

Minister Kaur speech at Total Place Now conference

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Satvir Kaur, Parliamentary Secretary in the Cabinet Office, spoke at the Total Place Now conference on Tuesday 17 March 2026.

Thank you for inviting me here today. After over fourteen years in local government, events like this, and being with people like you, is like coming home. What makes it extra special, of course, is having John Denham here to introduce me.

John was one of my local MPs growing up in Southampton. He gave me first prize when I was eight years old at a school fair. Several years later, he found me volunteering at a local community event, where he convinced me to get involved in politics.

For me, John represents the kind of politics that really matters: the politics that empowers people to transform places and, in doing so, change lives.

It is this kind of politics that drives me. It's why I was in local government for so long and became Leader of the Council for my home city. It's why I will always have the utmost admiration for local leaders and everything you do to make the places and the people you serve reach their full potential.

Having been there myself, I can empathise with the frustrations felt by local leaders when working with central government. When it works, the sky's the limit; but all of us, I'm sure, can recall a time when the system has fallen short.

The simple truth is that if government wants to improve lives and create thriving communities—especially at a time when public trust in government at all levels is at an all-time low—then we must put more power in the hands of local people and give them a greater stake in the places they live.

We know this requires a mindset shift at the centre. It is a mindset shift that won't happen overnight, but one that has already begun.

We have seen it through the reintroduction of neighbourhood health services, through youth hubs which are supporting opportunities for young people, and through the launch of hundreds of pride in place programmes across the country aimed at transforming neighbourhoods that have long felt forgotten.

They're all government initiatives, investing tens of billions in place, empowering local communities to deliver for themselves, and ultimately having more impact because of it.

This is policy work that is going beyond a single government department and breaking out of the traditional siloed, short-term thinking.

In my position in the Cabinet Office—the most central of central government departments—I am ensuring this vital cross-government partnership working is being maximised for people and place.

Let's be clear: this new way of working goes beyond putting complimentary services in the same location.

This is about reforming the services themselves. It is one thing to be in the same boat, but another to ensure everyone is rowing in the same direction.

This is where the 'Test, Learn and Grow' programme comes in.

It puts people at the centre, with services which not only work around them, but with them.

As a new mum, trying to navigate several public services at once which, despite being co-located, aren't actually talking to each other, is motivation enough for me to get this right—especially when you try to do that on about three hours sleep.

Test, Learn and Grow is about shaking up the system, not tinkering on the sidelines. This is about enacting actual reform which generates positive, tangible outcomes which are felt by our communities.

To make this work, we must put people at the centre, accept those on the frontline often have the best ideas, and understand there will be inevitable trial and error. We have created multi-disciplinary teams who will help empower the frontline to test new ideas together and put people and communities at the heart of this programme.

A key place where this is happening is Plymouth.

There, leaders of local services are driving a community-focused approach to health by offering preventative services through wellbeing hubs to frequent users of GP services, some of whom use these services up to 40 times a year. So they're trying something different.

Local health organisations are offering this more focused support by ensuring relationship-based ways of working. This not only increases efficiency and reduces stress on GPs and A&Es, but crucially, it helps vulnerable people get the support they actually need, improving their physical and mental wellbeing.

Another example is Barnsley.

We're supporting their tech ambitions through Test, Learn and Grow by harnessing the power of AI to improve children's safeguarding. Many here will know: nothing is more complex and fragmented than data sets when trying to keep children in safe, loving homes.

Our work with Barnsley involves ensuring information can flow between service providers, meaning that some of the most vulnerable members of our society get the help they need.

Now, I know the issues and measures Plymouth and Barnsley are taking are not unique.

Because great, innovative, joined-up, preventative work to solve multi-faceted problems is happening every day in areas up and down our country.

What makes these initiatives and others like it invaluable beyond their individual places, however, is how we take the learnings of their new ways of working forward to reform the state and have the greatest national impact.

It is essentially the 'Grow' part of the programme that takes it beyond previous attempts at reforming the state that have fallen short.

I'm often asked about the level of ambition with this, and for me, state reform—meaningful, place-

based, people-centered reform—is what gets me up in the morning.

Will it be difficult? Yes. Will there be challenges? Of course.

But this is a critical moment where the stars are aligned, and we must all play our part to take full advantage of it.

Complex central government structures, particularly around reporting and funding, are being simplified. Community mission challenges are being piloted, and a new place-based unit at the heart of government is being established. And crucially, the Chancellor announced ‘Place Based Budgets’ in the Autumn Budget, which I’m excited to see come to fruition.

Steve Reed will be beaming in to say a few words more about this later today, and I’m delighted to work in partnership with him and his Ministerial team on this work.

It will mean exploring new ways of working and new approaches to preventing and tackling some of the most wicked issues—issues that, quite frankly, used to keep us both up at night as leaders of councils.

Issues like how we keep our young people safe and reduce reoffending, what does meaningful employment support look like, what is the place-based answer to SEND support, and most of all, how do we ensure the most vulnerable people in our society are not constantly moving from pillar to post to get the support they actually need.

We know the life-changing impact place-based budgets can have on all of these issues and more.

This is a win for people, who will see public services built around them—focused on them and their needs.

This is a win for taxpayers, whose money goes further by ceasing duplication.

And it is a win for public servants, many of whom have dedicated their lives to helping others, who have tried to navigate the system but wished it were different.

I hope this central government mindset shift inspires, empowers, and invigorates you. You are the change makers.

Listen, I know I’m probably preaching to the converted, but my ask is this: Work with us.

Tell us what is working well, where the system needs to work harder, or where it needs to change altogether. Don’t give up. People and politicians have been talking about public service reform for decades. Reform through place-based prevention isn’t a new idea, but how we plan to get there, with you, in this moment, is.

We all do what we do because we want to improve lives and transform communities.

I truly believe, as I know many of you here do too, that this work is too important to ignore.

It’s why, despite the difficulties and hurdles, the constant frustrations and challenges, this will be worth it, because the benefits it delivers will wholeheartedly outweigh the efforts we put in.

Thank you.

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