

CONFERENCE ABSTRACT

The 21st century public servant - what roles and skills do we need from public servants to deliver better outcomes for citizens?

17th International Conference on Integrated Care, Dublin, 08-10 May 2017

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Introduction: The session will report findings from research on the 21st century public servant, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The project built on 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. The research is now influencing the development of policy and practice within local public services including social care, health, police and fire services in the UK.

Theory/Methods: The research comprised a review of the international literature followed by 40 semi-structured interviews with people working in a purposive sample of public services in the West Midlands region of England. National figures working in public services were also interviewed. A survey of a cohort of recent graduates on the National Graduate Development Programme for local government was conducted. Interviewees were drawn from organisations in the public, private and third sectors, reflecting the mixed market of providers of public services.

Results: The research identified 10 themes which exemplify the emerging expectations and challenges for people working in local public services. These included:

a new set of roles for the workforce (such as municipal entrepreneur, storyteller and resource weaver),

the need for a new way of working with citizens ('being human'),

a combination of softer skills alongside professional, technical skills

the need to combine public service ethos with a sense of commerciality

new collaborative leadership skills, moving away from 'hero' leaders

Discussions: The research suggests that there is a need to recruit, develop and support public servants in different ways in future. The new roles and skills that are needed to work in collaborative, integrated ways with a range of organisations, and with residents, are currently lacking.

Conclusions (comprising key findings): 21st century public servants are often working in 19th century style organisations where incentives, development opportunities and performance management frameworks do not support the development of new skills and roles that are needed to work in collaborative ways, both across organisations and with citizens. The research is of direct relevance to those organisations seeking to develop a workforce that is able to deliver integrated, collaborative services to achieve improved outcomes for citizens.

Lessons learned: Although the research was carried out across a wide range of public services the workforce challenges are similar for all organisations.

Limitations: The interviews were carried out with 40 people in the West Midlands, so the findings may only be applicable within this region. However, the researchers have spoken to over 100 organisations about the research and the response suggests that the findings are relevant across all regions and across a range of public services.

Suggestions for future research: The research has been extended to study the roles and skills of elected members. The missing part of the 'triangle' is to study the role of the citizen in terms of working in a collaborative way with public services to achieve improved outcomes.

Keywords: workforce; integration; skills
