

National Commission on the future of governance in the public sector

Stimulus Paper for Governance Summit – 27 May 2020

This short paper provides some further context and stimulus ahead of the governance summit on 27 May 2020. It is designed simply to draw out some of the high-level questions which might be engaged with during the summit.

We seem to be on the nursery slopes of a new era of modern governance. Certainly, there is an emerging view that existing social and economic trends, combined with the impact of COVID-19, provide significant challenges and opportunities for governance, which need to be thought through urgently both in relation specifically to the public sector, as well as generally.

Clarity on what?

But it is not yet clear what the main features of any “new world” will be, nor even whether they will in fact be that new at all. How new will depend in part on different views about what the shape of governance could and should look like, both over the next year and in the future beyond that and also, the appetite and capacity to make changes, if needed.

Should this discussion be left to those who currently see themselves as custodians of governance – the politicians, influencers, leaders, academics and activists?

Or are other approaches now needed which allow much more inclusive dialogue? If so, how should such involvement and engagement be conducted - with whom and by whom? Or are these types of terms (engagement etc.) too paternalistic and old-fashioned, as citizens are increasingly active and having impact outside established models of governance? If so, what are the wider implications for effective governance?

Of course, discussion about the future is already underway, but so far this seems to be happening in a largely fragmented way. The connections which would provide proper depth and legitimacy to both dialogue and action are arguably just not being made between citizens, government, local leaders and expert knowledge as a result.

What is potentially at risk here is the buy-in of the public to the fundamental concept of both democratic government and good governance – namely others exercising stewardship on their behalf in our overall interests. It is perhaps not even clear at the moment whether choices about governance will themselves be subject to meaningful governance.

Public sector

The Commission has adopted an inclusive (some might say loose) definition of what will constitute the future public sector. This is deliberate, to reflect the increasingly porous boundaries around the meaning of “public sector”, and the changing role of publicly-funded resources in creating public outcomes. Our intention is to open up space for looking at public value and contribution to public outcomes from multiple sources, rather than restricting it largely to public institutions and services and their regulatory environments.

So, this looks like a world of emerging scenarios involving numerous different actors subject to multiple governances or no governance. This will need careful navigation, rather than be based on any old certainties or firm convictions and assumptions.

Deeper understanding of the concepts and practice of good governance looks like being an essential anchor both for practical routes forward (which need to be taken now) and longer-term sustainability. The two will need to be seen as linked.

Nothing new?

In fact, many of the governance themes which will shape the new world are already well-known and historically-generated. Some of these main dynamics were articulated in the first Commission report published last year. The eight elements of the framework and the interplay between them were designed to engage with an increasingly fluid and interconnected environment. For example, issues of place, digital futures and citizens, when taken together, provide a good starting point for credible scenarios with which to test out what governance will need to look like in future.

Does the Commission framework need to adapt to the new normal? Should it include greater recognition of cross-cutting themes such as sustainability (in its many meanings) and public value? Or does something nuanced and reflective of complexity run the risk of being seen as academic or irrelevant?

It may be especially important to get something credible out there as soon as possible to help provide a calm and consistent framework within which to consider the future of governance, in the face of less rational and more populist voices.

Short-term versus long-term

The climate of emergency has required a direct response where governance has either been temporarily set-aside, or alternatively been important as an active agent for doing the right thing. But now, as this situation changes, are we seeing proper public focus on what sustainable models of modern governance need to look like longer-term, and openness to changing them, if necessary?

Sadly, there are likely to be a number of reviews and retrospective investigations to be worked through, before any negative legacies from emergency governance are put to rest. This public process could be messy and potentially prolonged. It also has the potential to focus public dialogue on recrimination and reaction. If nothing else, this could reduce the scope for deeper learning on efficacy, impact and evidence of what works.

But why wait or even let that happen? Don't we already know all that is needed to build sound and sustainable governance, not least in terms of the founding principles and outcomes which good governance can deliver for the public good?

Immediate focus

What is obviously going to be of immediate interest is the role modern governance can play in shaping the reset/recovery/re-enlivenment environment in both meeting and managing public expectations and delivering outcomes over the next year.

A lot is already going on to move the world forward, but most seems to be framed within existing mindsets and structures. All this is perhaps necessary and pragmatic, but it is also likely to deliver an extension of how things were, rather than how they need to be.

The danger is that doing largely the same things slightly differently reduces the scope for genuine radical rethinking and re-setting which will help achieve modern and sustainable governance. More unhelpfully, it leaves a lot of room for half-baked recipes for improved governance to be promoted in a piecemeal way, so that thinking is unduly influenced by sound bites and fanciful aspirations, rather than rigour, data and evidence.

The current climate has spawned numerous “we need to...” thought-pieces on more stakeholder involvement, getting closer to communities, more harnessing of social motivation, less bureaucracy and prospective focus, a new digital deal around data etc.

What would a more valuable contribution look like, which will raise public understanding and also provide a better foundation for change, if it is needed?

Changing the framing?

We are meeting at a time when the discussion of governance in the UK has inevitably been framed around urgent interventions intended to change public behaviour for the common good. Much of this new, temporary landscape has been forged without much prior thought about the longer-term implications for government and governance. The approach has focused on centralised leadership, shaping collective citizen behaviour and securing compliance to meet a collective threat.

The use of war imagery is a clue here that the reference points are backward-looking and emotional. Is this type of framing – your public sector needs you – itself just a temporary phenomenon or is it a concept of genuine value in improving future public outcomes? What would this mean for governance longer-term?

Trusted leadership

The state of public trust in the politicians, public officials and experts has also not been enhanced by recent experience. It continues to be actively undermined by individual behaviours of public leaders.

How severely have the core contracts between citizens, the state, public representatives (elected and appointed) and public institutions, actually been undermined? And what are the implications of populism for the prospects of maintaining good governance at all levels of public life?

Only now is the space opening up for serious engagement with what the future shape and sustainability of governance needs to look like in and around the public sector.

Professional narratives seem to be framed, at the moment, in terms of challenges or opportunities:

- on the one hand, severe challenges to be addressed immediately in a time of worldwide economic recession, which must be accommodated and addressed by renewed and refreshed governance;

- on the other hand, opportunities to be taken which enable governance to be strengthened in various ways, especially in relation to stakeholders and citizens who seem to be displaying a renewed interest in outcomes of common good.

Whatever might be said about support for new approaches, in truth these are being addressed primarily as institutional or single sector agendas, rather than in a more cohesive and collective cross-sector way with a new landscape of governance in mind.

The impact of economic freefall on social sustainability has potentially new and profound implications for the meaning, focus and parameters of good governance. And that must surely mean going beyond the how things are organised and run now.

Beyond the current....

So, does governance in future need to move away from a focus on the leadership of public institutions and their impact towards a focus on what citizens do themselves? Does this require governance to be equally about creation of the right conditions where citizens are educated, encouraged and motivated to be more active in delivering outcomes of public value themselves?

These may not be alternatives of course, but the two approaches will need to be coherent and connected, and could demand a radical rethink of what leadership means in the public sector, and who is best able to provide it.

In our first report, the Commission asked whether a new contract might be needed between the state and the citizen. This now seems to be more of a live issue than it was last year, but no clearer in terms of what that might entail or be achieved.

....or the same done better?

On the other hand, do the guiding principles of good governance remain absolutely right, making the challenge more about growing greater understanding about what good governance looks like, and stimulating the creativity and depth with which this understanding defines public sector leadership?

This suggests a much greater emphasis on how legitimacy and buy-in to stewardship can be developed with the public. How realistic is such an aim in the face of high levels of public scepticism, increased levels of backlogged demand for public services, and growing levels of social injustice, distress and also entitlement?

One issue which is already clear is that structures may get in the way. How can we expect a greater depth and appetite for collective, cross-boundary governance when governors are still appointed to deliver organisational sustainability and autonomy?

Some have expressed the view that both the easing of aspects of “normal” governance, and/or the presence of command and control, have created conditions where real innovation has been able to flourish. Alarm bells must sound when governance is framed as some form of restricting bureaucracy, by the same people who have held responsibility for achieving public outcomes for years.

Public voice and future generations

And finally, most importantly, where and how is public voice, and especially that of future generations, going to play into any consideration of future governance?

Governance, in one form or another, features more than ever in the media and in what people say they now want or need. But the language used is different from professional language. There is of course no one public voice, nor any consensus. But governance will surely need to reflect a greater openness to more voices, and find a way of doing so, which builds new levels of confidence and trust in good governance.

So, the first challenge may be to develop a shared palette of language which is engaging and works for professionals, journalists and the public. The second may be to create a digital space where dialogue can be open, and vital connections made, which is specific to governance in the public sector.

There also remain problems with the distinction between government and governance, which is not clear in the media nor amongst governors or leaders. Any lack of clarity however could undermine the ability of both government and governance to provide sound platforms for public outcomes. The governance of a country is different from good governance of its institutions, isn't it?

The Governance summit and the National Commission are both vehicles for gaining more traction around what matters for the future of governance in and around the public sector, for making connections between the conceptual and the practical, and for taking action for both the short-term with the longer-term.

Mark Butler

Convenor, National Commission on the future of governance in the public sector

Partner and Executive Director, Good Governance Institute LLP

May 2020