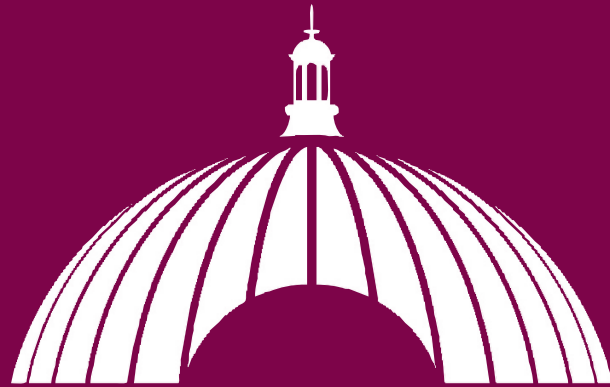


Twenty-first century public servant
Summary of roundtable discussion

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PUBLIC
SERVICE
ACADEMY

*“The skills we are teaching people in local
government are not the ones they need”*

Round table participant

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Summary of roundtable discussion



Introduction

Public services are going through major changes in response to a range of issues such as the Big Society agenda, increased localisation, greater demands for service user voice and control, increased public expectations and a greater mix in the economy of welfare services. Public service organisations are grappling with significant changes at a time when there are large-scale cuts to public spending. The public service organisations of today are no longer large public sector organisations such as the local authorities of the past but are likely to be smaller in size and increasingly likely to exist in the commercial sector or the third sector.

These changes have significant implications in terms of the types of roles that public servants undertake and their career trajectories. Whereas in the past an individual might start out in a junior role in a public sector organisation and work their way through various parts of that organisation, today it is more likely that individuals will work in a range of different organisations and institutions over the course of their career and also cross sectoral boundaries. Even where individuals remain in the same organisation it is likely that they will be required to work more closely with those from other organisations, institutions and sectors as public services become ever more diversified.

The existing knowledge and practice around career development of public servants is yet to catch up with these developments. There is no common and shared route through which public

servants are developed or through which they can gain access to information about the types of roles available and the skills and competencies they may need to develop. The training of public servants has traditionally focused too much on the core civil service, whereas the majority of people who work in public services may not fit this model. Those who work outside of the public sector are often trained and developed through different routes. This is compounded by the fact that professionals within the public service workforce (e.g. doctors, social workers, teachers) are trained specifically for that role to a certain set of standards and expectations. Further, the notion of the 'public service ethos' has been too associated with those working in the public sector which does not well reflect the myriad of organisations who today are involved with designing and delivering public services. Neither does this effectively take account of the shifting role of service users as co-designers, co-producers or citizens.

Against this background the University of Birmingham's Public Service Academy hosted a roundtable which brought together a range of key stakeholders (n=16, see Appendix) from the public, private and third sectors to facilitate a high-level discussion about what we want from the twenty-first century workforce and what needs to happen to deliver this agenda. Building on the work of the University of Birmingham's Policy Commission (2011) into the future of public services which outlined a range of new roles for public servants, this event explored this agenda in more detail and generated a set of practical actions which

need to be put in place if twenty-first century public servants are to be appropriately supported, developed, trained and educated.

The first section of this paper revisits the context set out in the Policy Commission's report and analyses whether the same sorts of challenges are present in today's environment. We then move on to consider who public servants are and what they do before setting out what needs to happen to deliver the twenty-first century public service workforce. The paper concludes by setting out a series of suggested actions and detail of where the Public Service Academy's work programme around this topic will progress next.

Context

The first part of the roundtable was spent re-visiting the important contextual factors outlined in the Policy Commission report and checking out the degree to which they are still relevant. The dominant contextual factor shaping the discussion was that of austerity. Most of the participants reported their organisation having to change in response to this agenda. In the context of financial austerity there were four major options being adopted:

- Reduction in services
- Streamlining
- Outsourcing
- Transforming

One participant described his organisation as being on a cliff edge: 'unless we go for transformation, the alternative will be cuts'. Although there was some disagreement between

participants about the specifics of the political agenda and the drivers underpinning change, most agreed that the current pace of, and urgency for, change feels different to that experienced for some time. The financial pressures are such that this feels like a very significant time for public services and for public servants.

The austerity context and the need to change services are creating a distinctive set of pressures for the workforce, including:

- High levels of workforce mobility
- Pressures to innovate from within a shrinking organisation

One of the major challenges for public services is how to do more with less, in terms of both financial resources and workforce. The changes that are being made around public services has meant that there are fewer people within the formal public service workforce which has positive and negative connotations. On the one hand there are fewer people to drive the significant change that is needed at this time. Many skilled and experienced professionals have been lost, particularly those who are in tough roles. However, in some places the loss of institutional memory may be making it easier for new and different approaches to be developed and tested.

In terms of creating high quality public services, the themes that were raised as being crucial are well known and include:

- Whole systems/whole place approach to delivery and funding so that partners work strategically and share costs and risks
- Outcomes-focused approaches to commissioning and delivery
- Incentives to innovate and take risks on the frontline
- Appropriate and effective demand management arrangements

All of these are more important, but more difficult to achieve, in a time of austerity.

The next section considers what roles twenty-first century public servants need to perform, before going on to look at how to deliver a well-trained workforce.

Who are they and what do they do?

Twenty-first century public servants may be professionals, managers and/or practitioners from across the public,

private and third sectors working in a system of public support. They fulfil a combination of roles, some of which are new, some evolving and some more longstanding. However approaches to supporting and skilling these public servants have been deficient in three key ways:

First, the training of public servants has been stratified by sector and grade, minimising the scope for shared learning and integrated approaches. This is evident in a number of ways: the separation of training for the core civil service from training for health and local government; the distinctive training and identities developed by the 'professions' in different sectors; the limited training available for frontline staff such as care workers, medical support staff and community workers, compared to managers and professionals. Recognising and supporting this diverse workforce in its common purpose of public service delivery is a significant challenge. Even the vocabulary struggles to do justice to this variance: we use the term public servant here, but recognise that such a term has historically been associated with the administrative core of the state. Newman and Clarke note that 'new categories of occupation may be differently classed, raced or gendered from the "traditional" professions... Located in new sites, working "interstitially" between both organisational and professional forms of authority and discipline, these agents typically have mediating roles – doing the work of brokering, negotiating, translating, and assembling the people and practices involved in governing' (2009, p.62). Although there have been attempts to encourage shared learning between sectors – such as public leader programmes – the barriers to integration remain profound (see for example Dickinson et al, 2013).

Second, the notion of the public service ethos remains too closely associated with the probity of people working in the public sector, and its relevance to people working in the third and commercial sectors is uncertain. Pratchett and Wingfield (1996) identified the public service ethos as a 'logic of appropriateness' for those working in public services. Changes to service delivery have significantly challenged understandings of what is appropriate –

for example focusing more on responsiveness to the customer of services, rather than on formal political accountability channels - yet there is little sense that a new shared logic has emerged. The distinctive ethical challenges of providing for the contemporary public service user need careful exploration to understand how they map onto older conceptions of ethos (Le Grand, 2003; Needham, 2006). This requires recognition that public service users may be customers in some contexts, but they are often also co-producers of service outcomes as well as taxpayers and citizens (Clarke et al, 2007; Needham and Carr, 2009). In the future they will increasingly be budget-holders, commissioning their own health and care services (Department of Health, 2010).

Third, there is a need to recognise the distinctive and complex skills set which public servants require. These are skills which public servants share and which span their distinctive professional groupings and service specialisms (Peck and Dickinson, 2008). There are four longstanding roles that continue to be important including: *regulator* which involves assessing performance of resources against standards; *protector* where the emphasis is on intervening to prevent harm; *adjudicator* where the requirement is to make decisions on balance of evidence; and, *expert* where the role is to exercise judgement in decision making drawing on relevant skills and experience.

The Policy Commission suggested that twenty-first century public servants fulfil a combination of roles, some of which are new, some evolving and some more longstanding. The future of public services Policy Commission suggested four new roles that will need to be developed in the future:

- *Storyteller* – playing a key role in authoring and communicating stories of how new worlds of Local Public Support might be envisioned in the absence of existing blueprints, drawing on experience and evidence from a range of sources. This is about the ability to fashion and communicate options for the future, however tentative and experimental and will be crucial in engaging service users, citizens and staff in the project of redesign.
- *Resource weaver* – this is the ability to make creative use of existing resources

Box 1: Birmingham City Council workforce statistics

Birmingham City Council shared with us some key data on their organisational workforce profile. Key features of this include:

- 68% of the workforce is female and 32% is male.
- 58% of the workforce is white, with 13% Asian or Asian British, 13% Black or Black British with the remainder alternatively identified or unknown.
- 5% of the workforce identify as having a disability.
- 0.1% of the workforce is under 20, with a further 6% being between 20 and 29. 18% are in the 30-39 age range, with 35% 40-49, 32% 50-59 and 8% 60-69. 0.9% of the workforce is aged over 70.

regardless of their intended/original use; weaving together miscellaneous and disparate materials to generate something new and useful for service users and citizens.

- *Systems architect* – someone who is able to describe and compile coherent local systems of public support from the myriad of public, private, third sector and other resources. This is an ongoing task as system resources are likely to vary over time and space.
- *Navigator* – this specifically focuses on guiding citizens and service users around the range of possibilities that might be available in a system of local public support. This is similar to the sort of role that some area based regeneration workers have developed in the past.

These new roles sit alongside three evolving roles:

- *Commissioner* – although much is known about this role already a key issue here will be in ensuring there are sufficient commissioners with the right range of skills to be able to commission support on a system rather than service basis, shaping local markets.
- *Broker* – a role similar to but distinct from an advocate. It involves working closely with and on behalf of service users to access the appropriate support. It is linked to personalisation and individual budgets.
- *Reticulist* – this role focuses on the development and use of networking skills to identify new sources of expertise and support and/or to bring together agents who together can achieve desired outcomes.

These roles were largely recognised by the participants at the roundtable as being relevant, although the breadth of the public service workforce was recognised as making it difficult to generalise across sectors, organisations and regions.

Some of these roles may be more important and further developed within some sectors and regions than others. The age, gender and full-time/part-time profile of the public service workforce also generates some distinctive challenges. In Box 1 we have included some exemplar data from Birmingham City Council to illustrate the profile of this organisation. Clearly this data will not be the same for every public service organisation, but according to what we heard in the roundtable it is not dissimilar to many public sector organisations, although it may differ from third and commercial sector organisations.

The group also recognised that the discussion needed to be broader than simply the roles of public servants and to encompass politically elected members and members of the public. In the context of local authorities, elected members were seen to be crucial in giving a steer to officers about working strategically rather than in silos. Members of the public were recognised to be important producers of public services (as well as recipients) through, for example, peer support networks and unpaid caring roles.

What is clear from the discussion is that although there are success stories in terms of these roles in some areas of the country, in others there is much still to be done in terms of developing public servants so that they might take up these roles.

What is required to deliver a twenty-first century public service workforce?

As we have suggested the challenge for public services and the public service workforce is significant and complex. As one participant suggested, public services are being asked to be 'both business-like and not like a business...whether in commissioning or providing roles, [this] demands high levels of intellectual spinning of technical, organisational and political plates'.

The Policy Commission report suggests that in order to undertake these traditional, new and evolving roles, there are a set of 'twenty-first century literacies' which are specific skills needed in the new working environment. These include:

- Interpersonal skills, specifically facilitation, empathy and political skills;
- Synthesising skills, including sorting evidence from a range of sources, analysing, making judgements, offering critique and being creative;
- Organising skills for group work, collaboration and peer review;
- Communication skills, making more and better use of new and multimedia resources.

These were largely recognised by the group as being relevant. Commissioning and decommissioning were areas specifically cited as in need of urgent development with a general perception that these areas are currently lacking in many areas of the country. Alongside these specific skills other 'softer' skills that need developing include:

- Ability to challenge the status quo
- Willingness to innovate
- Understanding risk, risk arbitrage (knowing who holds the risk in a particular situation)
- Stimulating and managing behaviour change (reprise of community development role?)
- Ability to be a fixer and facilitator
- Delivery skills – just get on and provide the service





In order to develop the kinds of roles and skills set out above – and to navigate the interplay between them – public servants will need appropriate and adequate support. Central and local government already play an important role in publicly valuing and supporting public service and promoting careers in public services, but there is more that can be done to develop the public service workforce further. In the next section we set out the sorts of actions suggested by the roundtable for bringing about the twenty-first century workforce.

Suggestions for action

There were a great many suggestions for action outlined by participants and we summarise those which were most commonly expressed or suggested to be most pressing here.

First it was recognised that we need to develop a positive narrative around public services, what different individuals and organisations do and where these services will develop in the future. Many participants felt that at the moment many of the dominant narratives about public services have been negative and these have a detrimental impact on the confidence of public services and the trust that the general population places in

these services. Many examples of good practice exist and there is a need to be more vocal about these and communicate these more widely than is done so at present. People leading on and delivering public services needs to become more adept at using stories about the future and not just the past and the present.

Many of the suggestions for action were made in relation to training and development. The overwhelming call from participants was for central government to start thinking about the public service workforce in the round. At present there are a range of professional and organisational boundaries which mean that training and development opportunities tend to exist in a silo and would benefit from being considered in a more rounded way. Some of the suggestions include:

- The need for more integrated training across public services. This would involve bringing professionals together with other professionals to improve insight, build respect and encourage collaborative approaches.
- Such an integrated approach would also include leadership training across the whole of public services. One mechanism that might be important here is the greater use of secondments.

- There needs to be more portability of continuing professional development (CPD) between sectors, recognising that people need skills that are portable between sectors.
- There also needs to be better accreditation so that people don't need to do the same course more than once.
- More training is required for staff who are not in professional or managerial roles
- More training is needed for elected officials.

If public services are to attract the best and brightest into the sector then more needs to be done to make these attractive jobs. Some of this might be addressed through the training issues outlined above, but more could also be done in schools and universities so that people understand what public service jobs are available and what they might give individual workers. Arguably public sector organisations may need to start recruiting fundamentally different people to those that they have traditionally done so. For example, staff who work co-productively with citizens to provide services may require a fundamentally different set of skills to those traditionally valued.

Commissioning and contract management skills were seen as urgent needs. Communication skills are also seen to be lacking and in need of development, with new channels of communication between frontline staff and managers being seen as crucial. This was seen as key to utilising frontline knowledge more effectively and to harnessing leadership potential on the frontline. Similarly new channels of communication with local people were seen to be important to learn what works and what doesn't work in public services, for example through the use of ethnographic approaches (see for example the Swindon Life project where researchers lived on a local estate for six months (Bluh, 2012)).

At an organisational level, more thinking space for managers and leaders was seen to be crucial. Such space is at present often seen as a luxury but is vital for thinking through the difficult challenges that individuals and organisations are presently facing. This space might be both literal places for managers and leaders to meet and discuss but also regular opportunities in

the diary to do quality thinking. This might involve reflecting on recent activities, testing good ideas and sharing best practice. Doing this activity as part of a system, rather than a single-organisation might also help develop more cross-organisational and sectoral responses. There is also a question as to whether managers truly understand the experience of staff at the front-line. Back to the floor programmes might be helpful in this respect to understand how operational staff perceive the organisation and how the implementation of reform processes is taking place in practice.

Ideas for next steps of the work programme

There were a number of suggestions of what we might do next in the Public Service Academy's work programme around the theme of the twenty-first century public servant.

It is apparent that there is a great deal of good practice that already takes place in different areas of the country. An important next step will be to gather data on this and use these case studies as exemplars to other areas. This is also a useful step in the process of constructing a more positive narrative about public services.

We will also undertake a process of data gathering around the profiles of the public service workforce, and (if available) patterns of mobility between sectors so that we get a better picture of the nature of the present workforce.

We have also bid for funding from the ESRC to produce a knowledge-portal based on the idea of the twenty-first century public servant. If we are successful with this, the portal will encompass a range of different media aimed at supporting public servants, students and public service organisations. The above good practice documentation and data collection will feed into this portal and we hope to incorporate a range of perspectives from the public, private and third sectors.

If you are interested in offering an example of good practice or being involved in these further activities then please get in touch with the Public Service Academy via Liz Haydon (E.Haydon@bham.ac.uk).

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Appendix: List of Participants

21st Century Public Servant Roundtable

Deborah Cadman	Chief Executive, Suffolk County Council
Michael Coughlin	Executive Director, Local Government Association
Helen Dickinson	Director, Public Service Academy and Senior Lecturer in Health Policy and Management
Mark Grimley	PPMA; Assistant Director for HR and Organisational Development, Plymouth City Council
Stephen Hughes	Chief Executive, Birmingham City Council
Chris Keates	General Secretary, NASUWT
Catherine Mangan	Senior Fellow, Institute of Local Government Studies
Gareth Moss	Partnership Director, Serco Global Services – Public
Catherine Needham	Senior Lecturer in Public Policy and Public Management
Fiona Sheil	Public Service Delivery Network Officer, NCVO
Chris Skelcher	Professor of Public Governance, Institute of Local Government Studies
Philippa Tucker	Public Affairs Manager, Chartered Management Institute
Heather Wakefield	Head of Local Government, UNISON



