

Revisiting the
21st Century
Public Servant



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WELCOME

These cards have been produced as part of the Revisiting the 21st Century Public Servant project.

The deck includes:

- 5 challenge cards
- 10 characteristic cards
- 30 question cards

They have been designed to support self-reflection, mentoring and coaching and you can use them however you want. We have included a few activity cards in case you would like some suggestions.

We hope you find them helpful!

OUR THANKS

Revisiting the 21st Century Public Servant was funded by the University of Birmingham.

We are grateful to our partners – the Local Government Association, SOLACE and West Midlands Employers. Their invaluable feedback has helped to ensure that the research is timely and relevant for the sector.

Illustrations are by Laura Brodrick,
www.thinkbigpicture.co.uk

REVISITING THE 21ST CENTURY PUBLIC SERVANT

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, in levels of social cohesion and in the ways in which employees want to engage with employers and their workplaces. This research looks at how public servants can thrive in this new environment.

You can find the report and summary at:
<https://21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com/>

CHALLENGE

PERMA-AUSTERITY



Austerity has deepened with sustained underfunding of public services.

- Councils struggling to meet even statutory requirements
 - Services pared back
 - Local amenities being closed
- Added pressure on public servants
- Short term transactional approaches instead of long-term prevention

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CHALLENGE

COMMUNITIES IN DISTRESS



Communities moving from the pandemic straight into the cost-of-living crisis.

- Intensification of poverty and destitution
 - Worsening inequalities in health and wellbeing
 - Risks from climate change and extreme weather
- More cases (and cases that are more complex) creating a feedback loop of crisis management, with issues only temporarily resolved

CHALLENGE

INCIVILITY IN PUBLIC LIFE



Incivility has grown with rising issues of abuse and harassment for those working in public services.

- Citizens becoming more demanding
 - Citizens are less patient and, at times, abusive
- Social media allows expression of frustration and anger in a public arena
 - Emotional stress and concerns about personal safety affect the wellbeing of public servants

CHALLENGE

EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION



The rising profile of equality, diversity and inclusion has drawn attention to how public services systematically fail some employees and citizens.

- The landscape around equality, diversity and inclusion issues is much more visible
- Demands for more awareness and training
- Less time spent with citizens can reduce attention paid to these issues
 - The politics of culture and identity are more complex
- Pushbacks against a perceived 'woke' agenda

CHALLENGE

REMOTE WORKING



Remote working can enhance individual flexibility and productivity but comes with risks of isolation and team underperformance.

- Pandemic accelerated transition to online delivery models
- May limit relationship-based practice
- May reduce time spent with citizens
- Negative effect on worker self-care
- Difficulties establishing relationships at work
- Risk of inequitable working arrangements

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ACTIVITY

PEER COACHING

Guide time 20-30 mins

1. For two or more people, to offer mutual support and development.
2. Separate out the 30 question cards, shuffle them and place the deck face down.
3. Take turns to take the top card and ask the question. Set timer and aim to spend 3-5 minutes on each question.
4. Listen carefully to the answer and summarise back.
5. Ask follow-ups to explore the answer. For example, 'what else?', 'how might you do more of that?', 'what do you notice that others find helpful for this?' or 'what might be the next step?'.
6. Swap over.
7. Enjoy the conversation!

ACTIVITY

SOLUTION CIRCLE

Guide time 20-40 mins

1. You can do this alone, but it works best with conversation.
2. Write down your challenge and place it on the table.
3. Place the 10 characteristic cards in a circle around the challenge.
4. Ask 'which characteristics will help to solve this challenge?'.
5. Move the 'helpful' cards closer to the challenge and discuss how each might help in turn.
6. Ask 'what characteristics, that might help, are missing?'.
7. Add and discuss your new characteristic(s).
8. Enjoy the conversation!

ACTIVITY

INDIVIDUAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Guide time 15-30 mins

Public servants can use these with others to work out what they are already good at, and where they might want to develop. These can be used in mentoring, coaching and appraisals. Spread the 10 characteristic cards on the table and have a conversation about:

1. Which of these 10 characteristics are important to your role?
2. Which ones are you good at already?
3. Which ones do you need support to improve?
4. How might you get that support (within your organisation or externally)?

ACTIVITY

MEET THE CHALLENGE

Guide time 20-30 mins

1. For either self-reflection or work in a pair/ team.
2. Select one of the challenge cards to consider.
3. Take the 10 characteristic cards and be ready to arrange them in three rows – a top row of three, a middle row of four and a bottom row of three – so that the 'most important' are at the top and the 'least important' are at the bottom.
4. Arrange the characteristic cards in response to the following two questions:
 - Which characteristics are the most important to meeting this challenge? For me? For my team?
 - Which characteristics do I/we need to work on most?
5. Consider what was learnt and what the next steps might be.

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CHARACTERISTIC

The 21st Century public servant is
**Operating at the thick end
of the complexity wedge**



Increased demand, tighter eligibility - and the 'easy work' being done by self-service and AI - makes complexity the new normal for public servants. Whatever the challenge, the public servant must find the best interventions or risk the same issues presenting time and time again.

In practice

- Holding the issue rather than the solution
 - Gaining insights through listening and conversations
- Building loose teams to develop interventions

QUESTION



**What have been your
successful strategies for
dealing with the increased
complexity of the
issues in your inbox?**

Operating at the thick end of the complexity wedge

QUESTION



**What do you do that helps
you to develop useful
interventions for people?**

Operating at the thick end of the complexity wedge

QUESTION



**How will you make
the case for spending time
on complex issues when
the outcomes can be so
hard to measure?**

Operating at the thick end of the complexity wedge

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CHARACTERISTIC

The 21st Century public servant is
Thinking whole system



The daily pressures of an increasing - and increasingly complex - workload can make it hard to take a long term and strategic view. Public servants nevertheless need to develop strategies for the long-term, whilst being ready for short-term volatility and unforeseen outcomes.

In practice

- Holding conversations that provide a system perspective
- Working with partners on system-wide goals
- Sitting with the discomfort of unpredictability

QUESTION



Describe an example of when you've been able to take a long-term and whole system approach despite daily pressures

Thinking whole system

QUESTION



What helps you to be calm and constructive even when your plans have unpredicted outcomes?

Thinking whole system

QUESTION



How do you support others to take a system-wide view when organisational norms and behaviours can be so strong?

Thinking whole system

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CHARACTERISTIC

The 21st Century public servant is
A sense exchanger



Thriving within complex public service systems requires powerful story telling. Public servants must also appreciate how the world looks from the perspective of others and develop a shared understanding of how to move forward on issues.

In practice

- Starting from 'how does the world look to them'
 - Expressing vulnerability
- Recognising you only have part of the picture

QUESTION



What are five things you say and do that let people know you are interested in their perspective?

A sense exchanger

QUESTION



Can you describe a time you have developed a narrative with others that helped to support a positive change?

A sense exchanger

QUESTION



What are three things you have changed your mind about because you listened to the perspective of others?

A sense exchanger

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CHARACTERISTIC

The 21st Century public servant is
A relationship curator

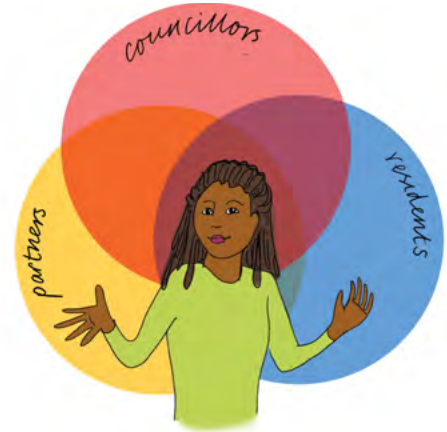


Complex challenges need relational working, as transactional approaches will not be effective. Even though organisations can make it difficult to find the time, public servants must put their connections with residents, senior leaders, councillors and partners at the heart of their work.

In practice

- Showing your humanity
- Demonstrating empathy and compassion
- Building relationships through many interactions over time

QUESTION



Give 3-5 behaviours that demonstrate your empathy and compassion to others?

A relationship curator

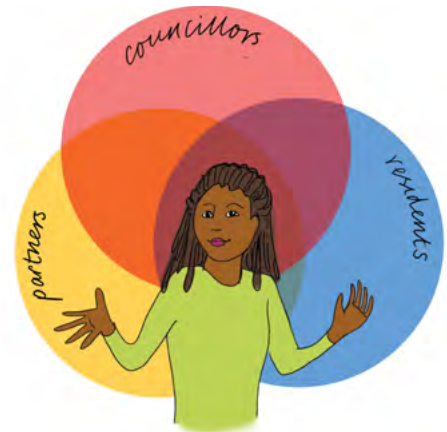
QUESTION



What are your most effective strategies for maintaining relationships with citizens or colleagues over time?

A relationship curator

QUESTION



How do you help others to see the importance of building relationships?

A relationship curator

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CHARACTERISTIC

The 21st Century public servant is
Ambidextrous



The complex and systemic nature of public services mean that public servants can no longer choose between being a specialist and a generalist, they must be both.

In practice

- Offering professional expertise in a partnership context
- Leading across services
- Demonstrating leadership soft skills

QUESTION



What helps you to work effectively with those outside of your specialism?

Ambidextrous

QUESTION



How do you maintain professional expertise whilst being pragmatic when working outside your specialism?

Ambidextrous

QUESTION



What are five things you would be pleased to hear people say about you as a representative of your specialism?

Ambidextrous

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CHARACTERISTIC

The 21st Century public servant is
Multilingual



The world of public service is a complex one that requires working with citizens and across different organisational cultures. The public servant must be able to communicate effectively in any setting and also help others to communicate.

In practice

- Being easily understood by citizens
- Speaking different organisational languages
 - Acting as an interpreter across organisational boundaries

QUESTION



**How proficient are you
in the different professional
languages you encounter
in your work?**

Multilingual

QUESTION



**How do you translate
professional language into
something the public
can engage with?**

Multilingual

QUESTION



**What's something you
might do to gain the
professional language skills
you currently lack?**

Multilingual

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CHARACTERISTIC

The 21st Century public servant is
A frugal innovator

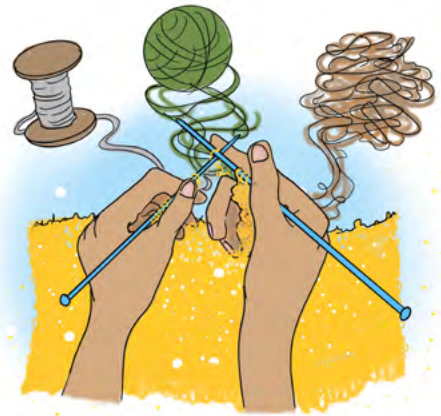


Perma-austerity makes everything harder for the public servant. As increasing pressure on core funding makes it difficult to innovate, they must nevertheless weave together resources from threadbare public services.

In practice

- Generating income from external funders
- Horizon scanning for opportunities
- Working with community assets

QUESTION



What strategies do you use to ensure that you are aware of new funding and resources?

A frugal innovator

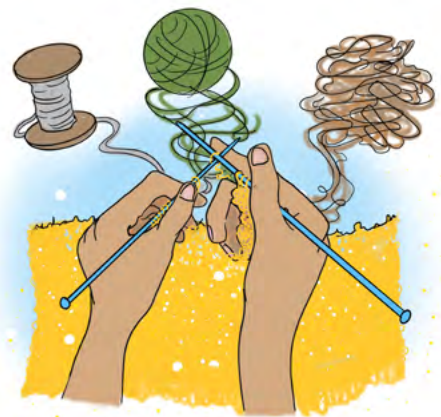
QUESTION



Your team has a new project idea but no new resources. What are five avenues you might explore with them?

A frugal innovator

QUESTION



What's your favourite example of a project that was resourced in an innovative way?

A frugal innovator

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CHARACTERISTIC

The 21st Century public servant is
**Data curious and
digitally comfortable**



In the rapidly changing world of work, the public servant is making the most of big data and embracing AI. Real time data now has the potential to paint an accessible picture of what is happening for communities, enabling rapid adjustment.

In practice

- Using self-service data to make decisions
- Being curious about what data might be available
 - Asking the right questions of the data

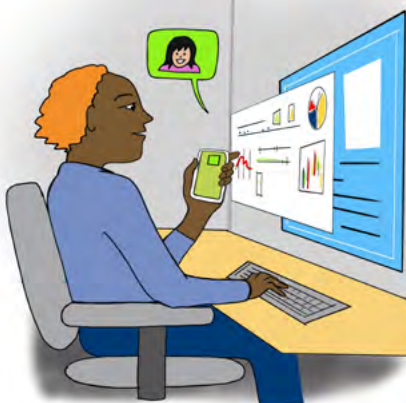
QUESTION



**What are five things
that give you confidence
that you can use data
effectively for your work?**

Data curious and digitally comfortable

QUESTION



**If you could magically
ask for something to help you
to make better use of data,
what would it be?**

Data curious and digitally comfortable

QUESTION



**What's something useful
that AI might help you to
do in future that you
can't do now?**

Data curious and digitally comfortable

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CHARACTERISTIC

The 21st Century public servant is
A hybrid operator



Post-Covid, working from the office is no longer the default it once was. Instead, the public servant must be equally comfortable connecting in person, on-line, from their kitchen table or in the community.

In practice

- Benefitting from the flexibility of home working
 - Ensuring a connection with the team
- Contributing to organisational life and culture

QUESTION



What are your strategies for boosting your wellbeing when working virtually, at home?

A hybrid operator

QUESTION



How might a team manage and maintain supportive relationships in the context of hybrid working?

A hybrid operator

QUESTION



How would you sell the benefits of hybrid working to a sceptical colleague?

A hybrid operator

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CHARACTERISTIC

The 21st Century public servant is
A hardy perennial



Despite the harsh conditions associated with perma-austerity and other challenges, the 21st Century public servant is a hardy perennial who keeps going. Surviving and even thriving means finding different ways to stay positive and motivated.

In practice

- Working to manageable and balanced workloads and within reasonable hours
- Drawing on personal values and a public service ethos
- Benefitting from appropriate supervision, coaching and peer support

QUESTION



What self care routines have helped you to be at your best when facing a difficult task?

A hardy perennial

QUESTION



What personal values do you hope will shape your approach to your next big work challenge?

A hardy perennial

QUESTION



Describe a time when you had a difficult challenge at work, and a conversation helped you to resolve it.

A hardy perennial