

New wine in old bottles?

Total Place was first mooted 38 years ago, says **Robin Hambleton** – who should know. He was there

Consultants have been asked ‘To formulate guidelines to help local authorities in developing a “total approach” to the urban environment, and to propose advice’.

Taken forward via pilot projects in selected areas of the country, this effort at public service reform stems from the budget debate. Ministers announced the designation of selected local authorities where government would examine the ‘total resources’ being spent in the area and propose ‘how to transform them’.

These remarks do not refer to the Total Place initiative, launched by chancellor Alastair Darling in May 2009. The quotes are from 38 years ago.

Peter Walker, the-then Conservative secretary of state for the environment, announced his intention to the House of Commons on 26 July 1972, to ‘develop a total approach’.

My purpose here is not to knock the Total Place initiative as representing out-of-date thinking. On the contrary, it is an exciting initiative which has struck a chord with public service leaders and managers across the country.

Note that, in addition to the 13 national Total Place Initiatives (TPIs), there are now more than 70 ‘parallel’ pursuing ‘Total Place’ types of reform. This, surely, is a good sign.

Total Place is, then, to be welcomed, since it can be used to spur public service innovation and strengthen local democracy. There is a risk, however, that Whitehall will repeat errors it has made in the past.

The report, *Total Place – lessons learnt*, is to be welcomed, as it reflects on past government initiatives. But even this study says nothing about the total approach of the 1970s.

I should declare an interest. I was the team leader of the first Total Approach in the country – the Gateshead Comprehensive Community Programme (CCP). Launched by the Government in 1975, the Gateshead CCP, which was followed by a second one in Bradford, aimed ‘to redirect the major policies and programmes of central and local government and other agencies to those most in need’.

The approach involved a new form of partnership between local and central government – the team was answerable to a members group. Chaired by a minister, this political group met in Gateshead Town Hall.

The CCP was also intended to be ‘comprehensive’. It involved the two tiers of local government, the area and regional health authorities, Northumbria Police and seven Whitehall departments – education, environment, employment, health and social security, the Home Office, industry and transport.

The CCPs paved the way for the Inner Area Programmes, introduced by the Government in 1978, and so began a long series of Whitehall-inspired area-based initiatives.

Cllr Bill Collins, leader of Gateshead, thanked the CCP team for helping attract millions of pounds of investment to inner Gateshead via the programme. But the task of ‘redirecting policies’ or ‘bending main programmes’, the central aim of the CCP, proved rather more difficult.

Critics of the CCP and similar initiatives, including Total Place, argue that such efforts are largely window dressing.

The claim is made that radical reform is never



really on the agenda, and that the underlying political motive is to show maximum concern at minimum cost.

There is force in these arguments. Those involved in Total Place can challenge them by moving rapidly beyond a narrow, managerialist model – focusing on public spending cuts and limited service gains – to embrace a much more ambitious agenda relating to enhancing the politics of place.

The Total Approach efforts of the 1970s can provide many lessons for Total Place. Certainly, care is needed in translating lessons across time – for example, the resource context is different today, and society is also rather different. With these caveats in mind, I offer three suggestions.

First, it is challenging to transition a new initiative from a ‘pioneering programme’ into ‘mainstream policy and practice’. Strong involvement from senior figures in Whitehall can give a real boost to the early stages of an initiative, but it needs to be recognised that it will be impossible to reproduce this level of attention across the country.

It follows that there has to be a radical shift in Whitehall towards a much more devolved approach.

Detailed national performance indicators must be discarded in favour of learning models which prize local innovation. Enter new political thinking-relating localism.

Second, it is important to reshape thinking relating to the role of the state in working with communities. Successful approaches to Total Place will be ones that engage effectively with service-users, families and local communities.

The CCP was not good at this – our approach was state-centric.

Encouragingly, some of the Total Place pilots are breaking entirely new ground in this regard.

Third, the three realms of place-based leadership – political, managerial/professional, and community – need to be brought together in new and more creative ways. We need to move towards ‘Total Place Governance’ rather than persist with a national programme which could end up with more pilots than the RAF. ■

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