

The case for Total Place 2.0



Summary

There is currently a gulf between the way that the government funds and delivers public services and the way that citizens use them. The government typically allocates money through departments, which fund specific services such as the NHS, schools or local authorities. Each service then spends money to meet the needs of its users: pupils, patients and benefit claimants among others.

But that approach does not match people's lives. On any given day someone might visit their GP practice, drop a child off at school, visit the Jobcentre Plus, and apply for social care support for their parent. It is very rare, however, that those services within a local area – or a 'in a place' as it is known in policy circles – co-ordinate effectively between themselves, instead remaining locked in artificial silos that reflect divisions in Whitehall. Consequently, services often end up treating the symptoms of problems without ever working together to address the underlying causes themselves.

Other ways that the government funds services create barriers to more effective working. Central government sets short-term budgets, providing little certainty over funding. What funding does come is often tightly ring-fenced, with heavy prescription from central government about how local areas spend the money. Ministerial churn means that policy often changes frequently. And there is often little co-ordination between departments when making policy.

All of this leads to poor outcomes. Residents are bounced from service to service with their underlying needs often not met, while individual services are forced to spend more on meeting that acute demand. This duplicates spending across services within a place, wasting money.

In 2009, in the final years of Gordon Brown's premiership, the government launched an initiative called Total Place, which encouraged agencies within a place to count how much they collectively spent on services, identify duplication and redesign services around the needs of the users. It was short-lived. The coalition government ended the programme soon after the 2010 election.

Fifteen years on, the returned Labour government, under Keir Starmer, should use its first spending review this summer to launch a revitalised version of Total Place. To do this effectively it should:

- Test a new version of this approach in some hand-picked areas
- Provide a small amount of funding for project management and second staff for analytical capacity
- Reduce the number of small, tightly ring-fenced funding pots and provide longer term funding certainty
- Facilitate data sharing across government to give areas access to the data they need to make the best decisions

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- Provide ministerial support and political cover for innovation
 - Support regulators to take a more holistic, place-based approach to inspections
 - Provide support for the evaluation programme.

The pilot areas should:

- Establish a collaborative governance structure
- Count spending across all services that are willing to co-operate
- In partnership with local communities, identify outcomes that align with central government's priorities and agree how best to spend pooled money to achieve those goals
- Build in evaluation from the beginning with the aim of having a solid evidence base by the time of the 2027 spending review.

Looking further ahead, at the 2027 spending review the government should evaluate the efficacy of this approach in the pilot areas, including the potential savings and improvement in outcomes. That should allow the government to decide whether and how to extend the programme to other places.

This paper offers some background for this proposal, looking at the first iteration of Total Place, how Total Place 2.0 could and should work, and what the government will need to do at the 2025 (and 2027) spending review to make a success of the move.

What was Total Place?

In 2009, after more than a decade in government, the last Labour government had a lot of experience managing public services. They understood that siloed funding streams from Whitehall often created artificial barriers between services at a place level, making it difficult for citizens to navigate a complex system of referrals, assessments and support. Total Place was its response to this problem and was intended to “put the citizen at the heart of service design” by better integrating service provision at a local level and shifting spending to support people before the point of acute crisis.

Total Place took a relatively intuitive – but rarely used – approach to integrating services. The government realised that if it wanted to design truly integrated services areas must understand how much money was spent across all services. Each of the 13 pilot areas undertook a counting exercise, totting up the amount spent on services such as schools, adult and children's social care, general practice, criminal justice, employment support and transport.^{1,2}

Areas often created a board that oversaw the running of the project. In Birmingham it was chaired by the deputy leader of Birmingham City Council and led by a council officer, with representation from the private sector, the NHS and other agencies. In the Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole pilot, the board was chaired by the chief executive of Dorset County

Council,^{*} one of the constituent local authorities, and included the chief executives (or the equivalent level) of other partner organisations.³ An interviewee who was involved in one of the pilots said that in hindsight there should have been greater focus on aligning the interests of the constituent services on the board before work began.

From there, each area took different paths when choosing which services to prioritise. Birmingham looked to integrate its parental support programmes with the goal of reducing conduct disorders in children.⁴ In Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole, which has high hospital admission rates and a larger older population, the pilot focused on preventing avoidable admissions by putting GPs in charge of integrated dementia services. This was the explicit purpose of Total Place: only those in an area truly understand where to direct funding to achieve the best outcomes.

Evaluations of Total Place, even in the short time it was in operation, found that programmes either delivered or were on track to deliver a range of improved outcomes, and reported falling demand for acute services. This also freed-up funding for performance-enhancing investment elsewhere. From the evaluation of programmes that it ran under Total Place, the Birmingham team estimated that they could save £105.3million over 15 years after investing £41.7million in the same time.⁵

There were plans to expand the scheme but these did not survive the 2010 election, shortly after which Total Place was scrapped by the incoming coalition government.

Why Total Place 2.0 is needed

Total Place pilots ran more than 15 years ago, but its founding documents read like they were written today. Indeed, many of the trends that were identified then have only worsened. Services are still heavily fragmented. There are still a small number of people with complex, overlapping needs who place high demand on multiple public services in a local area. Funding is still (or again) short-term and often comes in the form of small, tightly ring-fenced pots of money. Central government still likes to design policy in Whitehall and impose it on front-line services, regardless of its suitability. So it should not be surprising that interest in the scheme has resurfaced, with advocates such as New Local calling it Total Place 2.0.^{6,7}

Places are trapped in a cycle of tight budgets and rising acute demand

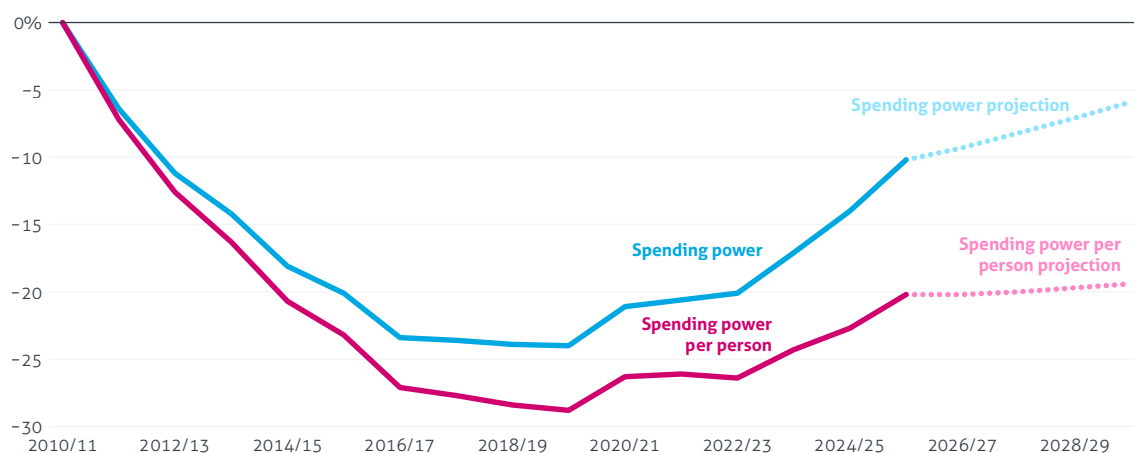
The government is spending a higher proportion of its budget on people in crisis. This has trapped service providers – particularly local authorities – in a doom loop⁸ where they often have little choice but to cut preventative spending to meet acute demand, which further increases demand for those acute services in the future.

The context of 2025 is very different to 2010. Central government cut funding for local government substantially between 2010 and 2016. Even after recent growth in funding, it is unlikely that local authority spending power will return to 2010 levels by 2030 in

* This should not be confused with today's Dorset unitary authority, which was established in 2019 and combined Dorset County Council and five district councils.

real terms. In that time, the population is set to have grown by close to 17%, meaning that real-terms, per capita spending power could be roughly 18% lower in 2029/30 than in 2010/11.

Figure 1 **Change in local authority spending power, total and per person, since 2010/11**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of MHCLG, 'Core Spending Power table: final local government finance settlement 2025 to 2026'; ONS, 'Mid-year population estimates' and 'Population projections'. Notes: This excludes 'Other' local authorities and shows England only. The 'projection' is an estimate of core spending power given current spending plans. Spending power before 2015/16 is an estimate using changes in revenue spending power.

The result of those funding constraints will be plain to see for many: a reduction in access to adult social care, a large reduction in early years and preventative children's services, heavy cuts to local authority-provided libraries, museums and leisure centres, less frequent waste collection and a large drop in subsidised bus services, among many others.

Other services are also in a worse position now than in 2010.⁹ The number of GPs has not kept pace with a growing population, meaning there are far fewer GPs per patient. The police have been through a cycle of heavy staffing cuts, followed by a hurried recruitment process, meaning that while officer numbers are not drastically lower, those officers are on average less experienced. Schools are struggling with rising special educational needs (SEND) demand. The entire public sector estate – including hospitals, schools, GP practices, courts, and many others – is crumbling after more than a decade of severe underinvestment.

Beyond a growing population, other demographic factors are putting more pressure on public services. The population is older now than it was in 2010: 19% of the population in England is aged over 65 in 2025 compared to 16% in 2010. In 2023/24, the number of children living in relative poverty after housing costs was 4.5 million, up from 3.6 million in 2010/11, an increase of 23.8%.¹⁰ The Health Foundation estimates that people on average spent 47.2 years of their life without illness in 2010. By 2019, this had fallen to 44.9 years.¹¹ These and other demographic trends mean that public services are under more pressure than ever.

Those factors act as headwinds against more effective working at a local level.

Previous Institute for Government work argued that to address this problem the government may have to “double-run” spending – in other words, temporarily fund preventative interventions while continuing to spend money on acute services. This is a hard argument to make to the Treasury, which tends to be sceptical that the preventative spending will ever generate the savings that means the government can stop double-running. It is a particularly difficult argument to make when budgets are so tight.

Places are already double-running spending

In fact there is already a different type of double-running in a place, but rather than this coming in the form of *additional* funds to boost prevention spending it is *duplicative* double-running – that is, different services spending the same funds, or their share of them, on the same things. Multiple services assess and interact with individuals and families for what are essentially the same problems. Someone living in poor housing may present to local authority housing services requesting new or temporary accommodation, to their GP with a health condition triggered by living in damp conditions, and to the local authority’s social services because they cannot wash themselves in a poorly equipped bathroom, and so on.

Staff are rarely empowered to work holistically, blocked by service silos. Instead, they are forced to use a small number of tools to try to meet citizens’ needs, such as referring people from one service to another, and often back again. As such, there are often multiple members of staff across the NHS, social services, employment support and the criminal justice system who are effectively ‘case managing’ the same person.

Even when someone does access a service, that provision is often focused on the symptoms of problems rather than the cause. The GP in the example above can help manage a person’s health condition, but until that person moves out of their inadequate housing they are likely return to their GP with the same complaint.

Some of the benefits of better place-based working are undoubtedly intended to materialise over the longer term in the form of reduced acute demand. But reducing such duplicative double-running could realise relatively quick service improvements for areas and allow for medium-term savings.

Funding silos costs the government money

Financial incentives matter for service delivery. Funding silos means that agencies are incentivised to keep activity in another service, regardless of the overall cost to the taxpayer. For example, a patient in hospital could be fit for discharge but kept in a bed while the NHS and the local authority assess which agency must fund that individual’s care. The cost is ultimately the same to the state, but siloed funding keeps the person in hospital, delaying their rehabilitation and stopping the hospital from using the bed for another patient.

Designed well, Total Place 2.0 should reduce such financial friction between agencies. By looking at funding in the round, it will no longer matter whether it is the NHS, the local authority, a school or the police that incur the cost of meeting an individual’s needs. Rather, a place should choose the best value intervention, regardless of the agency delivering the service.

Total Place 2.0 offers the chance of genuine efficiency savings

The government set departments a “2% productivity, efficiency and savings target” for 2025/26 at last October’s autumn budget.¹² This follows the pattern of recent productivity drives: central government decides a number that it then imposes on departments. Departments then ask places to sign up to unrealistic spending plans, which they are frequently unable to meet. Since at least the last 2015 spending review, that has meant the government has frequently resorted to emergency cash injections to address poor performance.¹³

Taking a Total Place approach should not be seen as a panacea for these problems. But it would provide the necessary architecture for encouraging effective, collaborative working between agencies. This is a more realistic and sustainable approach to improving productivity in public services and making real efficiency savings.

It would not require large amounts of up-front additional investment but instead would make better use of the money that services already spend in an area. Given the government’s stated aim is “to deliver more efficiently and effectively for citizens”,¹⁴ this should be seen in the Treasury as a welcome option.

Between now and the next spending review in 2027, chosen areas could make progress on some of the areas discussed – such as reductions in administrative spending and provision of better services to the most cost-intensive service users. This will not, of course, be enough time to make root and branch reforms to *substantially* reduce the amount of acute demand for services, such is the state of the public sector, but it would provide a blueprint for reform that delivers better, more cost-efficient outcomes by 2027.

Total Place 2.0 is a natural extension of the government’s existing reform programme

Total Place neatly dovetails with two major strands of government policy: the extension of English devolution and its Test, Learn and Grow programme being run in the Cabinet Office.

The government made it clear before the general election that it wants to move decision making powers away from Westminster and put them in the hands of those closer to the front line. The government is already making progress towards that goal and fleshed out its ideas in the recent English devolution white paper. Part of this is its commitment to providing multi-year finance settlements for local government from 2026/27.

It has already reduced some of the ring fences around funding by, for example, [consolidating six funding streams](#) into a single ‘Children and families grant’ for local authorities. 2025/26 is the first year that central government is rolling out ‘integrated settlements’ for mayoral combined authorities, which will provide those authorities with more flexibility to decide how funding in key policy areas should be spent. The functional responsibilities included within the integrated settlement mostly focus on economic development, but both the skills and employment support pillars demonstrate that this is a potential model for public services funding too. The Total Place model is a natural extension of these initiatives, further supporting local areas to make decisions for themselves.

The government's Test, Learn and Grow programme supports services to try new approaches, see if they work, and then if they do, scale them to larger areas. Given Total Place 2.0 would begin by empowering local areas to take an experimental, evidence-driven approach to innovation, this too feels a logical step.

Total Place 2.0 can go ahead with limited additional investment

The chancellor has repeatedly made clear that funding is set to be tight in this parliament. While there will be a substantial uplift for services in 2025/26, the government's spending plans imply cuts for unprotected departments from 2026/27.

That should make Total Place 2.0 even more attractive to the government. The benefits to an area come from the increased control over spending money, and a reduction in direction from the centre, rather than the headline amount of funding – there was no additional funding for the original Total Place but local areas were nonetheless very bought in.

We do not believe there is a need for large amounts of additional resource because staff in a place already deliver a mixture of acute and preventative services. The goal of Total Place 2.0 should be to reduce duplication between different public bodies and gradually shift staff activity from more acute to more preventative services.

This may sound unrealistic to front-line staff who are already working at full capacity. The goal should not be to load additional responsibilities on to those staff, but rather to free them up to work in the way that they know delivers the best outcomes for people in the places they work, as demonstrated by approaches like the Liberated Method in Gateshead.¹⁵

Beyond that, some limited extra funding would likely be needed to ensure dedicated management capacity in selected areas, but this would be negligible in the context of government spending and could likely be accommodated within existing departmental budgets. The government should also encourage secondments from central government to build local capacity (more on which below).

What should the government do in the upcoming 2025 spending review?

It is welcome that the government is considering a limited programme starting this year. But how it approaches this will be important: the following are key areas it should focus on when designing the new programme.

The government should use this summer's spending review to identify a small number of areas

With the spending review happening in June, there is not enough time to design and institute a national programme. So the government should focus on testing the Total Place concept in a small number of areas between then and the next spending review, in 2027.

We recommend selecting according to the following criteria:

- In the interests of moving quickly (the spending review is in less than two months), there should be no bidding process – selection should come from the centre. Bidding can be extremely time-consuming and a waste of time and money for the many areas not selected.
- Central government should see this as the equivalent of a grant, rather than a contract, taking a bet on the skills and capacities of chosen organisations, rather than selecting based on a highly specified local delivery model.
- Given this is about proof of concept, central government should choose places that have strong local leadership and relationships and have already made some steps towards developing place-based services – an activated network. This should include strong relationships between the selected authorities and the combined authorities they sit within.
- If possible, the centre should select a range of areas – urban, rural, more and less deprived. But this is a second order concern. The purpose is less to prove that this approach can work in any area now but that it can work well, full stop.

There was speculation that the government would take a ‘cohort approach’ to this programme, requiring areas to target support at narrow groups with the highest need. This would be overly prescriptive, substituting one form of ring-fencing (around funding) with another.

So it is welcome that the government is instead likely to ask each area to target a ‘life stage’.¹⁶ The life stages will be broad – likely childhood, working-age adults and older adults. This strikes a good balance between allowing central government to pursue some of its interests, while still empowering areas to design interventions that match the needs of their residents.

Within a life stage, an area should choose which outcomes it wants to improve, in partnership with local communities. Initially, that should be done in collaboration with central government so that areas are pursuing policies that align with central government’s goals. When these are long-term outcomes, the areas should specify intermediary input or output metrics that demonstrate progress towards the outcome.

The programme should be led from the Cabinet Office. But it needs strong buy-in from the Treasury (and preferably the prime minister). Ideally, there needs to be a roadmap that the Treasury signs up to. That should include expectations for the pilot schemes between 2025 and 2027, how the programme could be expanded from 2027 onwards, and further freedoms beyond that for areas that demonstrate their ability to deliver.

This should be the start of building a wider community of practice – sharing the learning from the selected areas so that other councils with more mature place-based working can adapt and apply it to their areas.

Recommendations: central government

Trial this approach in three areas

The government is considering plans to trial this new programme in three areas around England.¹⁷

This is the correct approach. It is helpful to use those areas as a test bed to work out the practicalities of the programme. If run effectively, with an evaluation designed from the beginning, this approach should give the government the information it needs to determine if it wants to expand the programme at the 2027 spending review.

Provide additional funding and secondments

To best enable chosen areas to embrace a renewed Total Place the Starmer government should give a small amount of additional funding to support project management (for example, some dedicated management capacity, data analysis and forensic accounting). It should also send its staff to areas on secondment – primarily from MHCLG or the Cabinet Office, though the involvement of the Treasury would send a strong signal.

Change its approach to ring-fencing funding

Central government should further reduce the number of ring fences around small pots of money to organisations in each area that are spent on relevant functions such as homelessness, adult and children's social care, and other neighbourhood services.

But there is a need to gradually nudge the balance of spending towards more preventative interventions. Previous Institute for Government¹⁸ work has recommended that central government puts a broad ring fence around preventative spending in a place. This would capture a wide range of interventions across multiple services but should also limit the ability of agencies to raid preventative budgets for day-to-day pressures. A prevention ring fence doesn't need to be a priority of this programme, but it could support the aims of Total Place 2.0 over the longer term.

Provide more funding certainty

Central government has too frequently relied on single-year funding settlements and one-off pots of money to fund services. That makes it very difficult to plan spending effectively. The government's commitment to move to multi-year funding settlements for local government is welcome, but it should look to provide similar certainty to other services.

The government should move to longer term funding arrangements and a more regular timetable of settlements for local areas. They should also align funding timetables across services to encourage integration.

Give areas better access to data

We heard that difficulties sharing data between local services was an important barrier to more collaborative working. There should be expedited access to data relevant to the chosen cohort that is held by central government. At a minimum that should include spending data for government departments and agencies. It should ideally include access to data that allows for better identification of those needing support.

Provide ministerial support

The success of the programme will depend on local leadership and relationships. But central government can support this by providing political cover. Local leaders don't want to be constantly looking over their shoulders, worried about criticism in a ministerial press release. Part of what matters is how it makes local authorities and areas feel. Do they feel like equal partners with central government? Can we move away from parent-child relationships?

Any move towards Total Place should come with a clear statement from central government that local areas have permission to rethink how they deliver services. This sounds trivial but is important for shifting culture up and down government. As one local authority CEO put it to us, councils need a small amount of money but a large amount of permission.

Bring regulators into the conversation

We heard that inspections are overly focused on process rather than outcomes, and on services rather than places. Regulation can be another form of ring-fencing around services. One interviewee said that "the government abolished spending ring fences in 2010 and then built them back up with regulation".

The government needs to bring relevant regulators, particularly Ofsted and the CQC, into the conversation. Appropriate ministers should ask the regulators how they can support this initiative. This may require rethinking the resources allocated to regulators; many are currently unable to perform more than their statutory duties due to limited funding and staffing.

Between now and 2027, the government should consider what broader changes could be made to the approach taken by key regulators, again particularly Ofsted and CQC, to encourage greater place-based working.

Support areas with their evaluations

Evaluation should be built into programmes from the start. The Treasury, the Cabinet Office and the Evaluation Task Force (ETF) should support places to design evaluation programmes.

Recommendations: pilot areas

Count spending across all services

The first step will be to count the amount of spending in a place across all services. The government should not be prescriptive about how this is carried out: the most important thing is that the exercise happens.

Rather than spending months arguing about whether apples are being compared with pears, it is enough to get a broad idea of how much is spent in total in an area. There will be different spending patterns in different areas, so it is not important to compare spending between areas in granular detail. What is important is properly understanding overlapping and unproductive spending in each area for the specific life stage that area chooses.

The counting exercise serves two purposes. The first is to identify the level of resources available and where there is overlap. The second is to start conversations and build relationships in a place, or to improve existing relationships.

Once the concept of Total Place is proven and the approach is rolled out more widely, closer comparison across areas will become more important as government will want to access the effectiveness of different models. Given that, the government should try to move towards more comparable spending measures in the medium to long term.

Establish a collaborative governance structure

It is important that areas decide how to make decisions and manage the programme. This needn't be uniform around the country.

While areas tended to appoint a board to manage Total Place in the late 2000s, the constituent members of those boards differed. It was easier to determine that Birmingham City Council should lead the board in Birmingham, where there was only one local authority in the area. That's a more complicated decision to make in areas that have multiple local authorities. Areas that take part in the government's new programme will need to consider which local authority or strategic authority is best placed to lead the programme, or whether it is necessary to create governance arrangements that share responsibility more equally.

Ultimately, while governance structures are important, the effectiveness of Total Place 2.0 will depend on the quality of local relationships. There must be trust that all agencies are working together in pursuit of the same goals. That will require governance structures that enable the development of aligned objectives and collaborative decision making on how to achieve these.

Agree how best to spend money to improve those outcomes

From there, areas should work out how to better use the total pool of funding to achieve desired outcomes.

Where those outcomes are longer term, areas should have a clear theory of change for how the actions of local partners will contribute to these and how they can show progress. This could include pointing to intermediary input and output metrics that will eventually shift outcomes.

Decision making should include as many services and community groups as are willing to engage, but local authorities seem the obvious choice to lead this work. They are responsible for a wide range of services themselves, have the most democratic legitimacy in a place and arguably have most contact with communities.

Combined authorities – an organisation constituted from a group of local authorities, and which is designed to increase co-operation between councils¹⁹ – are also vital for this work. Test areas will likely extend beyond the footprint of a single local authority and so combined authorities will play an important co-ordinating role between local authorities and other agencies. Experience from more mature systems – such as Greater

Manchester's – also shows that they can provide analysis that cuts across agency boundaries in a place. They can, for example, aggregate data about the availability of temporary accommodation, or which adult social care providers could accept someone out of hospital.

When deciding how to target spending, the local areas should involve the community where possible. As one interviewee put it “community involvement is not a nice to have but a fundamental aspect of prevention”. There is no one in government who is better able to understand the needs of residents in a local area than the residents themselves.

Build in evaluation from the beginning

The trial for Total Place 2.0 should inform the government's decision to either roll it out more widely or look to other reform options at the spending review in 2027. To make that decision, it is vital that the government – particularly the Cabinet Office and the Treasury – has as much information as possible about what worked and what didn't.

All areas should design their programmes with evaluation in mind. They should engage central government in discussions about both the type and quality of evaluations that the centre will need to inform decisions at the 2027 spending review. The evaluation should be designed to capture as wide a range of benefits as possible but should, as a minimum, include the fiscal effects of all interventions.

Evaluation would ideally be a joint programme overseen by the ETF. It would evaluate the performance of the three test areas in comparison with similar areas that have not run the programme.

In these evaluations, areas should identify the barriers that prevent place-based working, and which are within central government's power to remove or lower.

What can be done after the 2027 spending review?

By 2027 the government should hope to have an evaluation of the efficacy of how the three Total Place 2.0 areas performed compared to the rest of the country. These would provide the evidence for how much could be saved and how outcomes could be improved. They should also provide details of barriers to wider adoption of similar reforms across the country. Central government should endeavour to lower or eliminate any barriers that areas identify.

That should then feed into a more substantive bid to roll the programme out to the other parts of the country, dependent on the findings of the evaluation.

Given that expansion from 2027 will necessarily include less mature areas, the government should also look to put in place mechanisms and architecture to share best practice and learning. The Office for Local Government was an imperfect organisation that the government abolished quickly after taking office. But there is an opportunity to create a genuinely collaborative body that shares learnings across services and places, along the lines of the Office for Government Improvement and Learning that the Future Governance Forum²⁰ and the Institute for Government²¹ have previously recommended.

Another option could be to expand the remit of the Office for National Statistics' 'ONS Local' service, which collects some subnational data already, though this would require providing the ONS with more resources.

Box: Questions the government needs to answer before the 2027 spending review

- How to approach Total Place 2.0 in places that do not have a combined authority?
- How would Total Place 2.0 work in areas that have non-coterminous boundaries for services? In its devolution white paper, the government says that it has a long-term ambition to align public service boundaries. How can it use local government reorganisation and the merger of NHS England as an opportunity to move towards that goal?
- Are there outcomes that central government wants to target? Is the cohorts approach working as a framework for guiding Total Place 2.0? How should places incorporate the national missions into the outcomes that they're targeting?
- How should Total Place 2.0 interact with a shift towards more funding going through strategic authorities' integrated settlements?
- What is the government's desired end point of a Total Place 2.0 programme: improved communication and co-operation between services within a place, statutory governance structures to encourage collaboration, or funding settlements made for places rather than services?

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