

SHOULD WE BE DEDICATED FOLLOWERS OF FASHION?

Fashion can be as powerful in the policy world as it is in the high street. In today's council chamber alternative models of service delivery are undoubtedly de rigueur.

According to a recent INLOGOV Pulse Survey 93% of councils are seeking alternative forms of service delivery by 2012. The question is whether councils are discerning shoppers or fashion victims.

Call me old fashioned, but for me the starting point in thinking about the future of local public services has to be the conclusion of the last government's total place pilots. They showed that it is possible to get improved outcomes at less cost through greater collaboration between relevant agencies, a genuine focus on place and a deeper engagement with citizens, communities and staff.

Alternative models of service delivery have the potential to provide more effective ways of securing that focus and engagement that the total place pilots said is essential

It seems to me however that there is a danger of rushing to the solution without being clear what the problem is – without thinking what a new outfit will look like on a drizzly Thursday. Or, to be more precise, without thinking about what the theory of change is.

Standing back, councils and others seems to have a number of objectives in mind when they consider new models of delivery.

In some cases the driving force is a belief that closer engagement of staff and/or citizens in the design and delivery of services will secure better value and impact. In others the focus is on the stronger commitment that comes with employee ownership or the benefits that can be derived from an organisation being rooted in a community or neighbourhood.

Other drivers may include:

- The belief that some structures secure more "business-like" ways of working and more flexible employment models;
- The financial advantages – in terms of business rates and VAT – that some models bring;
- The transfer of risk from the council to another organisation.

Being clear about what the main drivers of change are in a particular case is critically important. This, rather than the latest fashion, can then inform

which models are explored in more detail. The table below may help this process.

Some councils purport to be adopting a big bang approach to this. We hear about "the co-operative council", "the commissioning council", the "new strategic direction".

Few people change their whole wardrobe at once. The discerning shopper doesn't plump for a single new trend but tries a new look out. Maybe that's the model for new forms of service delivery.

What is absolutely clear - in service delivery models as in clothes - is that one size does not fit all.

Phil Swann, September 2011

If the council has decided to externalise or divest itself of a function and the driver is... then...

...securing significant staff engagement in the design and delivery of the service and leadership of the organisation...

...an employee owned social enterprise may be the way forward.

...securing direct user engagement in the design and delivery of the service and the leadership of the organisation...

...a mutual or co-operative model may be appropriate.

...achieving commercial financial discipline and a business focus...

...a local authority trading company may be appropriate.

...the long term management and exploitation of a community asset...

...a charitable trust may be appropriate.

...transfer risk to the private sector...

...a joint venture may be appropriate.

...to secure economies of scale in management and service delivery...

...collaboration with other councils and partners may be appropriate.