



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Revisiting the 21st Century Public Servant

Summary report

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We advance
We activate

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About the research

Our 21st Century Public Servant research, originally published in 2014, highlighted the roles, skills, values and ethics of people working in public services. Ten years on we have updated that research, mirroring the original research design:

Rapid evidence appraisal: A desk-based review of academic and practice literatures identified the state of knowledge about public service professionals. This included the competencies and capacities that they require and how those are currently developed. This is available on the 21st Century Public servant website. <https://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com>

Primary data collection: Interviews were conducted with people working in the public sector (e.g. local authority, health, fire, police). This was a purposive sample identified through our partner organisations (Local Government Association (LGA), Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) and West Midlands Employers (WME). Through 31 interviews and 1 focus group we gathered perspectives of current public servants on how their 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. A questionnaire was sent to recent recruits and alumni from the National Graduate Development Programme for local government, and we received 24 responses.



The following research questions ran through the different phases of the work:

- What are the different roles of the 21st Century public servant?
- What are the competencies and skills that public servants require to fulfil 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 have presented the findings of the project as a series of characteristics of the 21st Century Public Servant.

The research was funded by the University of Birmingham. We are grateful to our partners – LGA, SOLACE and WME. Their invaluable feedback has helped to ensure that our findings are timely and relevant for the sector.

Executive summary

Local public services have been at the forefront of the most significant changes to our communities and ways of life over the past decade. The workforce has had to contend with the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent recovery. There have been changes in work patterns and lifestyles, levels of social cohesion, the 'great resignation', and ongoing changes to the ways in which employees want to engage with employers and their workplaces. This report looks at how public servants can thrive in this new environment.

What does it mean to be a 21st Century Public Servant?

This was the question we asked when we published 'The 21st Century Public Servant' in 2014. In that report we looked at how the public service workforce was changing, and what further changes would be needed to develop effective public servants. That project identified key contextual changes in public services and how the roles, skills and values of the public service workforce needed to be transformed in response. The resultant '21st Century Public Servant' framework set out ten key themes associated with being a public servant and challenged organisations to consider how to adapt practice to meet current and future needs.

What has stayed the same and what has changed?

Those ten themes still resonate in public life: citizen expectations of public servants continue to evolve;

technology brings new opportunities and risks; public service skills, roles and careers are more fluid than a generation ago.

Our new research has also identified distinctive challenges from the past decade:

- **Perma-austerity** has deepened with sustained underfunding of public services
- **Communities are in distress**, moving from the pandemic straight into the cost of living crisis
- **Incivility in public life** has grown with rising issues of abuse and harassment for those working in public services
- The rising profile of **equality, diversity and inclusion** has drawn attention to how public services systematically fail some employees and citizens.
- **Remote working** can enhance individual flexibility and productivity but comes with risks of isolation and team underperformance.

See overleaf for the 10 new characteristics of the 21st Century Public Servant.

Next steps

The full report and further resources are available on our website: <https://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com>

The characteristics set out in the report aim to support individual and organisational development.

Individual skills development – people working in public services can assess which of these ten characteristics they already feel confident in and where they might want further support. The characteristics can support conversations in mentoring, coaching and appraisals.

Organisational development – within organisations, leaders and teams can think about how to build systems and cultures that foster these characteristics. This can support recruitment, retention, progression and staff development.

We have developed coaching resources based on the characteristics which you can get by contacting Catherine Needham, University of Birmingham, c.needham.1@bham.ac.uk

The ten characteristics of the 21st Century public Servant now

From our literature review and interviews we identified ten characteristics which we have themed into three areas:

Working with complexity



Operating at the thick end of the **complexity** wedge (the easy work has already been done)



Thinking **whole system** (taking a long-term and strategic view, despite daily pressures)



A **sense-exchanger** (going beyond sense-making to help others to understand and influence)

Developing and valuing new ways of working



A **relationship curator** (connecting with residents, colleagues, councillors and partners with empathy and compassion)



Ambidextrous (combining expertise in a professional domain with the ability to lead across services)



Multi-lingual (able to communicate in different ways, depending on the audience)



A **frugal innovator** (weaving together resources from threadbare public services)

Thriving in the new environment



Data curious and digitally comfortable (making the most of big data and embracing AI)



A **hybrid operator** (connecting in person, on-line, from their kitchen table, in the community)



A **hardy perennial** (keeping going in harsh conditions)