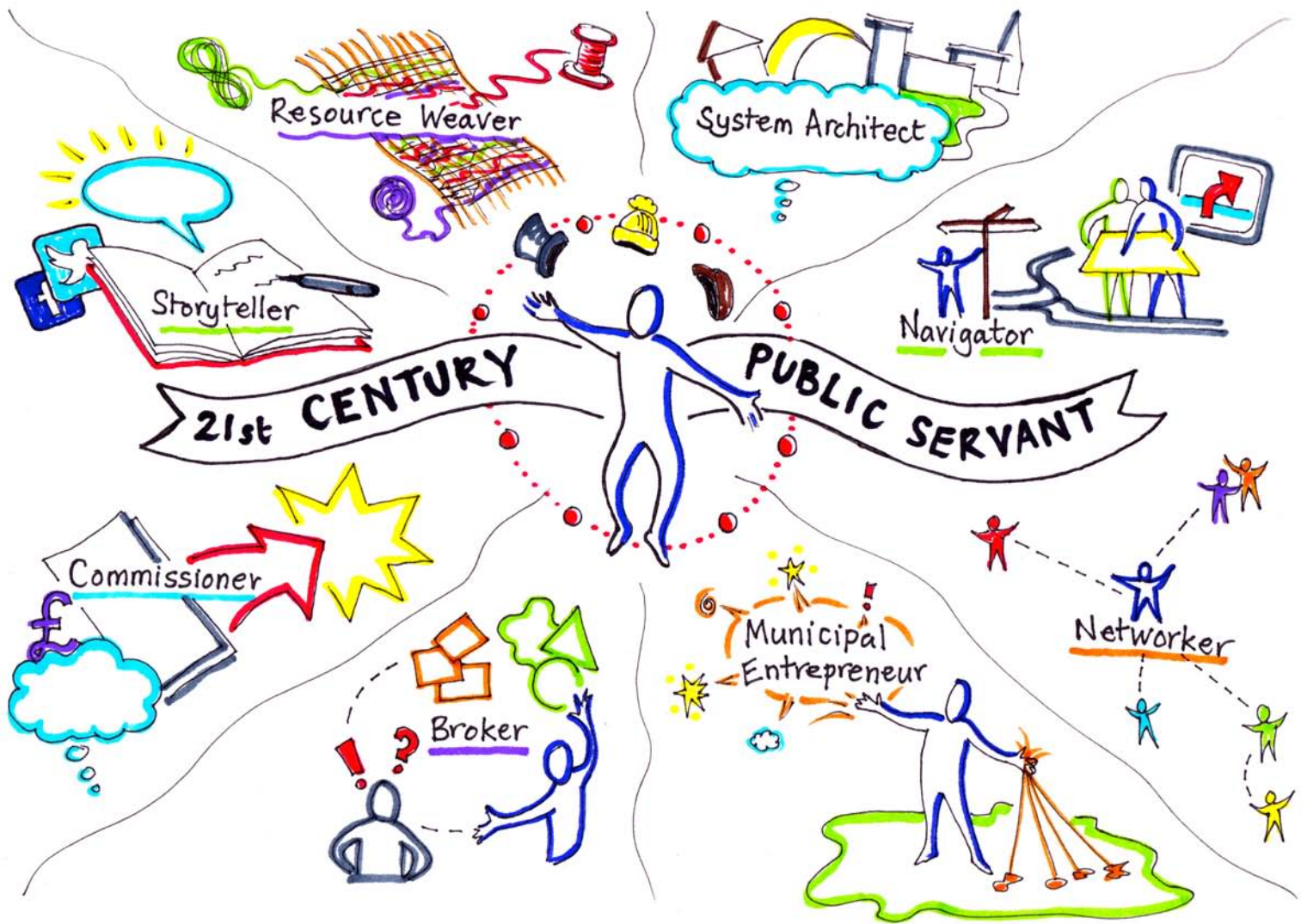


The 21st Century Public Servant

Catherine Needham and Catherine Mangan



About the authors



Catherine Needham

Catherine Needham is a Reader in Public Management and Public Policy at the Health Services Management Centre, University of Birmingham

 @DrCNeedham

c.needham.1@bham.ac.uk



Catherine Mangan

Catherine Mangan is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham

 @mangancatherine

c.mangan@bham.ac.uk

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Preface by Mark Rogers, Chief Executive of Birmingham City Council



The 21st Century Public Servant

"Cui servire est regnare." To serve is to rule

Always good to start with some random Latin, I think, when aiming for that all elusive quality of profundity.

But this quote has, believe it or not, been selected very carefully. To my mind, it is no longer relevant or acceptable for public sector leaders to promote, let alone deploy, the concept of benevolent municipalism in which the "great and good" (some of whom aren't always that great or that good) believe that they know what's best for the citizen. Hierarchical power is, rightly, giving way to networked authority, the roots of which are firmly in the community.

We do not exist in our own right. The political leadership is elected and the officers are appointed by the democratically mandated. We are all here to serve others - and that is the only kind of power we are entitled to wield: we rule only in order to serve.

As each year passes, it has become clearer and clearer to me that our *raison d'être* is the business of making (either through our own actions and/or the actions of others) a positive difference to people's lives. No more, no less. And, if this is our primary purpose, then to be successful we need to articulate and live up to a set of values that make this likely to happen in reality. Personally, I like empathy, respect and trust, but you'll have your own.

All, however, should have service - implicit or explicit - at the heart of them. If we take this as our starting point, then we can indeed aspire to rule from the Town Hall - because our authority to lead comes from the community itself which we have vowed to serve.

Introduction

What does it mean to be a 21st Century public servant? What are the skills, attributes and values which effective public servants will display in the future? How can people working in public services be supported to get those skills? These are some of the issues that we are addressing in this research.

Public services are going through major changes in response to a range of issues such as cuts to budgets, increased localisation, greater demands for service user voice and control, increased public expectations and a mixed economy of welfare provision. This 21st Century Public Servant project builds on the findings of the 2011 University of Birmingham Policy Commission into the 'Future of Local Public Services' which identified the need to pay attention to the changing roles undertaken by public servants and the associated support and development needs.

Through a review of the literature and interviews with 40 people involved in supporting and delivering public services, the research has considered how the public service workforce is changing, and what further changes are needed to develop the effectiveness of public servants. Here we present the findings and outline next steps for the research.

The research project is funded by a Knowledge Exchange grant from the Economic and Social Research Council. The University of Birmingham and Birmingham City Council are partners in the research.

Who is a 21st Century Public Servant?

Public servants have largely been thought to reside in the public sector but with increasingly mixed economies of welfare, many who have public service roles work for for-profit or not-for-profit organisations outside of the public sector. We have been inclusive in our approach by defining a public servant as someone working in public services (even outside the public sector). However we have been exclusive in focusing little attention on the career development of civil servants in central government: our focus has been on the local public service workers and managers who are part of the delivery infrastructure of public services.

The research concentrates on the workforce: we did not interview any citizens, and this is something we would like to develop in future work. The research was also focused on England, and we plan to develop comparative work in the future, beginning with the Australian public services, in collaboration with the University of Melbourne.

Research design

The research was undertaken in three phases:

Rapid evidence appraisal: A desk-based review of the peer reviewed and grey literatures identified the state of knowledge about public service professionals, the competencies and capacities that they are thought to require and information about how they are currently developed. This literature review is available here. (<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/public-service-academy/twenty-first-century-public-servant--eight-lessons.pdf>)

Exploratory research: Interviews were conducted with a range of people working in the public sector (e.g. local authority, health, fire, police), private sector (service providers, commissioning support functions) and third sector (service providers, service user and carer advocacy bodies). These 40 interviews were used to gather perspectives of current public servants on how this role is changing, the types of roles, skills and competencies that will be important in the future and a sense of how these might most effectively be developed. We also conducted a focus group of officers and members in one local authority and undertook a survey with recent graduate entrants into local government. The interviews and focus group drew on a purposive sample of people working in public services in the West

Midlands region and in national stakeholder organisations. We used semi-structured interviews, based on a standardised topic guide. Interviews were audio recorded. The survey was undertaken online, with a link sent to recent recruits to the National Graduate Development Programme for local government. Ethical approval for the project was granted by the University of Birmingham.

Disseminating the research: Bringing these different streams together we are now sharing the findings of these earlier stages in this report, at events and on our project blog (<http://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com/>). We are encouraging debate about topics such as the range of different public servant roles, the competencies required in these roles, the options available in developing these skills and competencies, plus a range of more general themes around accountability, risk, and knowledge sharing as indicated by the research process. We are not presenting this report as an end to the work, but rather as an ongoing discussion where we invite responses to the work, and in particular encourage people working in public services to reflect on what some of the next steps might be to realise the principles of 21st Century public service.

The following **research questions** have run through the different phases of the work:

- What is the range of different roles of the 21st century public servant?
- What are the competencies and skills that public servants require to achieve these roles?
- What are the support and training requirements of these roles?
- How might central and local government better support and promote public service careers?

In this report we present the findings of the project as a series of descriptors of the characteristics of the 21st Century public servant. The literature review led to the identification of 8 characteristics which were discussed with and evolved in conversation, by interview or questionnaire, with practitioners, into the ten themes presented here.

For updates and discussion about the themes of the research, go to the 21st Century Public Servant blog at <http://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com/> and contribute to the debate on Twitter #21cps.



Summary of Findings

The research has identified a series of characteristics which are associated with the 21st Century Public Servant. These are described in summary below and later in the full body of the report.

The 21st Century Public Servant ...

1....is a municipal entrepreneur, undertaking a wide range of roles

Future public services require a set of workforce roles which may be different from those of the past. As one interviewee put it, *'In the future you will need to be a municipal entrepreneur, a steward of scarce public resources.'* New roles that may be performed by the public servants of the future include story-teller, resource weaver, systems architect and navigator.

2....engages with citizens in a way that expresses their shared humanity and pooled expertise

The notion of working co-productively, or in partnership, with citizens was the preferred approach of most interviewees: *'Valued outcomes in public services are not things that can be delivered, they are always co-produced'*, as one put it. One of the suggested approaches was alluringly simple: *'It's about being human, that's what we need to do'*. One clear finding from the research was that the widespread calls for whole person approaches to care and support necessitate working practices in which staff are also able to be *'whole people'*.

3....is recruited and rewarded for generic skills as well as technical expertise

Generic skills are becoming as important as professional skills, with 'soft skills' around communication, organisation and caring becoming more highly prized. One interviewee said: *'We need people who are really good with people and can form relationships, who are able to learn quickly.'* According to another, *'engaging with citizens and the use, analysis and interpretation of data to understand your local populations, they are quite newish sets of skills for people who work in local authorities'*.

4....builds a career which is fluid across sectors and services

People are unlikely to stay in one sector or service area for life and require portable skills that are valued in different settings. People need opportunities to learn and reflect on new skills, which may be through action learning, mentoring, job shadowing and sabbaticals rather than formal training:

'People will have portfolio careers, working in different sectors, working for different people at the same time, not just sequentially. It's not a job for life, or even for 5 years', said one interviewee.

5....combines an ethos of publicness with an understanding of commerciality

Ethics and values are changing as the boundaries of public service shift, with notions of the public sector ethos being eclipsed by an increased push towards commercialism, along with a wider focus on social value. One interviewee said, *'Local government will need more private sector skills, more crossover of skills and people. If staff in local government don't have the commercial skills they won't be employable. We have to help them get them.'* Another interviewee said: *'I think there will be a fight between altruism and commercialism. We need managers who still care.'*

6....is rethinking public services to enable them to survive an era of perma-austerity

Perma-austerity is inhibiting and catalysing change, as organisations struggle to balance short-term cost-cutting and redundancies with a strategic vision for change. Some interviewees expressed this in very negative terms: *'There's a narrative of doom.....it's all about survival'*. For others there was a potentially positive aspect to the financial context: *'The cuts are forcing us to confront change. In public service, change doesn't necessarily happen unless there is a crisis or a disaster, or it happens very slowly.'*

7....needs organisations which are fluid and supportive rather than silo-ed and controlling

Many of the organisations where our interviewees were located had been through recent restructuring and there was little appetite for more structural change. Nevertheless there was a feeling that the organisations were not necessarily fit for purpose: *'We are trying to be 21st Century public servants in 19th Century organisations. There's that constant struggle. Not only how do we change what the people are but also how do we change the organisations to allow the people to be*

what they need to be?' This can be about addressing issues of organisational culture, rather than assuming that new structures will be the solution.

8....rejects heroic leadership in favour of distributed and collaborative models of leading

Hero leaders aren't the answer. Rather than emphasising the charisma and control of an individual, new approaches focus on leadership as dispersed throughout the organisation. This could be about thinking about leadership at the front line in a way that traverses traditional service sectors: *'We should offer a career in community leadership. The 21st century public servant should be able to cross organisational boundaries.'*

9....is rooted in a locality which frames a sense of loyalty and identity

The role of place in public service needs to be recognised: public service workers often have a strong loyalty to the neighbourhoods and towns/cities in which they work as well as an organisational loyalty. For some interviewees this was about staff being based in the locality: *'Above a certain grade you should be required to live in [the council area], because you are making huge decisions on how people will live, work and spend their recreational time.'* For others it was about putting professional knowledge into an appropriate context for the locality: *'Professionalism will be the death of local government. It's that lack of ability to soften and shape stuff according to locality.'*

10....reflects on practice and learns from that of others

The public service changes that we have set out here in which structures are fragmenting, citizens require authentic interactions, careers require much greater self-management, commerciality and publicness must be reconciled and expectations of leadership are dispersed across the organisation, require time and space for public servants to reflect: *'You need spaces where you take yourself apart and sort it out with the fact that the organisation is expecting you to glide along like a swan looking serenely happy with no mistakes whatsoever.'*

Getting from here to there

The challenges to current practice encompassed in these ten themes are wide-ranging, and require personal reflection, internal organisational dialogue, external networking and peer learning. Here are some questions to stimulate further thinking:

1. **Roles:** how can people be trained and supported into the broader range of roles that we have identified here?
2. **Engaging with citizens:** how can staff engage with citizens in a way that feels human, and supports people's assets rather than highlighting their deficiencies?
3. **Do recruitment practices** get the right balance between generic and technical skills? How can people be recruited on the basis of values as well as skills?
4. **Career development** What opportunities can be created to encourage sabbaticals and secondments, into and out of the organisation?
5. Is there a strong **ethos of publicness** and do staff know what it means to combine this with more commerciality?
6. **Perma-austerity:** are honest conversations going on about what the organisation can and can't do in an era of austerity, and do people understand their own role in that future?
7. **Organisational redesign:** are systems-based approaches being considered as an alternative to repeated cycles of organisational restructuring?
8. **Leadership:** what is being done to develop leadership at all levels of the organisation, and how is that being facilitated through incentives such as the appraisals system?
9. **Place:** how are feelings of identity and loyalty to place supported so that public servants feel like citizens of the place not just officers in an organisation?
10. Do appraisal, mentoring and peer support give people scope for **reflective practice**, to share and learn from mistakes and to take on new challenges (such as using social media) in effective ways?

The remainder of the report sets out the ten research themes in more detail. The themes have been presented on our [blog](#), with guest responders identifying key challenges, controversies and next steps in what we have found. Join the debate at [#21cps](#).



1. The 21st Century Public Servant is a municipal entrepreneur, undertaking a wide range of roles



Public services of the future require a different set of workforce roles than in the past. This is a consistent finding from the literature synthesis, interviews and survey findings that were undertaken for this project. The concepts of networking and governance have been dominant in the public management literature for many years, as the limitations of hierarchy and market-based approaches have become evident¹. Both networking and governance theories understand local public services as a system, characterised by ambiguity, complexity and messiness².

The workforce implications of these more fluid approaches are starting to get the attention that they require. As one interviewee put it, in a local government context: *'There's an urgency now about it, what does the future council look like?'* Workforce roles need to be less rigid to flourish in a context of messiness. According to another interviewee, *'In systems leadership everything is both/ and. This takes a different sort of being. Ambivalence is culturally necessary. Social workers and GPs mean different things by a care plan and we need to accept that.'*

Whereas existing organisational structures have labelled people according to their technical competence – planner, accountant, housing officer – there may be more appropriate terms to encompass the workforce roles that public servants are performing. A University of Birmingham Policy Commission into the Future of Local Public Services in 2011 suggested four new roles that will be performed by the public servants of the future: storyteller, resource weaver, systems architect and navigator³. In a survey of new entrants to local government undertaken for this project, all of these roles were viewed as relevant and important, with resource weaver being rated highest as the one that was most important to their own job⁴.

The new entrants to local government also suggested alternative roles such as:

- Developer: increasing the sustainability, ability and flexibility of public services.
- Defender: negotiating to ensure local government is getting the most for its buck, as are its residents.
- Balancer: balancing conflicting demands, pressures and views.

Other roles suggested by interviewees include *municipal entrepreneurs*, and *stewards of scarce public resources*.

These new roles are likely to co-exist with more established roles. The Policy Commission report highlighted existing roles which were likely to continue to be

important: commissioner, broker, networker, adjudicator, regulator, protector⁵. Of these, it was commissioning which was raised most frequently by interviewees. There was a widespread assumption that commissioning was a vital function but one that often is not done well. The Government's Commissioning Academy was felt to be too small to encompass the numbers of people now engaged in public service commissioning. One said of commissioning, *'It's such an important job to spend money well, but commissioning teams are often pulled apart, good people have left. That's not where you should be cutting from.'* However some interviewees cautioned against seeing commissioning as the cure-all for public services: *'We are seeing the development of a commissioning cadre over everything... commissioning is seasonal and no-one should have it in their job title. What is the value of commissioning? Strategic commissioning adds value but does micro commissioning?'*

Similarly not everyone accepted the narrative of changing roles: *'the roads will still need to be swept, the leaves will still fall off the trees so for some parts of the workforce it will be business as usual. The idea of change has been oversold'*, said one interviewee.

Challenge: How can people be trained and supported into the broader range of roles that we have identified here?

2. The 21st Century Public Servant engages with citizens in a way that expresses their shared humanity and pooled expertise



The literature review for the project highlighted the growth of a citizenry which is more assertive, and in which the notion of deference to professional judgment feels increasingly out of date. This partly reflects greater affluence and education levels. It is also about demographic changes such as the increased incidence of long-term health conditions about which citizens have time to develop a level of expertise. New technologies are changing expectations about how and when citizens engage with the state, as well as fostering the emergence of 'scientific citizenship' which challenges existing notions of professional expertise⁶.

The workforce challenges of engaging with a more assertive and technologically-savvy citizenry are not necessarily well understood. For some interviewees the notion of customer service was evoked to convey an approach which offered timely and effective contact with citizens. The limits of the customer metaphor were noted however, given that demand management was seen as a crucial element of future public service working, with no obvious private sector analogy⁷. Many of the interviewees saw consumerism as a potential blind alley, which threatened to artificially raise citizen expectations but also to dampen the political aspects of the role of citizen – 'let's not call them customers, I hate that word', as one said.

The notion of working co-productively, or in partnership, with citizens was the preferred approach of most interviewees: 'Valued outcomes in public services are not things that can be delivered, they are always co-produced', as one put it. The skills needed for this may not be in place however. A third sector chief executive commented on poor practice in engagement with citizens by the local authority: '...managers were meant to be working with community groups but didn't know how to just be human, not part of the system. They don't know how to just participate as a person without the weight of the organisation on them.' For a number of people interviewed there was concern that the public were absent from the conversations about how to do co-production well. As one put it:

The public are a partner in the conversation that's just not there, they keep being talked about. If you are interested in co-production, in solutions coming from communities and individuals, then you are going to have to start talking to them about how you see things, how might that work for them. Otherwise it's not going to happen.

As well as making the citizen visible, there is a need to recognise and harness their expertise, as initiatives such as the Expert Patient Programme and People Powered Health have done⁸. One interviewee working in local government observed the big cultural challenge that this posed: 'We need to be enablers not managers, enabling people to do it for themselves. We won't be in charge. That's a big culture change, it's difficult for people to get their heads around. It requires us to be more honest and trusting.'

Facilitating this cultural change is of course a key challenge for local authorities. One of the suggested approaches was alluringly simple: 'It's about being human, that's what we need to do,' as one interviewee put it. This notion of being human in dealings with citizens is a recurrent theme of what interviewees see as essential to a 21st Century Public Servant. As one said:

People need to be able to relate humanly to each other in the way they deliver services but in the way they assess people for services too. You can satisfy the requirements of the system but you won't have solved the problem that's dragging someone down in their life. That's why public services work again and again with the same people as their problems get deeper and deeper.

The tendency to engage with citizens only partially or temporarily dealing with issues was reflected by several interviewees: 'Individuals need the power to resolve a resident's problem – e.g. currently if the police make a visit to a home they can't resolve issues – they can only send people to the homeless shelter.' One interviewee used the metaphor of citizens being treated as items on a conveyor belt: 'Officers have responsibility not authority – like Yo Sushi, lots of trays going round but no-one wants to pick them up. We need a mechanism to identify those things they want to change and come together to work on them.' More holistic ways of working were seen as delivering high levels of job satisfaction for workers: 'People want to go the extra mile because there's a satisfaction in good work well done and in solving someone's problems. There's an end point.' The work intensification and episodic nature of citizen interaction in call centres, in contrast, was felt likely to increase staff burnout: 'Answering phones in a call centre has no end point.'

There is a symmetry to the way that people spoke about the changing relationship between staff and citizens. If workers can crack this more human way of engaging with people it will enable citizens to be treated more holistically – as a whole person rather than a set of conditions or needs. One clear finding from the research was that the widespread calls for whole person approaches to care and support necessitate working practices in which staff are also able to be ‘whole people’⁹.

For some respondents this common humanity will emerge if unnecessary regulations are stripped away. One interviewee gave this example: ‘Statutory workers with looked after children are not allowed to hug them. What crazy system have we got when those most in need of affection are denied it by the corporate parent on the grounds of somehow protecting them, that’s crazy?’ For another, ‘Authenticity...is critical. We need to learn its ok to say I made a mistake: this isn’t car insurance – you have to start off saying you’re sorry.’

Good interaction with the public is partly about giving people permission to ‘be themselves’, as these quotes suggest, but it will also require effective planning

and support. The skill set identified in the co-production literature suggests that it is a combination of more informal roles (‘part good neighbour’) with more formally trained roles (‘part facilitator, part advocate, part support worker’)¹⁰. The expertise for more effective relationships with citizens may well not exist within the corporate centre of the organisation but on the periphery. One interviewee suggested that the community engagement work that ‘used to be tucked out in neighbourhood offices’ now ‘has to be part of the corporate function of the local government.’ According to another, ‘The council doesn’t know how to combine knowledge and information e.g. from ward councillors. They need to develop internal co-production.’

More attention also needs to be given to the emotional labour of public service workers, particularly in a context in which they are engaging in more naturalistic ways with citizens. As one interviewee put it, ‘You need to be prepared to get out there and mingle with the real world and other people. And that’s emotionally draining. So when I go home in the evening (I’m actually an introvert) I’m really drained.’ Emotional labour is defined as, ‘the expression of one’s capacity to manage personal emotions, sense others’ emotions, and to respond

appropriately, based on one’s job’¹¹. In its response to the Francis Report into events at Mid-Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust, the government explicitly evoked the concept of ‘The Emotional Labour of Care’, writing: ‘Working in health and care is inherently emotionally demanding. To support staff to act consistently with openness and compassion, teams need to be given time and space to reflect on the challenging emotional impact of health and care work’¹².

This increased awareness of the need for resilient responses to emotional labour constitutes a new dimension of public service practice. However there are challenges here for traditional notions of professionalism and distance. More humane services in which ‘authentic’ connections are made between people using and providing services, challenge the assumption that professionals should preserve distance and restraint. Yet professional boundaries may be an important part of self-care, and it is important to consider what support staff themselves need in order to sustain good relationships with citizens¹³. The need for reflective practice in response to this emotion work and boundary spanning¹⁴ is dealt with in chapter ten below.

Challenge: Engaging with citizens: how can staff engage with citizens in a way that feels human, and supports people’s assets rather than highlighting their deficiencies?



3. The 21st Century Public Servant is recruited and rewarded for generic skills as well as technical expertise



The rising awareness of the 'emotion work' of public service and of the ways in which effective public service requires boundary spanning, highlights the significance of a generic skill set which is different from the technical skill set which has been valued in public services in the past. So-called 'soft skills' around communication, organisation and caring become more highly prized. Davidson writes about 'twenty-first century literacies'. These include: interpersonal skills (facilitation, empathy, political skills); synthesising skills (sorting evidence, analysis, making judgements, offering critique and being creative); organising skills for group work, collaboration and peer review; communication skills, making better use of new media and multi-media resources¹⁵. This more relational way of working has been the focus of recent reports from the IPPR, Participle and others¹⁶. However the workforce elements of relational working have not been explored in depth. As one interviewee put it, *'Dealing with people in a more relational way is a skill that will need to be developed.'*

A survey of public service employers by Hays found that employers valued 'soft skills' such as communication as highly as technical skills when recruiting new staff¹⁷. However, there remains a need for what might be termed 'hard' skills around contracting and decommissioning. What is distinctive about these skills, perhaps, is not the distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' but between the techno-professional and the generic cross-sectoral. As one interviewee put it, *'We need more skills as*

the council becomes smaller - not just professional skills but facilitators, good questioners, coaches.' There may be a need for more generic analytical skills than has been realised in the past: *'Some of the things around engaging with citizens and the use, analysis and interpretation of data to understand your local populations, they are quite newish sets of skills for people who work in local authorities.'* Another saw

the future this way: *'In the future we won't have structures that are wholly lawyers, HR professionals. People will have to be able to manage across different professional groups.'*

These findings chime with the national public service reform agenda set out by Cabinet Office minister Francis Maude, in which the key skills of people working in public services were identified as:

- the commercial skills necessary for public servants to feel confident commissioning services from the private and voluntary sectors.
- the digital skills needed to design online services based around user needs.
- the leadership skills necessary to embrace the changes needed to deliver government priorities and projects on time and on budget¹⁸.

These more generic skills in central and local government demand new types of integrated skills training. However higher education and other training and development and support continues to offer highly specialised and professional pathways that lead to particular professional qualifications¹⁹. Post-qualification training remains focused on particular sectors. Those courses which look cross-sectorally tend to be leadership programmes (e.g. the Local Vision programme²⁰). There is a tendency to assume that public service careers are linear and specialised and therefore predictable.

A somewhat different theme that was evident in some of the interviews was the promotion of multidisciplinary working rather than generic approaches. Some felt that it is unrealistic to expect an individual to be able to span the wide range of skills required: *'If you try to make everyone good at everything, they end up being bad at everything'*. They were also wary about the retreat from professionalism that was evident in the embrace of soft skills and generic training. As one put it, *'We discount the importance of experience and professionalism at our peril. It is quite risky to run helter skelter into a view that you can be a generic manager in any service... You need to find a way to reconcile the generic skill base with an understanding of the specific skills of the area you are managing. We have to understand and not undervalue the knowledge base that goes with public sector workers.'*

Here multi-disciplinary problem-solving was felt to offer the most productive way forward, with different people coming around a table to work collaboratively:

I prefer the notion of multi-disciplinarity rather than generic. Of course if me and my team are dealing with someone living in appalling conditions then we take a view about the whole person. But if I am then asked to assess whether the person has capacity under the Mental Health Act that's not something you can just do without having skills, experience or training... The more you can build the workforce around localities then we don't need to necessarily be generic workers but the way our team know our local police team and children's services team that's how we collaboratively solve problems.

There was a consistent view in the interviews that Human Resources (HR) teams needs to be engaged in the debate about future workforce at both a strategic and operational level. Several interviewees suggested that current HR practices are too rigid to enable a flexible and agile

workforce, or to provide organisations with the skills they need when they need them. Interviewees commented that traditionally HR professionals tended to focus on the narrow operational issues rather than the wider workforce planning ‘it’s all about how do we keep ourselves out of the courts, not about planning our future workforce’. Others suggested that we need to translate the strategic picture into something that HR professionals doing the recruitment can understand.

A number of interviewees talked of the need to recruit staff differently; focusing more on values and behaviours than experience:

In recruitment we ask for the easy things, experience of delivering a housing repair service, knowledge-based things. And maybe it is more about asking about innovation – how have they changed a culture, impacted on a policy, introduced a new idea.

Recruiting to different criteria was seen as important. As one interviewee said, ‘It’s about recognising and rewarding the wider competencies which aren’t about the kind of job you do but the kind of person you are.’ According to another, ‘We have always done values-based recruitment, tested out values in recruitment, but that really just meant a question in an interview that people learned the right answer to. We are now working with Skills for Care on recruitment and retention tools around values.’

In responding to the ‘recruitment for values’ movement, Cole-King and Gilbert have pointed out that compassion is not only a value, it is also a skill²¹. Thus recruitment needs to focus on the extent to which people have a set of competencies which will enable them to behave with compassion in high-stress environments and to cope with the emotional labour discussed in the previous section²².

Traditional public sector recruitment methods and processes were seen by some interviewees as limiting the diversity of the

type of person who might join the public sector: ‘We are working to deliberately try and put articles out into different parts of the media to capture a broader range of people. We won’t be advertising in the MJ [Municipal Journal] because we don’t just want local government people.’

The greater use of headhunting was suggested by some third sector interviewees as a way to increase diversity and enhance recruitment to values:

It is about seeing the people in other contexts and headhunting them. That’s what they do in the private sector. At [this organisation] despite being as fair as possible in our recruitment policies at a senior level we have only 1 non white person out of 50 people. So maybe our current practices are the problem.

Some of the equalities thinking has made it harder to recruit for aptitude and personality. Those are really important for a relational model, but they are more subjective. Here we put personal qualities and aptitudes and ask for demonstrations of how they were used in a current job. We are looking for a kind of person. In most of government they put out an advert, rather than headhunting, because they feel it’s fair, but I’m not sure it’s a very good way of getting the right person. We don’t do it, we advertise and we use our networks to get people to apply.

To support the skills for good relationships it is also necessary to value the more relational and interpersonal aptitudes of the workforce in performance and appraisal schemes. ‘You need public servants who account for themselves less by what is easy to measure and more by the relationships they have with people’, as one interviewee put it. According to another, ‘Wherever you are in the systems it’s about relationships. Relationships take a huge amount of resource...Government doesn’t get it really.’

People suggested that we need to move beyond rigid national pay arrangements and job evaluation schemes that reward and promote people based on the size of the budget they manage or the number of people in their team. There was a recognition from most interviewees that management skills were lacking in public service and that these skills are not valued through the incentive systems: ‘Most people that get promoted – yes they want more responsibility but not necessarily more responsibility for managing people, it’s wanting more financial responsibility or they want more money.’

There was a suggestion that organisations also needed to be more flexible in terms of how we remove people from the workforce. Current HR practice, in response to austerity, is to ask for voluntary redundancies which may mean losing key skills and experience from the organisation, whilst retaining people who may not have the appropriate skills. One interviewee suggested that most councils have staff working in roles that won’t exist in a couple of years’ time but they can’t be open and transparent about this. A more productive approach might be to ‘have a conversation with those people that in the next two years if you decommission services successfully there’s a reward for you at end of that process – we’ll help you move to new organisation or new career pathway.’

Moving away from rigid HR practices was seen by many to be the way to facilitate a more agile workforce. However others referred to how the traditional incentives that made the public sector attractive, such as good pensions, stable employment and guaranteed progression were being undermined which could have an impact on the sector’s ability to attract high quality people in future. Alongside innovative recruitment practices the sector will want to ensure that they are able to attract the ‘brightest and the best’ with the skills to act as effective public servants.

Challenge: Do recruitment practices get the right balance between generic and technical skills? How can people be recruited on the basis of values as well as skills?

4. The 21st Century Public Servant builds a career which is fluid across sectors and services



For many people working in public services a new kind of career path is emerging, far removed from the traditional 'job for life' that was seen to characterise some parts of the public sector in the past. As one interviewee put it, 'People will have portfolio careers, working in different sectors, working for different people at the same time, not just sequentially. It's not a job for life, or even for 5 years. One interviewee described it as a zigzag career path rather than the traditional linear one where people moved up the hierarchy.

For some of the interviewees this portfolio career was felt to be a euphemism for race-to-the-bottom employment practices in public service organisations that were rapidly shrinking in response to austerity ('The weekly sound of handclapping for another leaving do'). However for others, there was a positive aspect to having a career which took in a number of different organisations and sectors. There was a recognition that in a complex delivery context public servants need to have a better understanding of the cultures and motivations of other agencies who have roles in achieving outcomes for citizens: 'If you've had couple of roles in commissioning, you need to experience life on the provider side, support service or central service – get different perspective and get broader experience.' People's willingness to consider working in different sectors, or experience of having done so already confirms Lewis' empirical work with third sector leaders, many of whom lacked 'an explicitly "sectored" perspective on their careers'²³.

Several local authority respondents talked about the benefits of working in other parts of public services and in particular the third and private sectors which gave them an insight into different cultures. People in the third sector spoke of the value of encouraging more local authority workers to experience other sectors: 'The local authority has a particular problem in that because they are historically and culturally established

institutions they get a lot of people who are used to one culture. Who could be developed to step outside of that? There is less of that in the third sector, funding comes and goes and people are more mobile. It is useful for the third sector to get into the local authority and see the whites of their eyes.' Likewise, local authority respondents talked about the importance of bringing in people with private sector experience to help with procurement – one interviewee referred to it as a poacher turned gamekeeper approach.

Participants also spoke about the benefits of working across boundaries, and how people could be better supported to do this:

I've learned a huge amount by having crossed over into the private sector from local government. I would do my old job in a much different way with the skills and experience I've learned. I don't see enough of the skills I've acquired in my current role being applied in the public sector. The private sector can learn from the public sector as well as vice versa. I brought some skills to my current role that many of my peers who have never worked in the public sector haven't got, and in particular around working in a political environment.

Creating a shared understanding of other sectors and organisations would create 'more understanding and more mutual respect', as one interviewee put it.

A willingness to look across boundaries to other parts of public services was evident within the survey of recent graduate entrants to local government. Although a third saw themselves working solely within local government in five years time, 27% saw themselves working in the wider public sector, and 10% saw themselves in different delivery vehicles, such as social enterprises.²⁴

In these conversations with people working in different sectors interviewees talked of the importance of high trust, partnership and collaboration between public, private and third sectors, but retained low levels of trust in each other in practice. Local government was characterised as 'centralised', 'controlling', 'patronising'; the private sector as 'a vehicle to make profit', the third sector as having too narrow a sense of mission. One third sector interviewee characterised local government in this way:

At a strategic level, in terms of how to solve these problems, the [local authority managers] see this as entirely their responsibility, they want to control it, they wouldn't want to get together with leaders from the third sector to think it through. The culture is still quite closed and controlling.

This low-trust environment is not one in which the public, private and third sectors appear to be able to work together under a common umbrella of public service:

If we are going down the privatisation of public services route then there's going to be lots more partnerships between the third sector and the private sector. At the moment that's a nightmare, there is a complete culture clash. But they are going to need to understand each other better...and challenge the stereotypes about each other.

Whilst mobility across sectors may be one way to build trust and credibility, a number of interviewees highlighted the scope for learning from other sectors through job shadowing and secondments rather than formal changes of employer.

Sabbaticals and secondments were seen as useful tools for sharing learning and gaining exposure to other organisational cultures: 'Where I have gained most has been being located in those organisations. There needs to be structured placement opportunities of some significant length with requirement to be reflective, and some tasks as part of that. Experiential stuff is the best. Interviewees also referred to coaching, mentoring, shadowing and action learning as effective ways of developing new skills, as well as networks and relationships across the organisation and more widely:

We train people into their role too much. We don't do any real training and development. We need more work shadowing, but with a structure. It doesn't need to cost a lot. We need to get people working across the council with partners, not just within directorates and services. Managers need to do a lot more developing as part of PDR process.

Work Shadowing

One example of such a scheme, praised by our interviewees, is the National Council for Voluntary Organisations' A Day in the Life programme of paired secondments between the civil service and the voluntary sector. This is a four day work shadowing programme which provides participants with the opportunity to see the commissioning landscape from the other perspectives.

www.ncvo.org.uk/practical-support/cross-sector-working/work-shadow-scheme.

Challenge: What opportunities can be created to encourage sabbaticals and secondments, into and out of the organisation?

5. The 21st Century Public Servant combines an ethos of publicness with an understanding of commerciality



The public service ethos has been a common reference point in discussions about public service reform for many years. Ethos captures the sense of an intrinsic motivation to service the public, distinct from extrinsic motivations such as material reward or fear of sanctions.²⁵ Intrinsic motivations are particularly important in

public services since users often cannot impose extrinsic sanctions like exit on poor quality providers.²⁶ There was widespread agreement among interviewees that the public service ethos has an enduring importance. A survey of graduate entrants into local government showed that 'wanting to serve the public' was the most powerful motivator of choice of career.²⁷ Two-thirds (69%) of these trainees believe that there is a distinctive set of public service values. Furthermore, these values are not usually seen as static. Of the 33 trainees who believed in a public service ethos, three-quarters (73%) felt that these values are changing as public service roles change.

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The word cloud overleaf illustrates the terms which the respondents used to describe their sense of a public service ethos. The prominence of money and profit in the word cloud highlights the extent to which there is a financial component to ethos, either in terms of delivering value for money for citizens, or – in the negative – as being the absence of a profit motive.

The interview findings supported the literature review which highlighted that a public sector ethos has been eclipsed by a public service ethos, which reflects the variety of different public service providers and the value of a shared commitment to service. Certainly, private sector interviewees affirmed the relevance of the public service ethos to their own work, rejecting the notion that profit-motive is a barrier to such an ethos: 'I strongly believe that my public service ethos is as strong as, if not stronger than, many people who

6. The 21st Century Public Servant is rethinking public services to enable them to survive an era of perma-austerity



Perma-austerity is inhibiting and catalysing change, as organisations struggle to balance short-term cost-cutting and redundancies with a strategic vision for change. Many interviewees gave a sense of moving into a second phase of austerity: *'There may have been a narrative about the cuts being a burning platform for stuff that should have been done years ago, but it doesn't feel like that anymore, the easy stuff has all been done.'* As another put it, *'It's not about doing more with less now, it's about saying what we can't do, being very clear to the public about the limitations of that and say well yes we can do this but only to that standard, or we can't do it, or accepting that someone else might be better able to do it.'*

For some interviewees the current 'narrative of doom' was inhibiting their organisation from moving forward. Some talked about a sense of loss and grief for the past, with organisations paralysed by the impact of the cuts, and unable to provide a new vision to work towards. As one put it, *'No message of hope – leadership is putting council into survival mode by the language they're using. Nobody is planning for post austerity.'* One interviewee spoke about the effect of losing

large numbers of staff: *'You hear the language of loss everywhere. I get affected by it.'*

These sentiments resonate with findings from research into local government responses to austerity, by Lowndes and McCaughie which concluded that 'ideational continuity seems to dominate within local government...witness in salami slicing tactics (less of the same) rather than bold new visions'.²⁹

Although interviewees accepted that the financial context offered opportunities for doing things differently, some commented on the challenge of moving forward whilst dealing with the reality of the impact of large scale redundancies: *'The cuts are forcing us to confront change. In public service, change doesn't necessarily happen unless there is a crisis or a disaster, or it happens very slowly. But think tanks and consultancies can find it exciting, for them it's a massive playground. We have to remind them that people are losing their jobs, services are being cut. There has to be a balance.'* Others commented that the enormity of the challenge needs to be recognized and responded to: *'It's not salami slicing because you wouldn't have salami that big, it's hacking things off. It's about rethinking the role of the state in light of the changing economy, technology, the changing ways that people live their lives. The cuts are so big that we have to confront the questions we have been putting off: what is a library service, what is a leisure service?'*

The biggest shift being driven by austerity is developing a different relationship with citizens: *'We won't have the money so we will have to focus on the enabling and facilitating, enabling the rest of community to do it.'* As one interviewee put it: *'You can only get so far by being a supply side mechanic, cutting and slicing. You need a better sense of what your people are like, who they are, what their networks are, how they can do more not for themselves but how they can be more a part of the value that you create about what you do as a council.'* This perspective is supported by research which concludes that the role of institutional bricoleurs will become more important: individuals who bring together or recombine resources in particular ways to bring about opportunities.³⁰

However another interviewee described the difficulties she encountered in reconciling the efficiency/austerity agenda with more relational ways of working:

There is a complicated tension between the desire on the one hand for efficiency and rational processes versus the expectations and needs of customers which is more relational and focused on the personal and local. Public service workers have to find their way through that knot. We are expected to do both, to move to the more relational in the government's commitment to localisation and neighbourhoods. But elsewhere we are moving to customer relationship management and call centres. You phone or visit a call centre, pick up a ticket, it's not a holistic relationship with the person on the other end of the phone.

Challenge: Are honest conversations going on about what the organisation can and can't do in an era of austerity, and do people understand their own role in that future?

7. The 21st Century Public Servant needs organisations which are fluid and supportive rather than silo-ed and controlling



Several interviewees talked about how the hierarchical structure of local government and the wider public sector reduces the flexibility to respond to change. Many commented that the service-based structures were developed to suit the needs of the organisation rather than citizens and those trying to work with the institution and had not changed to accommodate new ways of working. As one put it, *'We are trying to be 21st Century public servants in 19th Century organisations. There's that constant struggle. Not only how do we change what the people are but also how do we change the organisations to allow the people to be what they need to be?'*

There was a recognition that the bureaucratic structure of government does not lend itself to engaging with partners and communities and that the culture needs to change – a real challenge for a large, traditional type of organisation with hierarchical structures:

That's the real thing to bottom out, we've got to find a way of delivering relevant and engaging public service without the trappings of a big bureaucracy. We need to remove some of the barriers that stop people – some of the things that are about micro-businesses, individual people thinking we have spotted a niche for something here. The council could play a role

in facilitating that, getting people together to share ideas. I know there are attempts to do that but I don't think it's as easy as it should be. It might be about creating the conditions in which that can thrive.

Most interviewees felt that the current service-based structures restricted the workforce from being agile and entrepreneurial: *'The processes that organisations need to have in place to meet their legal liabilities are the very things that hamper that flexible and responsive working'*.

Interviewees argued for the need for new ways of working, such as task and finish groups rather than rigid organisational structures, with people taking part on the basis of skills not job title: *'We don't invite people to take part in project based on "you're a head of" – much more about core skills or core behaviour that will be required – you have those things, come and work on it.'*

Some organisations are already moving towards different structures: *'We need a customer/place based approach. Here we're organised in a way that satisfies the needs of our citizens not in a way that satisfies our own professional boundaries'*. However this is by no means the norm. There was also a recognition that adopting more flexible, organic structures could challenge the traditional professions and services. One interviewee suggested that *'Maybe we need a new structure for local government where you have seniors that have a technical expertise, alongside people capable of making relationships, and then members.'* Health and social care integration was seen by one interviewee as an opportunity to explore how structures could encompass different ways of working whilst ensuring that citizens experienced an integrated service. But here too challenges remain: *'How do you manage to marry different traditions and disciplines (in a way that) respects them but doesn't lead to citizens being pushed from pillar to post.'*

There was also a sense that public services need to harness technology better in order to enable more flexible working. Several interviewees made the point that as the younger generation enter the workforce they are less likely to want to be in an office from 9-5: *'It will be less hierarchy in the future, more organised chaos, more project management. Will need to make more use of cloud technology, let people work from cafes, from home.'* The flexibility that such working provides is likely to be welcomed by many staff, although the potential isolation that mobile working can create, particularly for those workers engaged in more emotionally intense encounters with citizens, is an important counterweight.

Challenge: are systems-based approaches being considered as an alternative to repeated cycles of organisational restructuring?

8. The 21st Century Public Servant rejects heroic leadership in favour of distributed and collaborative models of leading



The traditional individual leader approach is not one that will be effective in the context of complex, adaptive problems facing society.³¹ The skill sets of leaders in the future need to be different, and the type of leadership approach also needs to change. Several interviewees mentioned the concept of systems leadership, as proposed by the recent report by the Virtual Staff College.³² They argue that the concept of systems leadership (or collaborative leadership in the health service) replaces the traditional notion of the leader as the sole source of power and authority with a version of leadership which reflects the complexity of modern society and the decline of deference. The argument is that 'in these troubled, uncertain times, we don't need more command and control, we need better means to engage everyone's intelligence in solving challenges and crises as they arise'.

Interviewees reflected this – with one saying that 'collaborative leadership is about creating conditions in which others can thrive'. The leaders themselves recognise this shift, with a recent survey of council chief executives finding that: 'public services can only be more responsive to the needs of service users if employees on the front line are trusted to innovate and empowered to act with more autonomy. This requires a fundamental culture change away from traditional command and control models of leadership to one in which leadership

is distributed across organisations'.³³ As one interviewee put it 'The kind of system leadership which is required now is seen to favour a different skills set to the 'fix it' leadership of the past'. Leaders also need to be self aware and emotionally intelligent: 'Someone who understands what they are bringing to the table so understands who else needs to be there.'

Interviewees suggested that leaders needed to do different things, but also needed a different style of leadership: 'The concept of leadership is changing from being one where leaders are expected to perform to one that enables others to be effective.' This is an approach which, '... requires being with people and allowing them to be themselves, listening, noticing, observing and deploying yourself accurately in situations.... it's about making teams and networks effective... about having a repertoire'.

Interviewees emphasised the importance of leaders having passion, strong values and motivation if they are to support others to improve outcomes; one interviewee commented that 'Leadership for outcomes only works if people care'. There was a call for leadership to promote shared endeavour across the whole system rather than merely enabling others to do things: 'It's about making it happen. It is so difficult to make it happen that it will only happen through passion and belief in what's to be done.' One interviewee suggested that 'What links all the different models of leadership is uncertainty, doing things where you can and when you can.'

Although an organisation needs someone to act as the face of the institution it 'doesn't require a charismatic leader', as one interviewee put it. This suggestion reflects the Virtual College findings that there is a

distinction between the 'old fashioned notion of the domineering leader, whose power comes from their willingness to coerce others, and the requirement on a modern leader to be a member of a team, making their presence felt by their ability to achieve a collective sense of purpose'.³⁴ One contributor to the Virtual College report felt that social media could be a real opportunity for leaders to make their presence felt as it 'gives the leader a name and gets the messages across as a leader'.³⁵ The engagement of public servants with social media is discussed in more detail in section 10 below.

Whilst recognising the need for this new type of leadership, interviewees questioned whether there were the right levers in place to make a change. Although some organisations are being explicit about the different types of leadership behaviours they want and recruiting to those competencies, the traditional models of leadership and the associated 'macho' type behaviours still exist and tend to be rewarded within the public sector.

Several interviewees expressed concern that the traditional, command and control type of leadership was having a detrimental effect on the decision making within the organisation; particularly in the current financial context where decisions about cutting services are being made. One interviewee stressed that 'People need to have managers and leaders who are honest, honourable and listening and who will help people make best of it – will create teams where people can survive. If leadership is saying don't bring me problems then people will leave'.

Another interviewee said that it is a challenge to ask people to make difficult decisions when they are operating in a command and control culture: 'If people are worried, they will avoid making a decision or will refer it up all the time, which creates paralysis in the system.'

Challenge: what is being done to develop leadership at all levels of the organisation, and how is that being facilitated through incentives such as the appraisals system?

9. The 21st Century Public Servant is rooted in a locality which frames a sense of loyalty and identity



The role of place in public service needs to be recognised: public service workers often have a strong loyalty to the neighbourhoods and towns/cities in which they work as well as an organisational loyalty. Several respondents talked about the importance of place in public service; one interviewee suggested that the building of a grand Town Hall had once been a physical statement of commitment to public place and questioned whether we now have such a sense of why public service exists. With the move towards more commissioning rather than delivery, this sense of serving a place will become even more important. An interviewee suggested that this service to place should be the fundamental role of councils: *'God knows what services [the council] will deliver in future but there will be someone thinking I have a responsibility to this place – I'm the leader of this place. That's the long term mission – all else is ephemeral.'*

Interviewees suggested that it was essential for public servants to *'know and walk their patch'*. One interviewee argued: *'Above a certain grade you should be required to live in [the council area], because you are making huge decisions on how people will*

live, work and spend their recreational time'. Living outside of the community, removed from the daily life of the area means that public servants may struggle to understand their residents, according to this view. Interviewees also suggested that although public servants need to have a vision of place this is challenging if they are trained to view the world through the perspective of services rather than

the place: *'We need to get people to look after the place rather than just meet their professional responsibilities. People need to get out of their professional silos and work with voluntary groups, people in the area, do their best for the neighbourhood regardless of their professional role.'*

Some interviewees felt that this commitment to place was special to the public sector: *'You don't have that working for a private sector company. You are like a GP or priest, who wants to do the best for the people in their area.'* Another respondent agreed that GPs are *'community workers who are based in their communities and have pride and commitment to the City and their area'*. However, he noted that the loss of the requirement to provide out-of-hours service has weakened this link to place, as many GPs no longer live in the community where their practice is based. There is potential for similar impact on the sense of commitment to place with more services being outsourced; *'The frontline...there a bunch of things happening over which they have no control whatsoever and the chances are that you are going to be part of an organisation*

that won't be the council. Whether that's an arms length or mutual body or straight off to Capita.' Becoming part of a national organisation could have an impact on that sense of commitment to place currently felt by many of our interviewees.

Several interviewees suggested that those working on the front line and in neighbourhood roles have the deepest sense of place, and need to relay this to others higher up the organisation. One suggested that a local government officer *'should get out of bed thinking about the city not services'*. Public sector organisations also need to recognise that many of their residents are also staff, and create opportunities for staff to respond and contribute to consultations and strategies as residents: *'Staff are beginning to challenge decisions being made – reflecting service user views but also their own views as residents.'*

The concept and importance of pride in the place in which they work was raised by several interviewees. One interview said: *'There's a sense that we are there to make a difference and we're proud to be part of that. Pride in place is part of that, people feel proud of their city or neighbourhood. Just because you live in the city doesn't mean that you are of the city. It's not the living in it, it's about having a genuine commitment to and being proud of the work we are doing in the city'*. There was also a view that leaders have a clear political task to bind people round a place and create a shared identity; in order to create civic pride. One interviewee suggested that the role of champions of a place is a key task because civic pride comes out of identity and this assertion of pride creates things which then pull other people into it.

Challenge: How are feelings of identity and loyalty to place supported so that public servants feel like citizens of the place not just officers in an organisation?

10. The 21st Century Public Servant reflects on practice and learns from that of others



The public service changes that we have set out here in which structures are fragmenting, citizens demand authentic interactions, careers require much greater self-management, commerciality and publicness must be reconciled and expectations of leadership are dispersed across the organisation, requires time and space for public servants to reflect. Many interviewees said that more value is placed on activity rather than reflection and this leads to risk aversion and lack of innovation: *'We put huge amount of store in activity and need to get better at valuing reflection, anticipating. The risk is if we focus on here and now we may not be able to transform and innovate. How do you slow it all down?'*

Another said:

You need spaces where you take yourself apart and sort it out with the fact that the organisation is expecting you to glide along like a swan looking serenely happy with no mistakes whatsoever. Self assurance can be reason for making an appointment but then that person can be very short fused. How can you recruit for self criticism?

This reflective practice can help people to cope with the emotional aspects of their work, highlighted above. It can also be a way to manage the anxiety that people are dealing with because of the cuts. Managers in the interviews suggested that they don't have resources to do the job and something

will go wrong and no one is listening to them (one person suggested that this can be seen in what happened with the recent flooding). Social workers are worried that they can't keep people safe. Chief officers are trying to balance the need to motivate people with determining where to cut the budget: *'Directors of adult care are taking decisions about where best to create the harm',* as one put it. The end result is a 'fake resilience' which is unsustainable.

New technologies are also creating new challenges for workers about how to manage boundaries and to work appropriately. Social media in particular was seen as a great opportunity to engage with citizens in a different way, and one that public service organisations had not always embraced with sufficient creativity. *'We are too controlling around social media at the moment. That's how people in the real world talk to each other.'* It was recognised to also bring challenges around time pressures: *'It's all leading to information overload, people become very stressed trying to deal with it all.'*

Staff also reported concerns about how to manage the boundaries between professional and personal selves when using social media:

A lot of public sector organisations fall into the trap of putting out this bland stuff... We're talking about personality now. Comms are saying you need to be blogging as you. But when I do get the time, fitting it into the day job, what guarantees do I have that no one is going to say you've overstepped the mark here?

For officers in local government, social media was felt to bring problems with exposure:

You have to be careful with Twitter. It's difficult to draw the line between personal and professional life. I tend to retweet things but without a value statement attached. We are in politically restricted posts so we have to be careful.

For elected members, who are already well exposed, the challenge was rather different:

Twitter and Facebook are about publishing what you do in your life. But huge parts of my life are in the public arena and I want to keep part of it private. I wouldn't want it to be that being a publicly elected person meant that I don't hang on to part of my life being private. And I wouldn't want to continue as an elected member if that was the expectation.

The reflective practice that will help staff to cope with these multiple challenges was seen as best supported through experience, coaching and mentoring than traditional training courses. One interviewee said: *'There is a real need to work on people's ability to learn, not just sitting in a classroom, go out, think for yourself, what it is that we don't know. We need managers who are able to do that and do that with their staff and think about how do we help people learn.'* Several participants suggested that people should view their relationships at work with colleagues and line manager as best source of education and skills: *'It's less about training, more about experience.'*

Organisations also need to be receptive to the learning that comes from exposure to other ways of practicing. One interviewee expressed her frustration: *'People have been out and brought ideas back but it's like throwing seeds onto stony ground.'* Personal development processes were felt to be too process oriented, with little emphasis on personal development and no sanction for managers who failed to develop their staff: *'There is limited effective challenge for managers who don't develop their staff, no one notices, whereas if people didn't manage their budget effectively we'd be down on them straight away.'*

Staff were seen to need more help to carve out time for reflection and training:

We don't create the right environment for internal managers to develop the skills and knowledge that they now need. The biggest barrier to that is people's time. There is a lot of organisational support,

please feel free to take this course, but translating that aspiration into staff doing the training takes a different lever. You have to make the space for it to happen, you have to make them learn, otherwise they won't find the time because there is never enough time to do everything already.

Challenge: Do appraisal, mentoring and peer support give people scope for reflective practice, to share and learn from mistakes and to take on new challenges (such as using social media) in effective ways?

Conclusion and Next Steps

The findings we have set out here are a combination of descriptions of how people perceive their current practice and aspirations of where they want to be. The report has aimed to give voice to what a cross-section of people working in different public service organisations feel are their current workforce issues and the best ways to address them. They contain clear challenges for 21st century public servants as well as opportunities, and we have included a specific challenge at the end of each section. What we haven't offered is a 'how to' guide or a toolkit. The aspirations set out in the report are much more likely to be achieved through personal reflection, internal organisational dialogue, external networking and peer learning than they are by working through a new human resources tool.

The fleet-of-foot worker, who manages a portfolio career and an emotionally rich engagement with citizens at the same time as exercising personal development and self care, risks being as mythic as the heroic leader who will single-handedly lead an organisation to success. It is of course more likely that attributes will be pooled within teams rather than displayed within one person. The 21st Century Public Servant is a composite role and exists to illuminate a series of working practices rather than to provide a blueprint for a single worker.

There are several perspectives which are underexplored in this report. The first is that of the citizen. This was a short project, and there was not sufficient scope to engage the

public in this conversation in a way that did not feel tokenistic. There is scope for follow-up work here, particularly around what the public want at the frontline interface. It seems likely that that notion of 'being human' that resonated with staff will also be relevant for the public, but that will be offset with convenience and efficiency. The balance is likely to depend on the service, and also perhaps on the age and social profile of the citizen. These are all fertile areas to explore in future work, building on the research of others.³⁶

The second missing perspective is that of politicians. Only three elected members were interviewed for this work, and the report does not have much to say about what it means to be a 21st Century politician. There were some interesting tensions surfaced by the research – for example around how far officers' use of social media trespasses on the role of councillors as the public face of the council – and these again warrant further exploration in the context of the changing role of elected members.³⁷

The third is the political and financial context. For the interviewees, and the recent graduates who completed the survey as the upcoming generation of public service managers, the context of austerity was taken as a given, as was the mixed economy of public service providers. The widespread emphasis on commerciality as part of public service working reflects how far the assumptions of new public management have penetrated all tiers of

government. With few exceptions, there was little critical reflection on this new terrain or on the political choices that have facilitated it, although this is a topic that has been covered elsewhere by the authors.³⁸ The role of trade unions and professional organisations was also underdeveloped, primarily because they were mentioned rarely by interviewees, but they clearly have an important role to play in thinking through how to modify working practices in ways that advance publicness and individual wellbeing.

The fourth is the international perspective. Other public service contexts have leant themselves to similar types of enquiry and related conclusions, although with a civil service rather than local service focus. In Canada for example a project on the Public Services in the 21st Century included a recommendation to 're-commit to "on the job" learning', including through mentoring and sabbatical programmes.³⁹ Singapore's Public Service 21 (PS21) programme has identified the workforce principles which it sees as essential for the future including: 'a mindset that welcomes experimentation and a desire to continually find new and better ways of doing things. PS21 gives every public officer the mandate and platform to contribute their ideas for a successful Public Service.'⁴⁰ Helen Dickinson and Helen Sullivan at the University of Melbourne are exploring public service workforce challenges in Australia in parallel to our research, and we plan to undertake comparative research with them in the future.⁴¹

Next steps

In this report we have brought forward what it means to be a 21st Century public servant. We have also identified some of the steps which are needed to get there. These include a greater role for lead professionals and multi-disciplinary teams; increased scope for work shadowing and sabbaticals; and stronger recognition of the generic and relational skills which make public services work for citizens. Some of what we have found is about refocusing current practices: incentivising managers to take personal development processes seriously and holding to account managers who fail to invest time in staff development; recognising the importance of place to workers' identity and loyalty. Much of what is here will need a more structured response: different kinds of professional training and development; opportunities to engage in cross-sectoral training; facilitation of more reflective ways of working. There are cultural challenges too, linked to notions of control and risk aversion which fail to respect staff or citizens, or to reflect new technological norms in communication. Some of the cultural prejudices towards other sectors (public, private, third) seem as entrenched as ever, despite decades of partnership working. These are the many issues on which we are encouraging comment and debate. Join the discussion on the blog <http://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com/> and help to share ideas on how to ensure that the 21st Century Public Service workforce is fit for purpose.

Notes

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