not on the outside watching, but are key actors within the system – and their actions have powerful systems effects. Different sorts of systems thinking have origins in different disciplines – sociology, biology, engineering, family therapy. Some systems models are closed – with an idea of an adaptive system – like an organism – or one that can be in balance or harmony – like a family. Some interviewees stress the importance of thinking only of 'open systems' – human interaction is messy, contradictory, sometimes in conflict, there is no inevitable balance.

"Human affairs are open systems... the problem of much systems thinking is that it can breed a 'totalising' view – if unintended consequences are as powerful as intended consequences...it makes for fatalism... the future is creatable... not a pre-ordered system... human affairs are open and unfolding and its our job to make them better... I prefer an experimental approach." (interview with Barry Quirk)

4. Learning for Total Place

There seem to be two ways of looking at the experiments of the past decade – either as a slow, but painful learning experience in which each initiative is a helpful modification of the last, or as a recurring 'ground-hog day' in which the same aspirations are chosen but lessons are never learnt. The reality is probably a combination of both –

"it is not all a waste of time - all that we've tried so far has been an experience – got us to where we are now – it isn't just the same old same old, can see it as a progression – what makes it difficult – is generating a different kind of conversation (interview with Stephen Taylor)"

"the previous stuff has put in place the building blocks we needed to be able to make change happen now... Total Place would be unthinkable without a robust LSP and the partnerships that have developed because of what went before." (interview with Phil Swann)

Most reassuring of all is the fact that Total Place has been conceived in ways that take account of the learning from previous initiatives. The role of the Leadership Centre is in part to ensure learning is captured and shared. Sir Michael Bichard chairs a high-level committee of champions. Many leaders at both national and local level engaged in this project think in systemic terms and have a long term as well as a short-term vision. Many people find the opening premise new and promising:

“if the premise is right – that it helps to think about the totality of public spending that achieve outcomes, then we should think, not about a series of initiatives, but about a different state of cultural being – and begin to behave steadily and for the long term as if all public spending in a place matters equally, and about an approach for the medium term that enables us to use that money wisely.” (interview with Nick Walkley)

“we won’t see real innovation unless we find a way of changing the culture at the centre.. we’ve got to have people committed to this being edgy challenging, locally owned.. with different styles and approaches in different places..” (interview with Sir Michael Bichard)

However, the pressures of design and implementation are already beginning to tell – and tensions are bound to emerge. The test will be whether Total Place is able to find ways to hold these tensions – to have the conversations in which they are surfaced and lead to new practice. Interviewees pointed out that many ‘system problems’ are already being experienced within the Total Place pilots:

- Total Place has several contradictory pulls – CLG wants better outcomes and the Treasury wants savings in the form of early wins and longer term reduction on spending, while the Leadership Centre and IDeA are focussed on ensuring deep learning and building the relationships that can sustain change.
- In terms of timescales Total Place has to live with what Professor John Benington calls *“two different rhythms: this government want quick wins and powerful stories pre-election; after the election any new government will want to be doing something fresh and innovative.”* One of the challenges for Total Place will be to manage the tension – to offer evidence of programme in the short term to keep senior players committed and engaged, while recognising that this is a five to ten year agenda to achieve radical change.
- An understanding of the difficulties with the ‘pilot and roll-out’ model leads Sir Michael Bichard to describes the process as one of setting up “initiatives” – not pilots. Nevertheless, attempts to “roll out” quick wins will be an almost irresistible temptation, done clumsily, it carries the danger of disrupting a much more radical process that could deliver far more substantial savings in the long-term.
- Time-scales are very short indeed. Interviewees stressed the danger of the focus on outputs and fixed points driving out the deeper learning that might get squeezed because of task focus. While breakthrough will come from radical thinking at locality level – it is proving hard to timetable enough time for that work within the timeframes required for evidence of progress. Realistically, well-developed ideas ready to be presented in September would have to have been already in development well before the gestation of Total Place. Even once ideas are ‘incubated’ there is a lengthy stage of winning political and public buy-in and planning implementation. There is need for a collective ‘holding of nerve’ to prevent deeper and more radical thinking from being driven out of the process.
- Experiments in Counting Cumbria, Suffolk and Norfolk took place within a different context – with a focus clearly on outcomes rather than on savings. The stress on making savings requires real attention to the narrative at local level – and the basis on which local service users, practitioners etc might be being asked to get involved. It may take time to sort out those messages, reassure and ensure commitment to the process – time that will eat into the process of delivering results.
- In the three early experimental areas, several months was spent building up agreement for the process, having conversations with key players, creating buy-in, While this may be particularly needed in difficult two-tier areas – the Total Place pilots may need to invest

considerable time in building up understanding of and support for the initiative – without it, partnerships may begin to come apart under the strain of rapid decisions about radical approaches.

- Finally, there is already a danger of Total Place becoming the next big thing' hyped beyond what it can deliver and obscuring the fact that there are many other initiatives going on as well – do other departments recognise Total Place as important?

5. Conclusions: The role of leadership in optimising conditions for success

Perhaps the most important leadership contribution will be to enable people both in Whitehall and in localities to recognise these inherent 'systems tensions' and to create space where they can be discussed openly. While they are unlikely to be 'solved' in the near future, a shared understanding of the different pressures impacting on both centre and localities will help to build the relationships necessary for long-term change.

Many of the practical suggestions made have already been taken on board, and are being implemented as part of Total place. Suggestions include:

- Pay attention to the design and architecture of the process, not simply in the pilot phase but beyond. Find ways to develop 'bridgeheads' between national and local government, that can build dialogue over the next few years, rather than next few months.
- Continue to make space – long term – for exchange of ideas between pilots and between local authorities once the pilot phase is over.
- Build learning into the fabric of Total Place at local level (in both Leicestershire and Worcestershire, leadership programmes are being developed as part of whole project to strengthen the partnership between key players by shared learning).
- Create opportunities for learning and exchange between leaders at national and local level - find ways to bring key policy holders into the process. (Discussions are already underway to bring together policy holders with groups of pilots sharing the same 'deep dive')
- Find ways to share data in 'real time' – using website and practice exchange – make data available so that civil servants can feel part of the learning and discussions – get civil servants involved in website design so that they can design in ways to gain the information they need without requiring endless reporting lines.

As important as 'process design issues' will be the leadership behaviours that signal the importance of a change of mind-set and ways of working. Leaders can encourage recognition of the different motivations and understandings of different players, and find ways to make this positive – creating 'holding spaces' where tensions and dilemmas can be explored rather than ignored or buried. Leaders can pay attention to relationships and behaviours – encourage reflexivity and reflection on the impact of different behaviours, encouraging feedback and open discussion at all levels.

Leaders at both the centre and localities will need to give explicit permission to more junior staff to do things differently. The authority of the centre can be used to give reassurance about the need to take the time to think radically and effectively rather than simply 'ticking boxes', for example explaining to colleagues the disruptive effects of asking for 'regular updates' or overloading pilots with demands.

Other government departments are struggling to launch other initiatives or to respond to major problems – (such as the flu pandemic and MRSA). It may be possible to understand and connect to the pre-occupations of other parts of Whitehall without trying to create a single ‘neat and coherent’ programme. The quality of the discussions and interactions with key players in other departments should lead to better understanding of the problems they face in getting involved and ways to work with the grain of the pressures they face.

Much will depend on the political leadership in a process like this. There may be opportunities to encourage Ministers to work together in new ways to further political understanding about how change works on the ground, and a better understanding of the ‘system effects’ of ministerial actions.

Total Place has the opportunity to sponsor and develop rich conversations both within localities and between localities and the centre which could provide radical responses not just to conventional service provision, but to the complex social problems that are so costly to the public purse. The encouragement to systems thinking - examining multiple-causes and connectivities could help to unlock solutions to some of the ‘wicked issues’ - recognising that localities and governance networks are ‘open’ rather than ‘closed’ systems, able to be shaped, however messily, by human action.

Appendix A – List of Interviews

- 1, Geoff Mulgan – Director, Young Foundation
- 2, Sir Michael Bichard – Chairman, Design Council
- 3, Barry Quirk – Chief Executive, London Borough of Lewisham
- 4, Professor John Benington - University of Warwick
- 5, Stephen Taylor – Director, Taylor Haig
- 6, Lucy de Groot – Former Executive Director IDeA and HM Treasury
- 7, Diane Neale - Leadership Centre Advisor, Leadership Centre
- 9, Nick Walkley - Chief Executive, Barnet Council
- 10, Phil Swann - Programme Director, Shared Intelligence
- 11, Cecilia Tredget - Director of Improvement, East of England RIEP
- 12, Professor Gerry Stoker - University of Southampton
- 13, Helen Bailey - Director of Public Services, HM Treasury