



Heart of the matter

GETTING TO GRIPS WITH WHOLE PLACE
TRANSFORMATION

By Joe Fyans, Sandy Forsyth and Callin McLinden



Executive summary

Driven by the dynamics of a new political cycle, we are on the edge of a major shift in the way we go about delivering local public services. The circumstances call for a reform agenda encompassing the positive hopes of devolution and community empowerment without shying away from the sombre realities of limited fiscal headroom and years of sluggish economic growth, even as public trust in politicians and their ability to deliver change is at an historic low.

This report draws on extensive research and conversations with local leadership from across the country in an attempt to present some of the key elements of a reform agenda aimed at whole place transformation. The aim is to contribute to the national conversation of where we are and what we need to achieve, at the local level, to improve our public services, revive the economic heart of our places and deliver for communities.

We do not attempt to produce a panacea of solutions to the challenges faced by local government, nor to encourage 'moon shot' ideas in a sector which is struggling to provide at a baseline service level in many parts of the country. Rather, this research has sought to produce pragmatic steps that can enable radical transformation, rooted in existing best practice among local authorities, as well as to provide recommendations for comprehensive central government reform, based on the lessons of recent decades.

Key points

Throughout the research for this report, engagement with leaders across local government unearthed an optimism about the possibility of radically improving the efficiency and efficacy of public services through adopting a 'whole place' approach.

A whole place approach entails focusing on:

- **Empowering local leadership** through long-term and sustainable financing.
- **Embedding a preventative approach** by investing to address problems at source.
- **Developing a collaborative culture** for user-centred service provision.
- **Practising community co-design** with structured and sustained community engagement.

Taking this approach can deliver better service outcomes with a more user-centred focus on resident experience.

Optimism about the prospects for whole place transformation is not grounded in a denial of the hard truths. As set out in **section one**, there are many challenges to delivery, born of systemic under-funding over at least the last decade. Yet local leaders remain as committed as ever to the task of finding ways to deliver quality public services.

A whole place approach has been trialled in various forms over recent decades. **Section two** details this history of false starts and near-misses. The research for this report engaged individuals involved in many of these configurations, with one clear lesson arising across all examples: namely, lessons going unlearned and new, effective approaches failing to enter the mainstream of delivery.

In 2024, with the election of a new government committed to devolution and reform we have an opportunity to make it stick. **Section three** looks at how a new settlement can be constructed and **section four** lays out actions that local leaders can take to realise whole place transformation in their areas and reforms that central government can take to make improving the delivery of public services central to a mission of local growth.

Recommendations

The recommendations of this report represent an attempt to balance two imperatives, as informed by the research and engagement carried out over the course of the project. On the one hand, there is the need for radical, structural reformulation of the settlement between central and local government. On the other, there is the need for councils to continue to find ways to deliver strategically and intelligently, in spite of a system which all too often works against such activity. The goal is to outline the principles which must undergird systemic reform whilst also highlighting the best practice and pragmatic action taken by councils managing to innovate in the system as it currently exists.

Local government recommendations

To continue to deliver for residents even under considerable pressure, the use of partnership models centring on upstream prevention will be crucial. An examination of best and emerging practices in this area informs the following recommendations:

1 Plan to transform



To help foster a collaborative culture, **councils should produce transformational whole place service delivery plans, in collaboration with other agencies**, to give a clear overview of the efficiency and quality of service delivery across an area.

2 Model to prevent



Councils should develop internal models for valuing prevention and review spending accordingly, to help ensure that they can adopt an outcomes-focused approach to reducing demand on frontline services.

3 Prime for good growth



Being primed for good growth will be key to sustaining long-term transformation. **Councils should set out what good growth looks like over the immediate, medium and long-term** as part of forthcoming statutory local growth plans.

4 Work in partnership



Councils should **form partnerships and pool resources with local partners** across the public, private and third sectors. Operating with severely restricted capacity that is mostly outside of their control, it is more important than ever that councils lead collaboratively.

5 Deliver through innovation



Councils should work with private and third sector partners to **establish innovative vehicles** for regeneration, with explicit mandates to use procurement and other strategic functions to promote local economic growth.

6 Empower people



Local partnerships should **embed a culture of community engagement and empowerment**. This means adopting an asset-led and strengths-based approach, focusing on trust building, and develop different channels of communication with diverse communities. Mechanisms for collaboration should be built into the process of formulating strategy and devising policy across all policy areas.

Central government recommendations

To lay the groundwork for this transformation and equip local authorities to deliver on national priorities by providing high quality, sustainable public services and strategic, dynamic placemaking for economic development, a new deal for local government must meet the following requirements:

1 Steady the ship



As an interim measure, central government must **make an immediate cash injection into local authorities for frontline service delivery**, to restore sustainability to core services and halt decline in neighbourhood service provision. The immediate focus of spend could be on the improvement of the built and natural environment to deliver a visible uplift, followed by investment in community services, longer-term housing improvements and preventative measures at the neighbourhood level.

2 Chart a course to sustainability



Looking to the future, there must be an **examination of local government revenue sources**, including fiscal devolution, to chart a course to longer-term sustainability.

3 Fill the capacity gap



To accelerate efforts to fill the local government capacity gap and ensure the workforce is properly equipped to address the service challenges of the future, government must **work with the Local Government Association (LGA) to further develop and scale-up local government employment and training programmes**.

4 Invest in prevention



The new funding settlement must **commit to the value of upstream prevention** and look to move beyond the 'discretionary' categorisation of non-statutory services, recognising the value of these services in reducing frontline demand.

5 Value outcomes



The success of local growth plans **should be evaluated on public service outcomes as well as economic indicators**.

Localis

Vox Studios, V.311
1-45 Durham St
London, SE11 5JH

0870 448 1530
info@localis.org.uk

localis.org.uk



Kindly sponsored by: