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The New Zealand Public Service Response to Covid-19

Abstract

The New Zealand public service faced an unprecedented challenge in 2020. The focus of this article is on what the Covid-19 experience can tell us about the strengths of the public service, and whether the course that we have set for the future, enshrined through the Public Service Act 2020, is the right one. The established directions of public service change helped the Covid response: functional leadership made a definite contribution; dispersed leadership roles proved their worth; the deepening experience of inter-agency collaboration over the past decade cannot be proved to have contributed, but it seems reasonable to conclude that it did. Public servants proved willing to behave as participants in a single service rather than employees of a single agency, living up to the more complete view of human motivation reflected in the Public Service Act. The article concludes with some observations on the importance of interoperability for the future public service, and on the implications the strong Māori response to Covid-19 may have for the public service of the future.

Keywords public service reform, Covid response, spirit of service, trust, integrity, collaboration

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The New Zealand public service faced an unprecedented challenge in 2020. Delivering New Zealand's response to the Covid-19 pandemic has been multi-faceted and complex, and is ongoing. There is no part of the public service that has not been affected.

While Covid-19 dominated the nation's thoughts, another event quietly occurred in 2020 that has significance for the public service: the passage of the first major rewrite of the legislation underpinning the service for 30 years. The Public Service Act 2020 marks a milestone in the evolution of the New Zealand public service. It reconfirms and codifies the purpose and principles of the service and provides new tools to enable it to continue to improve results.

This brief article does not attempt to do justice to the whole public service Covid-19 effort in either breadth or detail. Rather, the focus here is on what the experience can tell us about the strengths of the public service, and whether the course that we have set for the future, enshrined through the Public Service Act 2020, remains relevant and appropriate.

The current direction for public service change will be familiar to most readers of *Policy Quarterly*:

- an emphasis on the public service as a single, linked system with a common culture;
- maintaining the ethical foundations of the system based on the spirit of service;
- building and supporting the relationships of the Crown with Māori;
- a focus on outcomes and on cross-agency working to achieve results;
- leadership of the public service as a single system, and dispersed cross-system leadership roles for aspects of its work;
- flexibility in organisational arrangements and facilitation of workforce mobility across the system.

The emphasis on a single system, aligned and yet agile, collaborating to deliver outcomes, represents a gradual shift away from the highly devolved, and therefore somewhat siloed, approach that emerged from the New Public Management approach of the late 1980s. A further compelling rationale for making this shift is the changing world that we live in, one where communication is constant, rapid and diffuse, and where citizens have different expectations regarding the level and type of engagement they can have with decision makers. Increasingly, the public service is working in a dynamic environment where demands shift, sometimes very rapidly, and where ways of working need to change and adapt.

In terms of this agility challenge, an unprecedented and sudden external shock like Covid-19 is almost the ultimate challenge: major and serious, and broad in the sense of its breadth of impact – health, economic, social wellbeing. Moreover, the crisis was not ‘out there’, and in this respect was quite different from other crises the public service has had to respond to in the past. Previous economic shocks, like the global financial crisis or the earlier Asian financial crisis, whatever their broad social and economic impact, did not directly impact on the ability of the public service to deliver. Natural disasters, like cyclone Bola or the Canterbury earthquakes, have localised impacts on public service delivery. Covid-19 affected every part of the entire New Zealand public service’s ability to operate and continue both normal and

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Covid-19-related activity. It was not only a crisis ‘out there’, but was very much ‘in here’.

The emergency phase of the Covid-19 experience in New Zealand presented multiple challenges for the public service. How did it perform and what does this tell us about the strengths of the system, and the direction in which we need to evolve into the future?

The spirit of service

The obvious and outstanding feature highlighted in the response was the strength of the underlying spirit of service among public servants. Departments consistently reported staff in important or vital roles working in difficult circumstances, experiencing extreme pressure to deliver in short time frames despite upheaval to location, work hours and technology, and with concurrent disruption in their family and home life. They shared stories of staff going above and beyond despite these barriers.

Historically, the spirit of service has tended to be assumed rather than actively cultivated. To some extent it is part and parcel of New Zealand’s culture: characteristic of a society with strong social cohesion, a collectivist ethic, and an emphasis on fairness and responsibility in public discourse (Scott and Merton, forthcoming). In recent years, there has been stronger recognition of the need to more actively foster and celebrate the spirit

of service, starting at the highest levels of senior management (Scott and Macaulay, 2020). This was mentioned in the purpose of the State Sector Act 1988, but not backed with any specific obligation until the Public Service Act was passed. The role of senior public service leaders is to nurture, preserve and maintain the spirit of service. The Covid-19 experience shows how this can be achieved into the future, by empowering staff and removing barriers that impede their ability to serve New Zealanders.

The extraordinary Covid-19 experience for the community meant that there was significant public recognition of the efforts made by public servants. This is part of another key feature of the response: trust.

Public trust

The second outstanding feature of the public service response to Covid-19 was the extent to which it both depended on, and contributed to, the high level of trust in government. New Zealanders trusted their public officials and agencies to tell the truth. So, when they received clear information about the evidence underlying the policies of the public health response, they bought into the solution.

Trust in government helped achieve results for New Zealand through the high level of voluntary compliance with level 3 and 4 restrictions. The link between trust and voluntary compliance is well-established across a range of policy areas (Scott and Merton, forthcoming; Murphy, 2004; Grimes, 2006). This allowed the public service response to be built on voluntary compliance with very little enforcement, let alone prosecution, needed. Resentment against government-imposed ‘restrictions’ never gained much traction, and the public service was able to assume a positive character as a helper and enabler of the society’s wellbeing, rather than the negative cast that it sometimes acquired elsewhere.

Survey results indicate that trust levels hit a record high during the pandemic, but New Zealand has historically consistent high levels of public trust. This doesn’t happen by accident. The currency of trust has two sides to its coin, integrity and delivery. New Zealanders need to trust that the public service will deliver to their needs, and that this will be done in a way that reflects their expectations. This is consistent

with international research – for example, with the OECD trust framework, which refers to ‘competences’ (responsiveness and reliability) and ‘values’ (integrity, openness and fairness) (OECD, 2017, Box 4.4, p.142).

In New Zealand’s Covid-19 response we saw expert, professional voices being heard and believed by the public. Ministerial communications during the crisis phase were backed by high-profile expert public service communications, most notably from the director-general of health and senior officials of the Covid-19 All-of-Government Response Group located in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. In this context, we saw tangible recognition of the value of those same principles that were codified in the Public Service Act: public servants are appointed on merit, have a legal duty to be politically neutral, are expected to provide free and frank advice to elected officials and are mandated as stewards of the public service.

The challenge in this is always to be worthy of continued trust; to act in a way that adds to the fund of trust ‘capital’ in the system, rather than burning through it. Communications from public service leaders, backed by a range of information and advice from departments, were successful. The overwhelming impression was one of professionalism in style, competence in content, and timeliness in securing and providing information. Of course, there were instances where information was incomplete or contained errors, and where communications were inconsistent from various sources. Both the public and ministers seemed to accept these as inevitable shortcomings, understandable in the circumstances.

The New Zealand public service operates from a strong basis in integrity, for which we have a well-documented and deserved international reputation. Integrity concerns were not a feature of the Covid response. Historically, integrity has been another taken-for-granted aspect of our public service. It is now becoming an area of greater focus as we appreciate how significant a role it has played in enabling a successful pandemic response, and the huge opportunity cost of a loss of confidence in the integrity of the public service. It underlines the need for continued investment in this area.

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Shifting to new ways of working

Public service delivery was challenged as never before in that Covid-19 posed a threat not only to the provision of services, but to the very ability of public service agencies to continue operating. For most agencies, Covid-19 meant providing employees with the means to work from home if services were to be maintained at anything like normal levels.

Working from home presented a range of issues. Equipment often could not be transferred home from the workplace. There were issues with IT connectivity. People’s homes are generally not set up for ergonomic working. Managing teams remotely presented its own challenges, as did the need to prioritise when not all normal work could continue. And, as noted above, there were concerns for employee welfare and wellbeing, given isolation and other factors. However, the scale of the achievement should not be underestimated. At one point, 4,000 Inland Revenue staff were working from home. All Ministry of Education staff were at home by 17 April.

In facing these challenges, agencies found that it didn’t make sense to work alone. The legacy of the highly devolved approach to the delivery of services meant that different agencies faced different challenges around the shift to digital and remote working. At the same time, the changes that have been made over the last decade to align systems and develop ways of sharing expertise across the system through the creation of functional leadership roles were critical to supporting agencies to adjust.

The government chief digital officer – Paul James, Department of Internal Affairs – had a key system role during Covid-19, supporting government agencies to maintain critical digital services and continue to deliver for New Zealanders during the response. The government chief digital officer also partnered with other government departments and vendors to ensure that available digital resources were directed to the areas of greatest need across government.

The Digital Public Service branch in the Department of Internal Affairs also helped the progression and delivery of digital services for New Zealanders during the Covid-19 response. This included:

- working closely with government agencies to support them in implementing remote working;
- supporting key agencies providing critical services around health, education, welfare, and law and order;
- rapidly scaling up the infrastructure to support the government’s main Unite against Covid-19 website, using cloud services (Common Web Platform and Amazon Web Services) to ensure that it remained up and running even under heavy demand;
- contributing to the National Crisis Management Centre’s response and delivering subsequent joint Health/Government Digital Services reports back on technology options to improve contact tracing, manage self-isolation, and monitor population movements and disease spread.

Some very complex and difficult pieces of work were delivered by agencies during the Covid-19 lockdown. The delivery of the wage subsidy is probably the outstanding example. Within ten days of announcement, almost 200,000 applications covering

460,000 jobs had been paid out at a time when the Ministry of Social Development was already under pressure from increasing numbers seeking hardship, benefit and employment assistance. And some elements of business-as-usual activity faced great difficulties: two public service payroll runs were completed by public servants working from home.

Moving forward, there is now even greater recognition of the value of interoperable technology and platforms. In tackling a challenge like Covid-19, leveraging the power of the whole system outweighed the previous focus on agency-specific needs.

System-wide flexibility

Innovation and improvisation to enable the public service response to Covid-19 were evident not only at the level of the individual department, but across agencies and also on a system-wide basis. A public service history of working to improve collaborative capacity paired with public servants' intrinsic motivation to innovate, despite the difficult conditions, was evident (Scott and Boyd, 2020).

The response was not managed through the usual agency-specific mechanisms but co-ordinated through the specifically created Covid-19 All-of-Government Response Group, and led by officials selected for their expertise and seconded from a range of departments.

Departments assisted each other, including by transferring workload (especially in the case of call centres), sharing expert capability where possible, and redeploying staff. There were significant redeployments among large operational departments; staff with policy and strategy skills were moved into 'front-line' departments; executive assistants were processing wage subsidy applications; and in at least one case public servants were deployed to an emergency service outside government. Guidelines for the system set in place common ways of working and basic rules for secondments and deployment that fast-tracked agreements and smoothed working arrangements. The Office of the Auditor-General stepped in to support agencies to use appropriations more flexibly under the Public Finance Act, to reduce the need for elaborate arrangements of

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transferring funding when staff were deployed to different short-term functions.

At a cross-agency level, new forms of collaboration were needed and put in place. The Ministry of Health, New Zealand Police, New Zealand Defence Force and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade worked to establish the Whangaparāoa Reception Centre as a dedicated quarantine facility – a first for New Zealand – with design and implementation occurring between 31 January and 5 February. The obvious priority for this initiative was the protection of the wider community from the virus. These agencies also placed an equal focus on the welcome being provided to those arriving back in New Zealand, with staff being told to treat every returnee as though they were their own auntie – another example of a uniquely New Zealand response at work, and consistent with the values enshrined in the Public Service Act.

Over a period of 18 days, Inland Revenue and the Treasury designed and implemented the loan scheme for small business owners that helped over 92,000 small business owners manage through the Covid-19 crisis. For this project, policy design, legislation, system and contract development and software development all had to be done concurrently.

As we move beyond the initial emergency response, and ensure that we have the best systems and processes to succeed in a world defined by Covid-19 for the next 12–18 months (at least), the Public Service Act has also enabled the public service to build on collaborative efforts. Since early 2020, border agencies have worked closely together to manage the novel challenges of a closed border with managed isolation and quarantine requirements. In January 2021, these working arrangements were enshrined in an interdepartmental executive board under the new Act. This enables these arrangements to be sustained over time, enables shared 'neutral' resources to support collaborative efforts, and provides a platform for shared border infrastructure in the future.

Not only did the central government 'outgrow the silos', but the relationship with local government was strengthened. As Mike Reid wrote in the August 2020 issue of *Policy Quarterly*, 'institutional arrangements [were] quickly put in place that enabled a joined-up response from both local and central government' (Reid, *Policy Quarterly*, 16 (3), p.42). The August lockdown in Auckland also demonstrated the ability of agencies to mobilise community support. The Ministry for Pacific Peoples worked in partnership with Pacific community groups and key stakeholders to find out where support and assistance was needed, and to help individuals and families get access to information in multiple Pacific languages on testing stations, foodbanks and financial assistance.

When public servants are asked about the success of these collaborations, they often refer to the strength of a clear and common goal as a key enabler. When facing immediate challenges of the type thrown up by Covid-19, these goals are obvious and less likely to be crowded out by the myriad of other competing priorities. A key question moving forward is, therefore, how the public service can more routinely identify shared goals and configure actions and delivery around these outcomes for New Zealanders.

The Covid-19 response and public service change

While the Covid-19 pandemic is far from over, it appears that the New Zealand public service passed a test of agility – the greatest it has ever faced in peacetime – which created a deserved public impression of

a highly competent public service dealing well with an unprecedented challenge.

The established directions of public service change helped: functional leadership made a definite contribution; dispersed leadership roles proved their worth; the deepening experience of inter-agency collaboration over the past decade cannot be proved to have contributed, but it seems reasonable to conclude that it did. Public servants proved willing to behave as participants in a single service rather than employees of a single agency, living up to the more complete view of human motivation reflected in the Public Service Act 2020 (Scott, 2019). And all of this was made possible by a foundation of trust in government, created by an historical reputation for integrity and delivery. Overall, the experience demonstrates the ongoing relevance of the new Public Service Act and the direction of public service change.

The Covid-19 experience provides some important lessons. Most obviously,

there is the need for priority and emphasis on 'interoperability'. It is likely that future innovation, with or without the stimulus of a major external shock, will depend on equipment, systems and skills that are transferable across the system, and therefore not specific to a particular agency or subset of agencies. While progress has been made in the sharing of expertise, such as through the government chief digital officer, this approach is often straining at the seams. Many public servants gained different experience and skills through redeployment, but enabling flexible secondments across agencies is more challenging once normal rules and modes of operating return. There is significant potential to move further along the spectrum towards shared infrastructure, common standards and procedures without placing the flexibility of individual agency service delivery under threat.

For the public service as a whole there will be important lessons to be learned from the Māori response to Covid-19. As

noted earlier, one of the elements of the reform agenda is the public service's role in building the relationships between the Crown and Māori. And one of the visible features, both to public servants and for commentators more generally, was the strength of Māori channels in delivering services. 'Māori channels were shown during the lockdown to have reached those who may have been unreachable by other parties, and commonly to have had a pre-existing level of trust that enabled higher-quality engagement and more effective outcomes' (McMeeking and Savage, 2020, p.37). Māori networks effectively disseminated information and mobilised to distribute items including food and digital devices. The implications of this for the public service are potentially far-reaching: in terms of effective delivery of services to New Zealanders, meaningful collaboration with Māori, and assisting the Crown to fulfil its responsibilities as a Treaty partner.

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