Keeping The Window Open

The 21st Century Public Servant & COVID-19

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Images by Laura Brodrick, Think Big Picture
In April 2020, in the middle of the first Covid-19 lockdown we had an online meeting with North West Employers (NWE) about the changes they were seeing in the organisations they support. These are predominantly local authorities in the North West of England. It was evident that patterns were emerging in how Covid-19 was changing working practices and skills, and which responses were working best. Given the constraints of doing fieldwork with local Authorities themselves at a time of crisis, we instead set up a series of conversations with the NWE team to learn what they were observing first-hand in their work with local authorities.

This enabled us to gather real time insights into how local authorities were working during the Covid-19 in a way that would not otherwise have been possible. We ran these conversations with the NWE senior team at monthly intervals from May to September, seeing the evolution of local authority strategies as Covid-19 moved from an acute crisis into business as usual for the foreseeable future. This document sets out the learning from that research.

**METHODS**

We held four group interviews with the NWE senior team (four people) via Microsoft Teams. The topic guide for the interviews was developed from findings from the earlier 21st Century Public Servant research, reshaped to reflect the Covid-19 context. The conversations were recorded and detailed field notes were kept. Thematic analysis of the field notes was done iteratively after each interview, to develop and refine a set of codes relating to key elements of the Covid-19 response. After the sessions, themed fieldnotes were shared with the NWE interviewees to provide a 'member check' on the findings.[1] The verbatim quotes used in this document were checked against the recordings to ensure accuracy. Names and other identifiers were removed, and we have used anonymised labels for quotes (e.g. NWE1, NWE2 etc) in order to preserve anonymity. Ethical approval for the research was given by the University of Birmingham Research Ethics Committee. There are limitations to the research given the small convenience sample and the technique of working with an intermediary body to study organisational practices. The findings may not be generalizable to local authorities. However given the unique circumstances of the Covid-19 context, we have gathered important data which informs our ongoing work on the 21st Century Public Servant.

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Together they have worked on a range of projects on the 21st Century Public Servant. Their most recent book, together with collaborators from Australia, is Reimagining the Future Public Service Workforce, Springer, 2018.

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On 23 March 2020, following rapidly rising infection rates of the Covid-19 virus, the national government announced a national ‘lockdown’. Schools and workplaces closed and only essential workers were able to continue to work outside the home. Individuals were confined to home aside from a short daily period of exercise. This phase lasted until May, after which there was a gradual easing of the restrictions, with some use of local lockdowns to manage outbreaks in specific locations. By autumn, restrictions were being reimposed in response to concerns about a second spike.

Local authorities had some experience of managing short-term local crises, but a national and long-lasting crisis was something new outside wartime. Local authorities had to manage the local implications of the lockdown and Covid-19 preparedness in their area whilst also moving all of their own non-essential workers to a home working model. This has led to an unprecedented amount of change in the sector. Thousands of staff moved rapidly from offices to working from home; buildings had to be closed and secured; services (from issuing parking permits to registering deaths) had to be moved online; face to face meetings were replaced by video conferencing. Change happened with a speed and consensus that would not otherwise have been possible: ‘It would normally have taken months’ [NWE1]. Many people have been redeployed or are combining several jobs – some of whom are engaging in regional and national work as well as their core role.

The strain on staff has been intense, as it has on the whole population. However some of the changes in organisational practices have been seen as positive, and have flagged opportunities for long-term reconfiguration. Identifying and sustaining these positive elements through a long crisis presents a challenge. The early phase of the crisis built up a lot of expectations of long-term change (‘Build back better’), but, as one interviewee put it, we also have to be ready for ‘when the adrenaline goes’ [NWE1].

Over the last five years we have been developing research and tools for the 21st Century Public Servant, focusing on the skills, roles and values of people working in local public services. We have worked in partnership with a range of local authorities and sector bodies, and developed new strands to the research including the 21st Century Councillor. Our original work centred on ten themes of workforce change.[2] In this document we explore the impact of Covid-19 on local government through the following themes: leadership, roles, skills, place, trust, and endurance. .

[2] Roles, skills, careers, ethics and values, organisations, leadership, place, relationships with citizens, perma-austerity and being relational.
The end of the individual hero leader has been widely foretold. The Covid-19 crisis confirmed the importance of distributed leadership in which there are ‘heroes everywhere’ as one interviewee put it [NWE4]. The life and death nature of the crisis required rapid and innovative leadership at all levels of the organisation. e.g. to access and allocate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and testing, to relocate and redeploy staff, and to maintain core functions whilst adding new ones. It required leaders to be decisive and innovative, whilst also being compassionate and empathetic to support the wellbeing of the workforce at a time of high stress for all. They needed to be able to maintain morale, listen to staff, trust them and treat them with compassion. Senior leaders have also had to manage and influence ‘upwards’ to central government and MPs, as well as to staff, peers and local collaborators. New leaders have emerged with a high public profile – ‘Epidemiologists are the rock stars now’ [NWE1].

Having a narrative of self is part of what makes an effective leader. Senior leaders (and their teams) are having to share more of themselves, as they interact from their homes, sometimes with pets and family members in the background. That can help in establishing rapport – ‘being human’ – but it may increase the strain that people feel, as it can be harder to separate home and work life. This is particularly the case where leaders are having to deal with high stress situations and conflict, without the usual sense of role and authority created by the setting. There is also no change of location to cue different types of engagement: ‘You might be on a call with national ministers one minute and then meeting local activists online the next minute’ [NWE4].

The speed of the Covid-19 response did not always allow elected members to be involved in community and organisational leadership in the usual ways. Some members have been shielding and many did not have the technology for digital ways of working. It has been hard for them to keep connected with communities in the usual ways. They may have been less visible as leaders at least in the early phase of the crisis. ‘Some are keen to be seen to do the job and to get back in the town hall.’ [NWE2]. Many have been experimenting with new forms of connection with communities, e.g. through social media. Over the period since March, our interviewees observed a huge improvement in members online skills, enabling them to engage much more effectively as the crisis continues. ‘Elected members are much more confident about working online now. They have really embraced that.’ [NWE4]

Leaders at all levels of organisations will need to practice self-care and boundary setting, as well as projecting a narrative for an uncertain future. Resilient leaders will be those who come out of this having been able to protect their own mental and physical health (‘putting on your own mask first’ [NWE2], despite the 24/7 expectations placed on them - and modelling this so that their staff can do the same.

Many of the roles identified in the 21st Century Public Servant research[4] were evident in how public service workers were responding to Covid-19, particularly those of storyteller, entrepreneur and resource weaver:

**Storytellers** – the most effective public servants during the crisis were seen by interviewees as those who were values-based and able to tell stories that drew on those values, setting out a path for the long term. They were the energiser and cheerleader – ‘we can get through this’ – despite not knowing the length or trajectory of the story. “It’s about bringing people with you, building staff and community confidence that we’re in this together”[NWE4]. These were people who projected authenticity, telling the difficult parts of the story, rather than sweeping bad news or criticism under the carpet. They were able to articulate the ways in which positive aspects of change could be retained – and what change was for.

**Entrepreneurs** – the pandemic context has meant that staff have had to act quickly, without waiting for permission, and in some cases bypassing the usual sign-off procedures. They have needed to be alert to the financial and governance implications of any changes (and ready to defend those decisions at a later date). Ongoing entrepreneurship requires permission to fail, and an ability to cope with negative press attention for the inevitable failings. But it can’t work without the ‘contract’ of trust from staff and broader citizens, as otherwise the breaches of accountability are a way of simply decreasing trust further.

**Resource weaver** - A key part of the Covid response has been using internal resources differently. Redeployment has been extensive, which has helped to break down silos within organisations. Many teams changed roles as their core tasks were on hold – for example leisure services and democratic services teams took on tasks like delivering PPE and setting up community hubs. The urgency and scale of the task made possible changes that otherwise would not have happened:

> ‘People have been more willing to cross organisational lines, looking at partners and saying we can’t afford you to fail. For example some councils have provided staff to residential care homes...That’s the first time in my memory of stepping out and into another organisation.’[NWE4]

Interviewees felt that this has strengthened collaboration between organisations and workforce and has helpfully relaxed a number of policies and procedures. It was described as a ‘more outcomes-oriented approach, where resources are generously shared across different parts of the organisation’[NWE3]
The 21st Century Public Servant research identified the need to give more prominence to the **soft skills of empathy and communication** rather than only recruiting and rewarding people for their 'hard' professional skills, e.g. in finance or planning. For some workers, the Covid-19 crisis has been a re-affirmation of the value of the professional skill set: for those working in public health, environment health, planning and emergency response their skills have been more essential than ever.

However for many others, it is their **more generic skills** that have come to the forefront during the Covid-19 crisis and been the basis for redeployment to other teams. Through skills matching processes, there has been a new understanding of which individual skills are transferable: 'Lifeguards and fitness instructors have been redeployed to do community support because of their personal style and approach rather than their technical skills' [NWE4]. Staff and managers have had to accept a much more pragmatic approach to redeployment than anything contemplated in the past: 'It doesn’t just mean taking your laptop home, it means shifting from one whole service to another in the blink of an eye.' [NWE1]

People’s **digital skills have been transformed**: ‘not just getting online, but being able to facilitate a meeting or run an event online’ [NWE2]. These new ways of working require an understanding of the interpersonal skills that are required for online working: ‘What are the new digital competencies we want to support? Wellbeing, emotional control (calm and clear), courage, purposefulness, empathy’ [NWE3].

**PLACE**

Many people’s lives have been **limited to the neighbourhood level**. Mobility is restricted. When they do go out, people are spending more time in local shops and cafes and less in city centres. The use of local lockdowns has heightened awareness of local authority borders, and increased the sense of this as a local as well as a national crisis. Together these elements are changing people’s sense of place and how they move and interact within it.

Local leaders have been able to **make some positive changes**, rather than just cutting services as in the decade of austerity: ‘Councils are seen as being able to do things for their community. Leaders, mayors, chief execs, they’ve been pushing things rather than being on the defensive – or just saying we haven’t got any money. Now they are saying to communities we will work with you and support you.’ [NWE1]
However the **return of austerity** looms as local authorities contemplate the costs of the pandemic response and the economic difficulties that it is creating: will citizens lose trust once cuts resume and bankruptcies loom? Local government reorganisation is also back on the table, which will have huge implications for democracy, citizens and services: ‘How good are we at looking at what’s best for areas? Although councils have been busy collaborating like mad since January, when we get asked the best model for local arrangements, it’s more tricky’ [NWE1].

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**TRUST**

Trust has been a key factor in how relationships have been transformed during the Covid-19 period: ‘Trust is massive. This has been a real litmus test on trust this crisis. **Where trust is present, lots of things get done**’ [NWE3]. Interviewees felt that in many though not all cases, local trust has increased as a result of the crisis. Citizens have shown a new appreciation of the NHS and other key workers. Roles like refuse collection and care work have got a much higher profile. There has been enhanced visibility as local authorities have played new roles in their communities: ‘They have been very visible, delivering food parcels and medicines... citizens have got a broader sense of the reach of the council.’ [NWE2] As one interviewee put it, ‘Local authorities have rediscovered their nineteenth century purpose – keeping people safe and alive’. [NWE1]

Mass working from home has required **high trust relationships with and between staff**: ‘I think some managers have had their eyes opened about how home working can work. One local authority had no home working at all before this, they didn’t allow it – they had to go straight to 100 percent’[NWE1]. This creates questions about the future beyond Covid-19:

‘Are we prepared to let go and let people continue working from home or will we go back to the long hours culture? Can we focus on outputs and outcomes rather than hours worked? This time has allowed people to be more open about their work life balance.’ [NWE3]

Trust has also been crucial in the close working with community and faith groups that’s been needed – ‘a realisation that they’re not just someone you contract with periodically, they are key. The public service includes the wider public and voluntary sector, not just the council’ [NWE1]. These relationships **build over a long-term and can’t just be created at a time of crisis**. Interviewees noted that areas that had good existing relationships with partners were able to mobilise a joint approach much more quickly than those where relationships were weak and contractual.
Something we didn’t address in the original 21st Century Public Servant research was **endurance**. It is still unclear how long this crisis will last. In the early phases at least there was hope that the lockdown could be short, people were expecting offices and schools to be closed for a few weeks:

‘On the last day in the office, one person took absolutely everything, whereas I just took a few things, as initially it seemed like it would be alright, it wouldn’t be for long. A lot of people didn’t take enough stuff.’ [NWE3]

Now (autumn 2020) it is much clearer that **change will be for the long-term**: ‘this is not a phase, it’s the way we do things.’ [NWE4] For many, this phase of the crisis requires a recalibration of their own and their team’s capacity to cope with the situation: ‘It’s about acceptance, coming to terms with that’ [NWE2]. This is about transitioning from a short intense crisis phase to the current longer phase. The sense of all pulling together becomes harder to maintain: ‘There is a real risk of burnout. People have had to deal with bereavements, illness, no break, with children at home, all the work and personal pressures’ [NWE2]. There are ongoing anxieties about testing, new spikes, separation from family and friends and employment prospects. Relationships can start to fray as people’s resilience wears thin.

**Home working will continue for many people**: ‘we won’t have everyone back at work ever again’ [NWE3]. Some staff may have found working at home really hard, feeling isolated from colleagues and having to juggle caring responsibilities, but others have welcomed it: ‘it’s been a delight: they’ve gone into their bunker and want to stay there’[NWE2].

Home working for many may have offered the promise of a more informal approach to work – no need for a formal suit, a later start to the day with no commuting. However, many have found home working to be much more intense, with **few opportunities for down time**, such as the chats in the lift with colleagues or the daydreaming on the train: ‘There isn't much informal in my day at the moment. The intensity of it can be quite exhausting. How do we sustain the informal interactions like we had in the office?’ [NWE4].
CONCLUSION: KEEPING THE WINDOW OPEN

John Kingdon’s classic book on policy change argues that a ‘window of opportunity’ is created at the time when there is an intersection of a problem, a potential response and the right political context in relation to motivations and resources.[5] Covid-19 created all of those things. It jolted public services out of the 2010-2020 narrative of austerity and decline, but it is too early to say where it has left those services and the people who work in them. As one interviewee said, ‘This isn’t a binary – crisis or not crisis. We have to transition into a new resilient phase where interaction with the public is different...And staff will be expecting something back for the sacrifices they made, and the hours they worked’ [NWE1].

The long-term organisational legacy of Covid-19 is unclear, but the months of the crisis have made much clearer what public services are for and how to get the best out of the people working in them. Organisations and individuals need to think about how to keep open the window of change, and what are the new working cultures, roles and skills that can be retained. Which forms of organisation cross-working and partnerships with communities can keep going? What are the positive stories – such as the approach to homelessness – that could be retained? The inequalities highlighted by Covid-19 – and also by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement – must be addressed as organisations think about their working practices and their communities: ‘The BLM challenge is not just about how we teach our history, but also about how we plan for an inclusive future’ (NWE3). This has been particularly evident for our interviewees: ‘The North West has got six out of the ten Covid hotspots, and they are focused in certain types of communities. They are communities that lack stable employment, good housing. They are BAME communities. Everyone is saying we will do something about it now – I hope they will as they’ve been saying it for about 40 years’ [NWE1].

Some people who are returning to the office will have been told to keep the windows open, to improve the ventilation and reduce the risk of Covid-19 transmission. Let’s also consider how to keep open the window of change for public servants and the citizens and communities that they work alongside.
