Implementing spending cuts in silos, without looking across the whole local public sector to alleviate them, is wasteful and short-sighted, say Robin Hambleton and Su Maddock

The answer lies in the place

The conventional wisdom now guiding current public service reform efforts is that public service leaders should ‘do more with less’. But this thinking is outdated. What is required is the development of the capacity to work with local people in more innovative ways.

This is not to argue against making savings in public spending. Rather, it is to suggest that public service managers following a ‘more for less’ approach run the risk of becoming trapped in silo-based decision-making.

As one chief executive said recently: ‘We are busy cutting spending without knowing that much about the spending cuts being rushed through by our public service partners, such as the fire service and the police. This makes no sense, as we are all serving the same communities.’

Innovative localities in various parts of the country are developing solutions which go beyond cutback management. They are developing what might be called a ‘more with more’ approach – one which recognises that the state, and particularly local government, has an absolutely-critical role to play in creating new ways of building personal and community resilience and wellbeing.

Traditional cutback management fails to challenge the very barriers that have stopped people working together. The alternative of nurturing new approaches by working with people recognises that every community contains untapped resources of knowledge, skill and enthusiasm.

This idea goes far deeper than co-creating solutions with people. It is a political strategy, one which seeks to rebalance the power relationship between the citizen and the state, and one that also respects individual experience and potential.

For instance, recovery principles are now being adopted in mental health, substance abuse and re-offending services, because they are more effective in helping people exercise control over their lives. This approach starts with the person’s lived experience, and guides them, not just by providing support and opportunities, but also by giving them hope.

Innovations of this kind depend on local initiative. Central government is too far from the frontline to be able to redesign services with the public to generate better and more inventive solutions. It follows that the role of central government needs to become one of supporting and encouraging imaginative place-based leaders.

Three major challenges need to be confronted if local leaders are to make a success of public service transformation.

First, inequalities. There is a real risk that a Big Society approach will mean that well-resourced neighbourhoods will flourish, while areas with high needs and fewer resources will stagnate. We note that around 60% of voluntary activities are carried out by middle-aged, educated women.

This does not mean that the notion of the Big Society should be ditched. Rather, it suggests that place-based leaders, and particularly elected political leaders, need to claim a central role in ensuring that radical innovation promotes social justice by developing the capacities of communities with less social capital.

Second, more attention needs to be given to the development of new governance arrangements to guide public service reforms at the local level. The policy initiatives streaming out of the coalition government could lead to considerable fragmentation, when connectivity is what leads to sustained wellbeing and prosperity in any locality.

The growth of isolated and competitive social and private enterprises could lead not just to waste and duplication, but a weakening of the web of community relationships. The 16 community budget pilots, announced by chancellor George Osborne in October, could make a major contribution by strengthening place-based leadership and its Total Local Governance role.

And third, the opportunity to advance the objective of ‘localism’ requires place-based leaders to exercise a decisive role in local economic as well as service development.

In the UK, local economic development practice is very uneven. The current, scrabbly bid for regional growth funding is reminiscent of the wasteful, competitive bidding approaches of the past. The new local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) could, however, provide a vehicle for place-based leadership of local economic development.

Our work with councils in various parts of the country suggests there are many leaders ready to go beyond cut-back management and take on the place-based leadership challenge.  

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Programs in action

Examples of place-based leadership working with communities:

- The Family Life Programme in Swindon involves actively working with families with multiple difficulties to help them build the lives they want to lead. The approach, which starts from lived experiences rather than the perspective of service providers, aims to enhance individual, family and community capabilities to arrive at outcomes which everyone wants.

- The Digital+Green City Initiative in Bristol sets out to promote community-based action that simultaneously serves green, digital and economic development objectives. For example, Bristol City Council and Knowle West Media Centre have worked together to orchestrate a range of initiatives designed to test out new ways of empowering local people by using new technologies in innovative ways, for example, smart metering of energy consumption in the neighbourhood.

- Wakefield City Council is breaking new ground in working with the public to support wellbeing and prosperity. It created the first local authority mortgage rescue scheme which provided loans to stave off local repossession at the height of the recession, restarted a critical scheme after developers went into administration, and the council’s economic growth board provides strong leadership for local businesses, preventing further business closure while working with communities to build community resilience.