

Stepping up to the mark: the workforce implications of Total Place

The Total Place initiative has the potential to transform the shape of local public service delivery. It looks at how a 'whole area' approach to public services can lead to better services at less cost. What is different about Total Place? What are the key HR and organisational development issues? Will the financial crunch help or hinder whole area momentum? We spoke to four HR and OD leaders from local authorities involved in Total Place. The discussion highlights the challenges for HR directors that arise from the Total Place change agenda.

At the heart of Total Place is a counting process that maps money flowing through the place, from all central and local bodies, and makes links between services, to identify where public money can be spent more effectively. This methodology is modelled on work in Cumbria. The approach is now being rolled out in 13 pilots covering each region of England. Croydon is among them. Pam Parkes, director of HR and OD at Croydon Council, stresses that "the initiative encompasses the entirety of the public spend and activity within one place. I don't believe that has ever happened before. Where previous initiatives may have looked at collaborations between the voluntary and public sector or private public sector initiatives, this is actually looking at all spend on public service delivery within a place. That makes it completely different and much more far-reaching than anything that has gone before."

Configuring jobs and organisations to the needs of places

"Total Place digs much deeper into the content of what we do," says Roger Britton, head of OD at Worcestershire County Council and programme manager for the Total Place pilot in Worcestershire. "It may be over-egging it slightly at this stage but we do need to be prepared to think in terms of a single public service workforce which is operating across organisations, the boundaries between which have become invisible. Our organisations need to configure themselves in order to respond to the needs of the places, the communities of place and interest which they serve. There are major HR implications that flow from the way that we deliver the people function into that changed world."

In Cumbria, for example, there has been a major focus on health, equality and worklessness. This has led to moves to co-locate Job Centre Plus staff in GP surgeries. Jim Savege, corporate HR director at Cumbria County Council, reports that “it has led to considerable success. Rather than just being able to prescribe medicines, a GP is able to prescribe a job centre referral to be able to get a person into employment because they sit alongside each other.” The logic of such approaches may require change at national as well as local level. Sir Michael Bichard, executive director of the Institute for Government and chair of the high-level officials’ group, points out that there has to be “the opportunity to tell Government how it could behave differently to make this kind of collaborative action more likely” (1). Back in Cumbria this view finds echo with Jim Savege. “We want to do more of it but some great ideas at a local level require policies, practices and funding mechanisms to change at national level.”

Making it an opportunity not a threat

Of course, whole area approaches are nothing new. Sue Stanhope, director of HR and OD in Sunderland, part of another pilot area with neighbouring Gateshead and South Tyneside, points out that “working across organisational boundaries is already there in parts. The difference with Total Place is bringing all of that together and giving it a single focus.” Inevitably the public finance crunch and reduced resources over the coming years will be a key factor. “We need to discover how we can coordinate and organise ourselves to deliver more efficiently and more effectively for less money than we’ve done before” says Stanhope.

Worcestershire’s Roger Britton believes Total Place’s focus on money flows will “help people wake up and smell the coffee.” The mapping of total public spend in Worcestershire, for example, produced a sum of £4.02bn. “At a crude level, there is the realisation that even 1% of that is a lot of money. Moving on from there, it brings the opportunity to simultaneously address service improvements together.” One of the key HR challenges, says Britton, will be to ensure that staff engage in the initiative so that they see these opportunities and do not regard it as simply a cuts exercise: “there is a component that will entail headcount reduction but the starting point is about service delivery outcomes and the chance to make these better.”

The financial tipping point

Will the pressure for public funding cuts accelerate or slow the attainment of Total Place objectives? Is there the danger that such a climate could engender opposition to rather than support for innovative and more efficient ways of working? “That’s the 64 million dollar question,” says Cumbria’s Jim Savege. “I think the financial pressure is a useful piece of leverage. Pressure on public spending is forcing and requiring different agencies to innovate. The counting and mapping methodology in Total Place will help ensure public agencies look at things together not separately.”

Looking beyond her own council across the whole local government landscape, Sunderland’s Sue Stanhope believes the answer to the ‘help or hinder’ question “could go either way.” She observes: “It will come down to whether key players recognise that answers demand collaborative and integrated approaches rather than retreating into their own organisational shells.” Pamela Parkes believes that, ultimately, it will be financial pressures that will force collaborative working. “I think the driver will be money,” she says. “It has to be the tipping point. There won’t be sufficient money to do things the way we have been doing them so people will have to work differently.”

Implications for HR and OD

All four of our interviewees are in no doubt that the success or otherwise of Total Place will rest on people and that the HR and OD function will need to step up to the mark in a major way. “We deliver public services largely through people so, inevitably, the consequences of what comes out of the Total Place initiative are going to be about leveraging the way people do their jobs,” says Roger Britton. “It is important for us to think about that right from the word go, rather than come up with lots of clever ideas and then scratch our heads wondering how we can actually motivate people around those clever ideas.” For Britton this means that HR leaders have to be able to deliver the “business partner element, ensuring that the people dimension is central to the solution.”

Sue Stanhope sees implications for the balance between HR and OD expertise: “we will need to invest more time in the OD side of things and that is something that we have not always done in the past compared to the more traditional personnel aspects.” This is echoed by her Cumbria counterpart, Jim Savege, who

says OD and HR leaders need to be “starting to help organisations think about how they deliver some of this stuff, looking at the different operational models that could be utilised by different organisations and agencies and how best to navigate and choose between the different options.” Of course, HR and OD functions will themselves be the subject of change. Delivering less for more will imply some HR integration and specialism between agencies.

Clearly HR and OD functions need to be able to facilitate what will be a challenging change process flowing from Total Place. They will need to deliver support for and leadership on a long list of challenges. Mindset and culture were common themes highlighted by our interviewees. Croydon’s Pam Parkes reflected on a joint workshop held between different local agencies as part of the Total Place initiative. She says it was very productive but also “I realised how different our cultures are and how different our approaches are, even though we are all public sector bodies. Culture is a key issue. We are going to have to look at being able to speak a common language and have common approaches to work.”

Delivering a mindset shift

Total Place implies a mindset shift. “It is a crux area,” says Jim Savege. “How can you start to think as an area as opposed to an organisation? How do you engage your different management teams and boards into a constructive way of thinking in a coherent manner across the piece, as opposed to silo by silo? It is a dilemma for many staff, whether they are policy practitioners, performance practitioners or, in some cases, in leadership roles.” Where mindset shift occurs it is because organisations have succeeded in enabling, either tacitly or otherwise, people to make that shift and because staff can see a compelling logic in it. Taking up the theme, Roger Britton observes that, in some front-line areas, the customer logic of joint working has already produced a mindset shift: “If you go to one of our joint discharge teams and talk to people there, they don’t focus on who they actually work for. They share out the jobs and the work according to who can do what best, without reference back up the organisation to what their particular masters might define as their role.”

To be successful, organisations involved in Total Place need to enable that mindset shift at all levels of organisations and be innovative and flexible in matching it with processes and structures that liberate rather than constrain new

ways of working. But the structural barriers in the way, such as culture, terms and conditions, policies and protocols, are enormous. “I don’t think anyone should underestimate the scale of this challenge,” observes Britton. “The only comparable recent thing is ‘single status’ but that pales into insignificance compared with some of these deeper issues.”

A deeper dive

One of the ways that Total Place organisations are addressing this challenge is by taking a so-called ‘deep dive’ into certain themes in the pilot areas, such as health and social care, crime and high cost communities, to uncover current realities and throw light on shared solutions. Does this imply previous initiatives were not ‘deep’ enough to enable different agencies to overcome the barriers that lie between them? “I’d have to say yes,” says Pam Parkes. “I think there were ‘deep dives’ previously but in separate and shallower pools. If we pool all of our resources, if we pool all of our thinking, if we pool all of our systems, that is more powerful because we can look at issues in their totality.”

One thing that will help, according to Parkes, is a new generation of local government leadership. “We’ve got a new breed of leadership, particularly in London. There is a new level of thinking and ambition. Chief executives and elected members are far more interested in the place in which they have responsibility and not just the local authority. It has been helped by the inspection regime which now gives much more credit for partnership work.”

The future view

What does Total Place herald for the future? Looking five to ten years ahead, Pam Parkes sees a possibility that “new local public sector workers coming into the profession won’t recognise local government as it is today. Instead, they are much more likely to be focused on the client group working alongside other similarly-focused professions.” The journey will not be straightforward. Jim Savege anticipates “a struggle with the complexity of what is the public sector in this country and the choices that we will have to make” but he also predicts “some great innovation and some consolidation, which is going to challenge some of our preconceived views. I don’t think it’s going to be universal. There will be a huge diversity of different delivery arrangements depending on circumstance and need. What I hope to see is a real focus on customers,

communities and needs and less on institutions, matched with the organisational development that will be needed to facilitate it.”

2,010 words

(1) Total Place website - www.localleadership.gov.uk/totalplace/