

<b>Institution:</b> University of Birmingham		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UoA 20, Social Work and Social Policy		
<b>Title of case study:</b> The 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Public Servant: Changing the Public Service Workforce		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2014-2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Catherine Needham	Professor of Public Policy and Public Management	2012-present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2014-2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Public Servant framework, developed by Catherine Needham (with Catherine Mangan and colleagues, UoA 19), has <b>changed understanding within public bodies on what a 'good public servant is'</b>, empowering public service workers to respond to new challenges around technology, citizen expectations and austerity. It has provided a blueprint that is being <b>taken up as best practice nationally</b>, including in over 100 councils, through changed job descriptions, the recognition of new roles and skills, and the development of new value frameworks. It has <b>underpinned a national 'Partners in Practice' scheme</b> which allows organisations to apply to the Local Government Association (LGA) which has been successfully piloted in two local authorities. Several national organisations (e.g., Public Health England, SOLACE and the LGA) have developed leadership programmes with curricula based directly on the research.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p><b>Context</b></p> <p>Five million people work for the public sector in the UK. This workforce is key to delivering the essential services on which the population relies. The context of public service delivery has been transformed in recent decades due to sustained austerity, increased localisation, greater demands for service user voice and control, increased public expectations and a mixed economy of welfare provision. Adapting to these new ways of working has been challenging due to insufficient recognition of the nature and drivers of change. A University of Birmingham Policy Commission in 2011 highlighted the challenges facing public services and the corresponding need for a different public service workforce. As a result, our research was undertaken to better enable public service workers to understand, and respond to, this changing context of public service work.</p> <p>In partnership with Birmingham City Council, and with funding from ESRC, we carried out interviews across a wide range of public services in England, including local government, health, police and fire services. We also conducted a survey of new entrants to local government. The research identified key contextual changes in public services and how the roles, skills and values of the public service workforce must be transformed in response to changing contexts. The resultant '21<sup>st</sup> Century Public Servant' framework identified ten key characteristics associated with the 21<sup>st</sup> century public service worker and challenged organisations to consider how to adapt practice to meet current and future needs. Crucially, the framework established an evidence base to improve workforce strategies and leadership development. Subsequently, this was extended through further fieldwork to encompass the roles, values and competencies of elected councillors in local government via the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Councillor framework.</p> <p><b>Key findings</b> from our research are:</p> <p><b>F1.</b> Changing citizen expectations, technological shifts and reduced funding have led to <b>new cultural values that are reshaping ethics, careers and identities</b> in public service work [R1,</p>		

R2, R3]. This poses three main challenges for public service workers, to which they need to adapt:

- Professional boundaries are being challenged by more open, immediate and informal ways of engaging with citizens [R1].
- Public service workers and councillors are expected to perform high levels of emotional labour within their roles, with a growing need for “soft skills” such as interpersonal and communication skills [R1, R2, R4, R5, R6].
- The expectation of being visible, available and prepared to interact with citizens in more informal ways is a cause of anxiety for workers and councillors, creating new support and training needs [R2, R6].

**F2. Workforce planning in public services needs to shift away from valuing people only according to their technical competence (e.g., planner, housing officer).** What is required instead is an approach that also utilises public servants’ skills in engaging with citizens and working across organisational boundaries, such as “storytelling” and “resource-weaving” [R1, R2].

- Practitioners need to adapt to new ways of working with citizens (“being human”), with a sensitivity to place (“officers are citizens too”), and adaptability to the current financial context (“perma-austerity”) [R1, R2].
- Councillors should develop their capacity to act as “stewards of place” [R4, R6].
- The move towards these ways of working will enable more effective inter-organisational collaboration, which is increasingly important in interconnected public service systems [R3].

**F3. Elected and appointed leaders within public services are poorly equipped to deal with the complexity of this public service context:**

- Too much emphasis is placed on “hero leadership”, emphasising the charisma and control of an individual, whereas effective public service requires leadership to be dispersed throughout the organisation [R5].
- Whilst traditional leadership skills are covered in existing training (e.g. management and financial responsibilities), there is insufficient training in relational, communicative and networking skills (e.g. resilience, system leadership). For councillors, training has reduced since 2008 and not all councils even offer basics such as induction programmes, buddying or mentoring schemes [R1, R4, R5].

**F4. Current models of leadership development must be refocused on distributed and collaborative models** of leading, which recognise the scope for people to lead at different levels of the organisation [R5].

- Reflective practice needs to be embedded in staff development so that leaders and other staff can cope better with the emotional aspects of their work [R1, R2].
- This includes councillors, whose leadership skills need to be developed within the specific context of local democratic decision-making [R4, R6].

### 3. References to the research

- R1.** Needham, C., and Mangan, C. (2014) *The Twenty-First Century Public Servant*, Birmingham: University of Birmingham. Available on [21<sup>st</sup> Century Public Servant website](#)
- R2.** Needham, C., and Mangan, C. (2016) ‘The Twenty-First Century Public Servant: working at three boundaries of public and private’, *Public Money and Management*, 36 (4): pp. 265–72. DOI: 10.1080/09540962.2016.1162592
- R3.** Needham, C., Mastracci, S., and Mangan, C. (2017) The emotional labour of boundary spanning, *Journal of Integrated Care*, 25 (4): 288–300. DOI: 10.1108/JICA-04-2017-0008
- R4.** Mangan, C., Needham, C., Bottom, K., and Parker, S. (2016) *The Twenty-First Century Councillor*, Birmingham: University of Birmingham. Available on the [21<sup>st</sup> Century Public Servant website](#)
- R5.** Dickinson, H., Needham, C., Mangan, C., and Sullivan, H. (eds) (2018) *Reimagining the future public service workforce*, Singapore: Springer.

**R6.** Needham, C., Mangan, C., Bottom, K., and Parker, S. (2020) 'Elected Officials in an era of austerity: stewards, mediators and catalysts', in Dickinson, H., and Sullivan, H. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of the Public Servant*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

#### **4. Details of the impact**

Through the research, we have **changed understanding within public bodies of what a good public servant is, and what qualities and aptitudes they need** to effectively perform in the contemporary context, leading to clear changes to **workforce planning and HR practice**. We have also **influenced the concept of what a good public sector leader is, and how they are developed and trained**.

##### **1. Changing understanding about the qualities and aptitudes of public servants**

We have **transformed the blueprint of what a “good public servant” is**. Before our intervention, there was a tendency in many public bodies to value technical and expert skills over generic, softer skills [F1]. This perception made it hard for some public servants, despite having a range of skills, to influence change or enact leadership. We have shown that this old model is ineffective and outdated and a new model of a public servant is needed, one which values “soft skills” [F1], engagement with citizens [F2], flexibility rather than role expertise, enabling the “resource-weaver” [F2], and collaborative and reflective leadership [F3, F4]. So effective has this intervention been that the Local Government Association (LGA) has become a champion for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Public Servant, describing it as **‘a blueprint — looking at skills, values, and identities of the future public service workforce’** [C1a]. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport cited the research in its *Enabling Social Action* report, as an example of leadership and culture change [C2].

Our model is being taken up as **best practice nationally**. The open source website, which provides practitioners quick and easy access to our materials in an accessible and appealing way has had 84,006 views from 41,027 visitors [C3]. With a social enterprise, we developed 21stC Public Servant playing cards which are a training tool to stimulate culture change in organisations. 422 packs have been sold to date.

That the model is **changing practice** is shown by the fact that, in 2018, at a 21st Century Public Servant conference run by the LGA, over 100 councils shared examples of how they used this work [C1b]. An external evaluation, commissioned by the University of Birmingham, found that local authorities describe adopting the model as a **culture change, ‘introducing a different way of talking about who we are and what we do’**, ‘building it into our DNA’ [C4]. One council reported, ‘We developed a **whole new set of values and behaviours** based on [the research]’ [C4]. Another council reported distilling the framework into six values: ‘these are on our screen savers [...] and on our lanyards.’ [C4, F1] ‘Significant changes in working practices and a major investment in staff training’ were reported in a council’s own appraisal of the impact [C5].

**As a result of the take up of our model, workforce planning has changed in a third of English higher-tier local authorities** (cities and counties), reaching a combined workforce of 407,000. For example, **job descriptions have changed**, to better fit the mixed roles which staff are undertaking; as one respondent said: ‘It has influenced our job descriptions a lot — they are now more generic and outcome-based’ [C4; F2]. 35 councils are using the research to **inform new roles and skills** [C4; F1, F2]. One council reported ‘we are redesigning our HR function and [the research] is in the centre of that’. Another council said it is ‘us[ing] the concepts extensively to **underpin our overall approach to people management and investment**.’ [C4]. The evaluation of the impact of the 21st Century Public Servant research found that its impact overall been **‘extensive’** and that, for a small number of councils, the impact has been **‘profound’** [C4]. A quarter of councils are able to evidence specific benefits to their organisation from the research; for metropolitan boroughs, 39% report significant benefit [C4].

The **widespread change in practice driven by the research is now being systematically embedded in a national scheme**. This ‘Partners into Practice’ scheme, which we have developed with the Local Government Association, enables local authorities to assess how far their staff are displaying the characteristics of a 21st Century Public Servant, and to develop

staff against this benchmark. This work began in 2016, when a national 21<sup>st</sup> Century Public Servant steering group was convened by the LGA, with the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE), the Public Service People Managers Association, and representatives from health, police and fire organisations. This resulted in a commissioned podcast and publication 'Walk Tall', explaining to public service organisations how to embed 21<sup>st</sup> Century Public Servant principles in frontline work [C6; F2]. According to the then Head of Workforce for the LGA, 'The reason we commissioned the ebook Walk Tall was because we were really impressed by the fantastic research that the University of Birmingham did to develop the concept of a 21st Century Public Servant' [C1c]. The Partners into Practice scheme has been trialled by 2 councils (Wigan and Colchester), with a combined workforce of over 10,000 staff. The trialling period has spanned the Covid-19 pandemic. According to Naomi Cooke, current Head of Workforce Strategy for the LGA, 'We have piloted it with two local authorities who have confirmed that this has been really helpful to them in encouraging staff to work differently and to engage better with communities. In particular, they found it helped the Covid-19 response by encouraging staff to take more autonomy and trust their communities. One council told us that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Public Servant approach was 'spot on' when it came to dealing with Covid. [C1b]

## **2. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Public Servant framework has transformed leadership development and training of public service leaders**

We have **changed the understanding of what a good public service leader is and how they should be developed and trained**. Prior to our research, the traditional model of a charismatic hero leader was prevalent within public sector organisations [F2]. Our research has challenged that model and affirmed the importance of dispersed, collaborative and agile leadership. As one senior manager said 'Our lightbulb moment from the research was that **effective leaders can be anyone**' [F4; C4]. Of the 59 councils who reported a 'significant benefit' from the 21st Century Public Servant framework, 47 councils said the most significant benefit was leadership development [F3, F4; C4]. The framework is 'help[ing] leadership teams to think about how they operate in a different world', reported one council. Our influence has been on elected leaders as well as appointed managers. A partnership with regional workforce body North West Employers led to the **co-creation of a 360-degree feedback tool for councillors**. This has been used by a network of North-West councils to identify and address the skills development needs of elected council leaders [C7].

National government has welcomed our intervention, with Mangan invited to join the Expert Advisory Group for the Cabinet Office's National Leadership Centre. Our research underpins the **curriculum of two key programmes** specified in the 2019/20 Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the LGA to improve the skills of the local government workforce in England [C8], and a **third leadership programme commissioned by Public Health England** [F4].

1. **The Society of Local Government Chief Executive's (SOLACE) Total Leadership programme** has been redesigned using our framework. This programme develops senior public service workers' skills to enable them to become local government chief executives [C9a; F4]. According to the SOLACE Head of Leadership, the research 'has resonated so directly with practitioners at all levels of organisations. I have noted in particular that it has had an impact on helping individuals both to see themselves as leaders in their organisations, and to see the values of collaborative leadership' [C9a]. From three cohorts of 45 each, nine participants have secured their first chief executive role, eight as council chief executives and one as chief executive of a national education organisation [C9b].
2. **The LGA's National Graduate Development Programme (NGDP)** has been redesigned on the basis of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Public Servant framework. This prestigious national programme, equivalent to the Fast Stream for the Civil Service, recruits up to 200 graduates joining local government each year; recruited on their potential to become senior leaders. Feedback from participants illustrates our impact; for example, one participant stated 'the NGDP has given my career in Local Government a strong start and is helping me become a "21st Century public servant" with greater commercial awareness, diverse experience, flexibility and strong collaboration skills' [C1d; F2].

**3. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Public Servant Leadership Programme for Aspiring Directors of Public Health** was first commissioned by Public Health England in 2016 and was awarded to the University of Birmingham because it wanted our framework to be the basis for the programme. The programme has since been re-commissioned twice. Its programme is given as a best-practice example in an NHS Improvement Report [C10]. To date, 45 people have participated in the programme across two cohorts, with the main outcome for them being the ability to apply the principles of system leadership into their work [F4]. Follow-up data on participants of this programme found that from the first cohort, six have been promoted into the Director of Public Health role, with two others securing deputy director roles, since completing the programme [confidential material, available on request].

#### **5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

##### **C1. LGA evidence:**

- a. Local Government Association (2018), *Great people for growing places*, LGA [Available as PDF]
- b. Testimonial from Head of Workforce, LGA (10<sup>th</sup> December 2020) [Available as PDF]
- c. [LGA Podcast transcript](#) [Available as PDF]
- d. [LGA National Graduate Development Programme case study](#) [Available as PDF]

**C2** Department for Culture, Media and Sport report, *Enabling Social Action*, 2018 [Available as PDF]

**C3.** Screenshot of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Public Servant website usage statistics (8<sup>th</sup> January 2021) [Available as PDF]

**C4.** Mckenna, D. (2018) *Impact Evaluation of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Public Servant Research on Principal Councils in the UK: Findings Report*, Birmingham: University of Birmingham [Available as PDF]

**C5.** South Staffordshire Council Efficiency and Income Plan, 2015–2020 [Available as PDF]

**C6.** 'Walk Tall' ebook (2016) [Available as PDF]

**C7.** Testimonial from Chief Executive, North West Employers (17<sup>th</sup> December 2020) [Available as PDF]

**C8:** Memorandum of Understanding from Ministry of CLGH to LGA, 2019–20 [Available as PDF]

##### **C9. SOLACE evidence**

- a. Testimonial from Head of Leadership and Organisational Development, SOLACE (19<sup>th</sup> October 2020) [Available as PDF]
- b. SOLACE, [Total Leadership programme overview](#) [Available as PDF]

**C10.** NHS Improvement report, *Developing People Improving Care Together: 1 Year On*, 2018 [Available as PDF]