

Total Place briefing note: Luton & Central Bedfordshire December 2009

Introduction

More than two hundred senior managers from local authority, police, probation, courts, health and benefits services in the Central Bedfordshire and Luton area have worked together throughout November to examine, in detail, two key issues: dealing with offenders and access to welfare benefits. The objective is to identify problems in the system and come up with cost effective solutions.

The initiative is one of 13 national Total Place pilots, part of an ambitious government programme to get central government and local agencies working together to look at the totality of public spending in an area – and the outcomes – and identify ways of delivering better value services on priority local issues.

The theme for Central Bedfordshire and Luton (*From dependency to self-reliance*) has two specific sub-themes: integrated offender management and access to benefits. Both reflect major concerns for local residents and are issues where partners felt that a real, positive impact could be made.

Findings from the first half of November's intensive 'deep dive' investigation have already revealed many examples of activity duplication and expensive failures within the current processes for delivering welfare benefits and managing crime. In particular, the investigating teams have highlighted:

- The country's welfare benefits system does little or nothing to encourage self-reliance.
- The complexities, fragmentation and duplication of the various processes actively discourage many people from coming off benefit and returning to work.
- There are 51 different welfare benefits in England and Wales but no single, official picture to show the public how they inter-relate.
- Each benefit requires a different claims process and some claim forms are over 50 pages long.
- People usually have to visit more than one agency to claim all their entitlements; at each different office, they have to answer more or less the same questions.
- Claimants are confused – local citizens advice bureaux estimate that nearly a third of their advisers' time is spent signposting benefit entitlements and helping people complete the forms - and many people in need miss out altogether.
- So complex is the system that benefits administrators have their own professional organisation but recommendations for improvement are too often thwarted by legislation and a labyrinth of official "guidance".
- Procedures for dealing with offenders are expensive and often completely fail to break the cycle of re-offending.
- In the Central Bedfordshire and Luton area, official figures show that two per cent of offenders are responsible for 30 per cent of crime.
- Dealing with the most prolific two per cent of offenders costs the community and taxpayer £5 million a year. Based on national research, such offenders have the potential to commit up to 22,000 crimes, costing £26 million a year.
- The vast majority of crimes committed by this group are burglaries and vehicle crime.
- Over eight out of ten of the offenders have a drug dependency.
- Five offenders come from one local family alone.
- As with welfare benefits administration, there are pockets of good practice but these are extremely segmented and uncoordinated.



The second half of the month-long 'deep dive' was devoted to scoping and formulating models for change and improvement. Total Place project leaders are confident improvements to service quality and delivery are achievable and that opportunities exist to make efficiency savings across the wider public sector, at both local and national level.

Already, well over a hundred issues of concern have been raised and more than thirty specific improvement measures identified. These were presented to councillors and senior executives at the end of November. Further work is continuing on logistics and costings.

Emerging recommendations

Proposals include:

Integrated offender management

A co-ordinated system for managing prolific and priority offenders (PPOs) to improve the way resources are used and reduce crime. At its heart lies a way to marshal resources, develop an effective 'life action plan' for each offender along seven distinct pathways - accommodation, finance, benefit and debt, employment, skills and training, health, drugs and alcohol, attitudes, thinking and behaviour, children and families – and dramatically cut re-offending rates.

Recommendations include a single point of contact for PPOs, with police, courts, prison service, probation, health, council and benefits services working together as a 'core team' in one location, using a common, accessible database. Such a team would be co-ordinated by a single person reporting to a steering group and governed, operationally and strategically, by a local criminal justice board, including the chief executives of all the partner agencies involved.

A new system of appropriate and speedy sentencing is also mooted.

By offering the 'right service at the right time', the new IOM system would deploy the assistance needed to break the chronic cycle of re-offending and encourage a major shift from dependence to self-reliance. A key factor would be a 24/7 support service, working to a joint care plan delivered locally and deployed when intervention would be most effective, not just during office hours - particularly during the transfer of offenders from custody back into the community.

The Central Bedfordshire and Luton Total Place team are convinced that radical improvements are possible, with robust governance and suitably trained staff from all the partner agencies providing the necessary continuity of service. The new system would cut risks to the community, increase public confidence and perceptions and reduce the fear of crime.

Overall, the team identified over 50 service improvements and new ways of working, 15 of which could be delivered locally in the short-term and 21 in the medium term. Nine key proposals, involving pooling of resources, could require structural change and 12 would require change at central government or legislative level. However, with strategic commitment and operational support, dramatic and cost-effective results could be achieved.

Access to benefits

As with integrated offender management, recommendations emerging from the Total Place team to improve access to benefits also focus on the right support, at the right place and right time with big improvements in service cost-effectiveness.

A 'triage' service is proposed, which could reduce – by 75 per cent - the time taken by existing procedures and speed up payments to claimants by as much as 25 days, cutting delays by more than half. Savings in administration costs are estimated to be around 40 per cent.

The proposals envisage a simple, largely self-service, process – available across all customer access channels - with a 'triage' service available to provide quick access to expert help and advice whenever it was needed. Key factors include a single IT system across a range of

benefits and a single system, and team, for verification and visits. A single, common team to counteract fraud is also proposed.

The recommendations point the way to a far more 'joined up' and cost-effective system that shares data more effectively, simplifying – and speeding up - the process for the customer. The proposals also show how support services can be better deployed to help address 'root cause' problems and enable a greater shift to proper self-reliance.

The proposals consist of nine local opportunities (five classified as 'easy' and four as 'hard') that could be realised in the short-term and six national/legislative changes that could be made in the longer-term. The longer-term proposals signpost the need for an enhanced *Tell us Once* approach, a single IT system and shared-service back-office processing team to administer all benefits, a change in national policies regarding data sharing and a simplified benefits system.

With both sub-themes however, the Total Place team are confident that a high number of service improvements are available. Some could be achieved for little or no additional cost, others could require further investment. But the evidence to date indicates that such investment could deliver significant benefits to the customer and taxpayer alike.

Locally and nationally, there are issues and challenges around governance, democratic accountability, legislation, operational control and changes to long-established practices but the findings of the November 'deep-dive' have already clearly highlighted cost-effective methods to improve systems and services by re-focussing on the needs of the customer.

Background

Total Place is an ambitious and challenging programme, bringing together elements of central government and local agencies in an area to achieve three things around a priority issue:

- service transformations that can improve the experience of local residents and deliver better value
- early efficiencies to validate the work
- a body of knowledge about how more effective cross-agency working can deliver the above

There are two complementary strands:

- a 'counting' process (mapping money flowing through the 'place' from central and local bodies) and making links between services to identify where public money can be spent more effectively
- a 'culture' process that looks at 'the way we do things round here' and how that helps or hinders what is trying to be achieved

Total Place has strong government backing and cross-party support. Communities and local government secretary John Denham has stressed it is an opportunity for councils to develop a 'whole area' approach to public services and the chance to identify, through working together, big, transformational changes that deliver better services at less cost.

Through examining the totality of public spending on a number of key issues in this area - and the outcomes - we see a clear opportunity to identify radical new ways of working that will deliver vital services more effectively and for less. Our objective is that the Total Place pilot will:

- have significant impact
- be deliverable within time and resource constraints
- be of interest across local organisations
- be customer focused
- change the way we do business
- deliver efficiencies

Partner organisations include: Bedfordshire Police, Luton and Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service, NHS Luton and NHS Bedfordshire, the Chamber, HMCS, DWP, JobCentre Plus, HM Revenue and Customs, Ministry of Justice, CPS, Probation Service, together with a wide range of local third sector agencies and organisations. Central Bedfordshire Council (CBC) and Luton Borough Council (LBC) are the joint leads.

Our initial report was sent to the Treasury and the Department of Communities and Local Government on Friday, September 18. To meet the government's timetable and deliver the final report on February 5, some highly intensive work is now well underway.

Two sub-groups, involving senior operational managers and decision-makers from the partner agencies, have employed a 'lean thinking methodology' to study, in sharp detail, the current way of working in terms of access to benefits and integrated offender management. They took a particularly close look at the weaknesses, duplication and problems within the current system and re-designed working methods to remove these.

The groups have identified challenges for central government as well as local issues. The detailed findings – including clear, well-evidenced and considered recommendations for real, deliverable change - will then inform and shape the final report to Whitehall.

The report will be supported by detailed *Customer Insight* social marketing research that captures accurate and meaningful data - quantitative and qualitative - on customer profiles, their aspirations and their experience of the current system(s). This too will inform proposals for service re-design and future partnership working, including local strategic partnership community strategies and delivery plans.

The high level count for the area has identified £3.434bn of government spend locally, equating to £6,853 per head of population, or £16,778 per household. The biggest spending organisations (by revenue) are:

1. Department of Work and Pensions - £746.331m (24.37%)
2. Central Bedfordshire Council - £459.837m (15%);
3. Luton Borough Council - £421.597m (13.77%);
4. NHS Bedfordshire - £326m (10.64%);
5. NHS Luton - £296m (9.66%); and
6. HMRC (tax credits/child benefit) - £245.88m (8%).

Current estimates indicate that over £146.8m a year is spent on dealing with crime and administering the criminal justice system in this area, equating to 4% of the total spend. On benefits, over £987.7m is spent per year, equating to 28.75% of the total public sector spend. A detailed count for each of the pilot sub-themes is underway to identify potential areas for saving, for example administration and office accommodation costs.

Further findings from November's 'deep-dive'

Integrated offender management

There is a cyclical quality to offending and re-offending and, often, insufficient support and resources are available to help break this cycle along seven distinct pathways: accommodation; skills and employment; mental and physical health; drugs and alcohol; finance, benefit and debt; children and families of offenders; attitudes, thinking and behaviour.

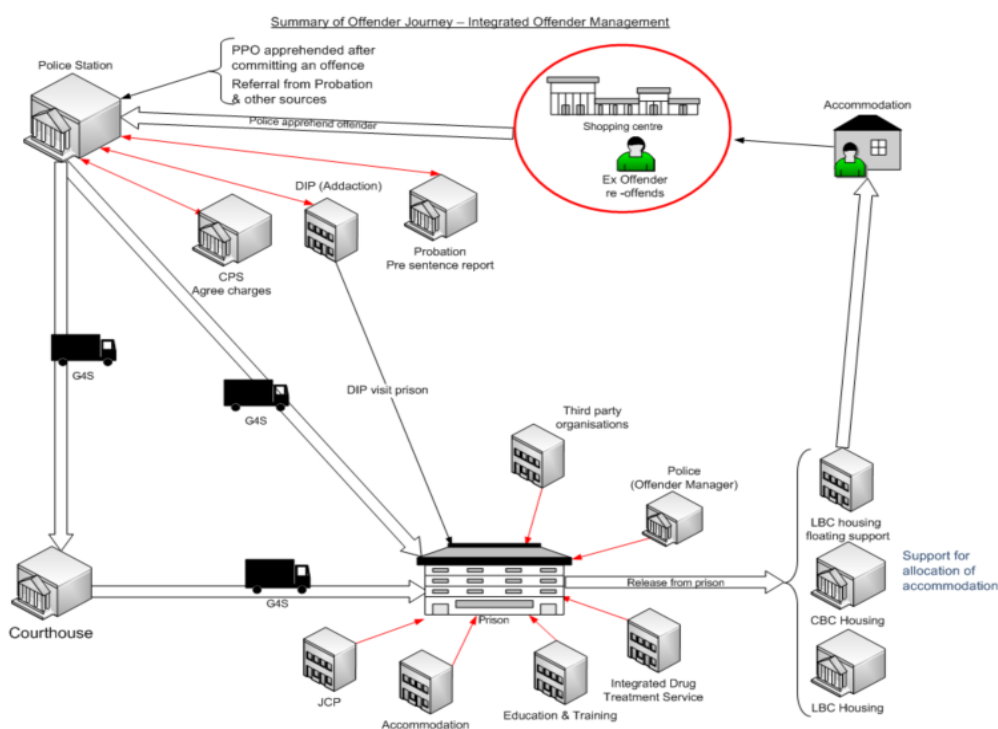
The huge cost of dealing with crime makes a cost-benefit analysis of increased and properly co-ordinated resources - with better continuity of care and responsibility between agencies - an imperative. This is particularly pertinent when a very small group of repeat offenders are responsible for almost a third of crime in the area.

There are pockets of good practice but they are too fragmented. Overall, the interaction of all the agencies involved in offender management can be greatly improved. Rather than relying on 'contacts', better processes, based on holistic case management, need to be developed.

The management of prolific and priority offenders (PPOs) is highly reflective of local needs but it does create challenges in terms of national definition, legal status and official guidance.

The number of people on the PPO scheme is also limited by resources. Although the scheme was set up to address problems in this area, not all partners recognise and/or provide a priority service to PPOs. Services are not always delivered at the point and time of need and there are distinct gaps in service provider awareness levels and support from third sector agencies.

Current systems have a high potential for duplication of activity (including paperwork and IT) and also uncoordinated activity that can detrimentally affect offender progression. There is a pressing need for better performance guidance and governance and better national guidance on the management of PPOs. Key questions for the sub-group include: do we understand what success looks like (?) do the performance indicators we have currently measure success effectively (?) and do we have a proper, joined-up strategic direction(?)



Access to benefits

The overall welfare benefits system is unnecessarily complex. There is a mix of area based benefits, council tax benefit and housing benefit for example, and regionally administered national benefits. The varying legislation that covers these is highly complex and discourages proposals for positive change. As they are means-tested benefits, application and delivery systems focus on the strict verification of identity, income, entitlement and correct payment.

No work is done on root cause analysis, problem solving or prevention. System complexities and inflexibility actively discourages many people from coming off benefits.

It is clear that voluntary agencies play a huge role in encouraging and facilitating benefit takeup and helping people negotiate the benefits maze. This represents a significant drain on their limited resources.

To claim the variety of benefits to which they are, or may be, entitled, customers have to embark upon a 'grand tour' of different agencies who administer different benefits from different locations. In parts of Central Bedfordshire in particular, this can involve long, difficult and expensive journeys via public transport.

Nearly every benefit is processed differently, with different performance targets for each benefit. There is very little incentive for operational departments to support people to be self reliant.

Each benefit requires a separate form, yet all the agencies ask for the same information. Some benefit claim forms run to over 50 pages. The verification of customer documents – again, the same documents are always required for each benefit - causes delays in processing. Insufficient use is made of IT and benefits entitlement data is not 'joined up' within authorities or between agencies.

Customer insight data is limited and not readily available to all the agencies involved. Customer profile data is not available. The focus is on benefit entitlement instead of the support that would enable self reliance. No data is available on who isn't claiming their entitlements, or why.

There is further duplication of effort in contacting and visiting customers and online claim processes are inconsistent and generally poor. There is no single customer champion and little co-ordination of communications to encourage take-up or to inform people on *how* to claim. Each agency had varied availability times. It was clear to the sub-group that everyone is dedicated to providing the best service they can. Providers are working within their performance targets. Benefits staff had many ideas on what would improve the service for customers. However, existing legislation – and the inherent complexities of the benefits system - prevents people from working creatively.

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The national Total Place picture: www.localleadership.gov.uk/totalplace/

More details on the Luton and Central Bedfordshire pilot:
www.localleadership.gov.uk/totalplace/pilot/luton-and-central-bedfordshire/