

Joined up ?

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“Joined up government” is the holy grail, yet the practical barriers to its efficiencies and improvements have long stumped us all.

Start with government departments, separate fiefdoms with their own staff and targets. DECC reduces carbon emissions, regardless of economic growth; HMT wants economic growth, whatever that does to carbon emissions.

Joining things at the centre is often a zero sum game, with staff at stake. With little achieved, when administrative capacity has declined, it is local government that has lost most, and as Guardian data¹ shows, not evenly.

“Joining up” only really takes place not where directives go out, but locally where they are received. This requires consistent geography, overcoming the perennial whinge that every level above is too remote, and every level below too incompetent.

That is where we hit those practical barriers, such as departments and their national agencies’ targets, budgets and accountabilities and also localities’ inability to sensibly share services. There is also agencies’ different responsibilities, like probation’s to work with offenders, social workers’ to check on vulnerable children, housing providers’ to stop the roof leaking and health visitors’ to improve children’s health.

Despite genuine aspirations to brigade the dozens of visits some families get each year under a “lead professional” (the work of Louise Casey’s “Troubled Families” unit²), it is very difficult in practice for one agency to take on the responsibilities of another. Further fragmentation comes with different outsourced payment by results systems (like the Work Programme and prisoner reoffending), which makes early preventative intervention harder, the real key to cutting off expensive and unproductive demand.

Today though we are a step closer to solving another of those intractable problems: data sharing. Whilst cutting through this particular Gordian knot isn’t winning Manchester quite the kudos of discovering graphene³, it is nonetheless a sort of alchemy in this arcane but important world.

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/interactive/2012/nov/14/local-authority-cuts-map>

² https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/6151/2183663.pdf

³ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2011/nov/13/graphene-research-novoselov-geim-manchester>

It isn't rocket science. A joint team from Bradford, Leicestershire and Greater Manchester, supported by more enlightened Government Departments, has found the problem mostly a cultural one, deriving from deeply risk-averse default attitudes.

The lens is disproportionately pointed at vulnerability and embarrassing publicity around losing data sticks, and finds expression in terms like Caldicott *Guardians* and Data *Protection* Officers. The pendulum has swung far too far, as we need to not just protect data but to share it – something the Guardian⁴ champions.

Officers at all levels are often ignorant of what is possible; trying to solve issues is seen as too much work and doomed to failure. Even where Protocols exist, they are often woefully underused. Too many systems are still paper-based, making sharing costly.

The solution is localities with cross-agency plans that pass muster with national policy but more importantly are based on local policy-driven information needs. Community Budgets⁵, if national pilots succeed, are the best way into that, but there are others. The more plans are consulted and agreed, the greater the chance of avoiding the usual “no” on data sharing. There are successes to report, for example all ante and post natal data is now shared between the NHS and all Greater Manchester's local authorities.

Where there is a will, the project shows the way, developed through a sophisticated toolkit that helps officers navigate through the possible, with the minimum fuss and the maximum knowledge to counter doubts and foot shuffling by knowing what is allowed and how it can be achieved. The toolkit is freely available at www.informationsharing.co.uk. It includes advice and a number of case studies, Q&As, templates and the like to help organisations pull together data sharing agreements and generally achieve the art of the possible.

This is only one of the elements needed to “join up” government, but the fact that something seen by so many as so intractable is actually rather simple to solve surely brings a little hope as we speed ever faster towards the budget-drive absolute need to dissolve different agencies' work into single plans and actions.

This blog was first published in the guardian on december 4 2012,
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/local-government-network/2012/dec/04/data-sharing-reluctance-local-government?INTCMP=SRCH>

⁴ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/data>

⁵ http://menmedia.co.uk/manchestereveningnews/comment/blogs/s/1589518_baron-frankals-blog---why-reform-is-so-difficult