



CENTRE FOR
BRITAIN AND EUROPE

UNIVERSITY OF SURREY



BRIEFING NOTE

New Surrey 'Localism'?
**Post-Covid-19 practices in public
services, anchor institutions
and community wellbeing**

NEW SURREY 'LOCALISM'? POST-COVID-19 PRACTICES IN PUBLIC SERVICES, ANCHOR INSTITUTIONS AND COMMUNITY WELLBEING

Bio

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CONTEXT

The last two years have seen substantial shifts and changes on a global scale. These changes however, have not only been at the global level, but at a national level, and felt particularly strongly at community and local levels.

Among the plethora of changes in trends and habits that have been noted in Surrey since the Covid-19 pandemic and the first national lockdown in March 2020, there have been significant changes in both attitudes around, and provision of community services. These are in place to aid and support the local community, in both their physical and mental wellbeing, and access to essential support and services.

The extent to which local communities rely on public services is no secret, and if anything, this has been highlighted even more so as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic's caused disruption to these services and their delivery. What was once potentially taken for granted at the community level – such as public transport, access to council offices, or the availability of public spaces – is arguably now more than ever recognised as an important and essential part of community life in the United Kingdom. Building upon previous research carried out by both the University of Surrey (2020 & 2021) and Surrey County Council (2021), this CBE Briefing Note sets out the background of public services delivery

in light of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic at a local level, and discusses constraints and weaknesses, and strengths and opportunities which can now be seen across this area either as a result of the pandemic, or indeed, in spite of it, across Surrey in particular.

The main recommendation put forward by this briefing note is that public services offered at the local, or county level, need to be reformed in a way which places community unity and wellbeing at the forefront, by collaborating with anchor institutions and the

voluntary sector, in addition to addressing the existing shortcomings which have been highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Within Surrey, and across England as a whole, these services need to be open and easily accessible to all, and offered in an improved and innovative way, with consistency and regularity, and in a sustainable fashion - running parallel to other changes seen as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and placing localism at the centre.



DEFINITIONS



Localism is defined by the Local Government Association (2021) as the importance of placing community involvement at the centre of everything undertaken by councils and fellow local stakeholders. Under this sense of community unity and involvement encompassed by the concept of localism, comes public and community services offered at the local level, in order to support the wellbeing and lifestyles of local residents, and to maintain communities and their surroundings.

Both positive and negative natures in public and community services as a result of Covid-19 have been noted (House of Lords Public Services Committee, 2020), such as a decline in funding and provision, but also in the creation of new and innovative approaches to providing public services which benefit and support local communities and the local economy. Having seen significant impacts upon the delivery of essential services such as education, social care, GP appointments and court hearings, strides have been made a matter of months, with huge innovation and progress being made by newly introduced local changes, and the efforts of frontline staff (Institute for Government, 2021). The advances in the use of digital technology have been notable, helping to ensure public

services have still been provided for groups who are hard-to-reach, and increased recognition of charities, community groups, the private sector and volunteers as contributors to public service provision (Lewis, 2021).

Along these lines, the role of anchor institutions must also be considered, alongside local authorities, and high street businesses, and how together, these can be accessed to stimulate growth in local communities – not just in terms of the economy, but also in terms of wellbeing, support, and a sense of localism.

Anchor Institutions

An anchor institution is defined by the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (2015: 7), as ‘an organisation which has a key stake in a place’, and has typically having substantial numbers of jobs, significant level of spend, and as being institutions such as hospitals, universities, housing organisations, and of key importance in the context of this briefing note, local authorities.

Anchor institutions, such as hospitals, universities and local authorities, have significantly sized assets which can be used to support community wealth development and building, through buildings, land, workforce and training; across the NHS in particular, there is growing enthusiasm for how health care organisations, as anchor institutions, form an essential part of the economic and social fabric of communities (Reed et al., 2019: 2) – thus demonstrating their potential uses as hubs for public service delivery, in order to promote a sense of community and wellbeing. Although key for the local economy, anchor institutions also have the potential to be explored for several other avenues of community life and wellbeing.

In recent years, a growing recognition and accessing of the offerings of anchor institutions has been seen in locations such as Preston, Manchester, Leeds and Birmingham (Centre for Local Economic Strategies, 2020: 17). In a Surrey specific context, examples of anchor institutions which could be considered as potential collaborative partners, or community

hubs to aid in the delivery of key public services are: the University of Surrey, the Royal Surrey County Hospital, Surrey Research Park, Ashford and St Peter's Hospital, Royal Holloway (University of London), Surrey Heartlands, and Gatwick and Heathrow Airports, in addition to the eleven borough and district councils across the county, and many more. As anchor institutions are key stakeholders and institutions in individual places, and both affect and are affected by local economies, and local communities (Centre for Local Economic Strategy, 2015: 7), it is therefore understandable that they be placed at the forefront of local economic strategy, and in bettering the quality of life in their respective communities. When considering public services in Surrey, and a new direction in a post-Covid-19 scenario, it is therefore important to consider the contributions which could be made by anchor institutions across Surrey, and their different areas of expertise and resources which they have available to support local communities – in essence, real localism in action.



CHALLENGES



With the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic since March 2020 in the UK, it is important not only to consider challenges faced on a global or national level, but also at the local level, and how communities in particular have been affected. Below, issues and constraints experienced at the community level regarding public service provision are explored, with certain discussions made around a Surrey specific context.

Based upon conversations had with local stakeholders representing borough councils and high streets across Surrey earlier this year, elements which were highlighted as being key for the county's growth moving forward revolved mainly around involving local communities, improving the services available at the local level, and regenerating the county's high streets in order to reflect new trends and patterns in the wishes and behaviours of local residents (University of Surrey,

2021: 37). Another element highlighted during these conversations, was the impact upon local service provision and across high streets since March 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic – such as temporary closures, delays, and disruptions (University of Surrey, 2021: 36).

Public Services

Existing weaknesses and shortcomings within public service provision and delivery were highlighted as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, such as levels of low resilience, the existing disadvantaged position of different minority groups, historical underfunding of preventative health services, and the growth of existing inequalities, such as the educational attainment gap between children from different socio-economic backgrounds (House of Lords Public Services Committee, 2020: 3).

Regarding public service provision in particular, at a national level, a substantial impact has been seen, and is likely to continue as a result of disruption from Covid-19; according to the House of Lords Public Services Committee (2020: 3). The pandemic has 'represented an unprecedented challenge' to public services in the United Kingdom and it has become apparent that an enormous impact will be seen across public service delivery for 'years to come' (House of Lords Public Services Committee, 2020: 5).

Within Surrey, there have been a multitude of the aforementioned issues with public service provision across the county as a result of the pandemic. For example, according to the Surrey County Council 'Coronavirus – Council services information' webpage (Surrey County Council, 2021b), in August 2021, the county is still experiencing suspended services such as 'Short Breaks for Disabled Children', and disruption and delays to other essential services, such as bus services and Blue Badge applications, and the temporary closure of certain cultural centres such as Surrey History Centre, or of council offices in order to view planning applications.

Online Provision

Another potential issue to be addressed is around the accessibility of support services and helplines which have been launched or provided at the local level throughout the pandemic. Not only in Surrey, a large proportion of services available for mental health support or to aid those in isolation have of course been provided online or over the phone, such as a community helpline in Surrey, or a selection of online/digital entertainment issues being provided for those in lockdown, isolating or shielding (Surrey County Council, 2021a). While an online delivery was of course the safest and only avenue to explore for the provision of these services during the peaks of the pandemic,

it must be questioned to what extent this restricts the scope of vital wellbeing support services and information surrounding local services and their provision if continued going forwards.

Not everyone finds websites and telephone services easy to use, or accessible; according to the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee (2020: 8), when thinking of the access to disabled people to online food delivery services, some websites and telephone helplines were found to be inaccessible to people living with sensory impairments. This therefore highlights potential issues with continuing to provide most mental health or community support services solely online or over the phone in the future, and when thinking of lessons learned from the pandemic, may require a change as life returns to a 'new normal.' If focusing on community wellbeing, accessibility, and reaching those who are most isolated, demographics and differing technological access or abilities need also be considered - for example, the elderly population, those with limited access to computers or phones, those with learning difficulties or disabilities, from different socio-economic backgrounds, or the homeless population, are all disproportionately disadvantaged through the option of providing support services such as these through solely online or telephone delivery.



OPPORTUNITIES

When considering the weaknesses and constraints which are tied to public service delivery, and localism in a post-Covid-19 society, there is a need to also consider the areas for growth, and opportunities for potential reform and improvement at the community level. As stated by the House of Lords Public Services Committee (2021: 5), the pandemic has exposed ongoing shortcomings and deficiencies in public service delivery but has also encouraged new and innovative approaches – which have been used throughout the pandemic, but could also be put into practice moving forward. These potential changes are presented in both more general, and Surrey specific contexts below.

This period of ‘a new normal’ and adjusting to life post-lockdown, can be seen as an opportunity to make radical changes and reforms to previous community life; as a country there is now an opportunity to treat the pandemic’s effect on the delivery of public services as a ‘critical juncture’ and the chance to completely transform public services (House of Lords Public Services Committee, 2020: 3). Having seen what was successful and more challenging in terms of how service provision was adapted/delivered throughout the pandemic, and the possibilities for increasing capacity and reach, there can now be a transition to improving our pre-existing practices. Across Surrey in particular, and the lessons learned from a community perspective, a new focus is emerging as a result of the pandemic, on the importance of community and localism and the wellbeing of local people, where closer community relationships can be facilitated (University of Surrey, 2021: 10).

Local Government & Active Citizenship

The potential of local government to rapidly react, make adjustments, and support the public and their needs has been demonstrated throughout the pandemic

(George and Roddis, 2021). Another trend which has come about as a result of the pandemic, is a substantial increase in citizen action and volunteering – through acts of kindness and social solidarity (Centre for Local Economic Strategies, 2015: 5) – not just at the community level, but across the country. This surge of altruism and neighbourly support at the local level is hopefully a trend which could be here to stay, and used to transform public service delivery and localism going forwards. The increased collaboration between volunteers, citizens, private sector companies and charities in order to provide services to the public which has been seen throughout the pandemic (Lewis, 2021; George and Roddis, 2021) has led to something referred to as the ‘relational economy’, where the traditional ‘transactional economy’ has fallen short (Centre for Local Economic Strategies, 2020: 5). This has highlighted active citizenship and the importance of the voluntary sector, not only in times of crisis, but as a constant pillar upon which communities can rely on; in Surrey in particular, this can be seen through things such as the offering of a Surrey Community Helpline, and volunteering helplines in place across the individual boroughs and districts across the county (Surrey County Council, 2021c).

The increased use of technology and digital resources to reach those in need can be seen as an innovative solution, and as a leap forwards, however, certain elements of support need to be more accessible and more concrete moving forward, as online delivery should not be seen as a long-term replacement for face-to-face services, and could disadvantage those using the service (House of Lords Public Services Committee, 2020: 4). This therefore presents the opportunity to both combine the strengths and positive changes to public service provision seen as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and to use this as an avenue for further potential improvements and

innovation. A suggestion along this line could be a hybrid model, where services are readily available online, but also with a paired face-to-face option – such as community support groups, gatherings or drop-in sessions in community venues.

Networking & Collaboration

This is where the use of, and collaboration with local anchor institutions could be another leap forwards for Surrey. What these institutions across Surrey have to offer – employment, skills, communication, buildings, space – there is opportunity to further incorporate anchor institutions into public service provision as communities recover, and use these institutions as community hubs and spaces in order to offer more frequent and improved community support services at the local level. For example, skills courses or rooms/spaces could be offered up to groups who require them, in addition to holding regular community events or services offering support to Surrey residents.

In parallel with the regeneration of high streets across Surrey, and how these are changing in both community use and purpose moving forwards (University of Surrey, 2021), patterns and trends of local residents are changing and will continue to do so, and so will their needs and expectations of community/public services to reflect this. More space and opportunity will be needed to offer regular, in person support to complement the online options – whether for physical or mental wellbeing -, access to key services such as education, healthcare, social care or public transport services, and a change in community offerings to support those continuing to work from home – such as networking spaces or community hubs to avoid isolating those who live alone. This of course needs to be delivered in a sustainable manner, by putting the assets and resources which are already available to use instead of creating new ones – such as the space, skills and services offered by local anchor institutions and their resources across the county.



RECOMMENDATIONS



It is clear that both before, and throughout the current Covid-19 pandemic, that there are significant issues to address in local public service provision, and several areas where reforms and improvements can be made – while also tying in the ever increasing prominence of anchor institutions as local hubs and stakeholders.

As the last 18 months have demonstrated, the Covid-19 pandemic has showcased the successes of increased volunteer work within the public sector, and more collaborative approaches (Roddiss and George, 2021; House of Lords Public Services Committee, 2020);

this has demonstrated the potential for a future model where volunteer schemes and opportunities may be able to relieve pressure upon public services, or mobilised during national emergencies (Roddiss and George, 2021).

While online delivery needed to remain the main method of delivery during lockdowns and the pandemic, and of course in the time following, in the future it is suggested that perhaps these services which look to support the wellbeing of the isolated - for example, elderly people living alone -, be maintained



in a more concrete and tangible manner going forwards – something which becomes a more regular and consistent service.

A hybrid model around providing support for those who have been affected or isolated during the pandemic, involving elements of both online and face-to-face delivery, with a focus on wellbeing and community togetherness, could be a potential avenue for a new localism across Surrey. For example, by continuing the volunteering helplines provided by Surrey's borough and district councils (Surrey County Council, 2021c), and by providing this as a regular service – not only accessible over the phone, but perhaps with a weekly drop-in session in order to include a face-to-face element.

Highlighting the resilience showcased by our volunteering sector and communities throughout the pandemic is key, as is adopting their innovations routinely, primarily through the use of anchor institutions including local authorities, in order to provide the services, or providing community hubs and space for their delivery. This also makes local residents more aware and more connected to their local anchor institutions, and more understanding of resources available to them and to others in their community. By maintaining the increased collaboration with volunteers beyond the pandemic, and prioritising this as a key and essential service going forward, community wellbeing and action could be placed at the forefront of local service provision.

Learning from strengths is also a vital asset moving forward in this new era of localism; playing upon areas of resilience, or flexibility and adjustments demonstrated by public services is a strategy of key importance. At the centre of this approach, services need to be tailored to individual communities, and what they require; resources can be used more effectively and efficiently when targeted in a focused manner (Local Government Association, 2021). This crisis can be

used as a 'critical juncture' for public services in the UK (House of Lords Public Services Committee, 2020), and can be used not only to better inform future crisis preparedness, but also to reform the way local communities see their public services delivered, through working to relieve the pressure on certain services, and drive changes in behaviour – gearing toward a more sustainable approach also.

Overall, a recommendation for public services in Surrey as it transitions to a post-Covid reality would be to make greater use of anchor institutions, essentially as entities with a stake in place (Centre for Local Economic Strategies, 2015: 7), these institutions – universities, hospitals, and even local businesses on the high street – can become a key part of public service delivery going forwards. Either through collaboration, new volunteer schemes or provision of services, anchor institutions can be used as hubs for public services going forwards; for example, through providing space for community or support group gatherings, offering key services or learning opportunities/courses – linking back to the ever-important area of employment and skills. Surrey specific ideas for how anchor institutions can be used in this way could be an important next step at this turning point for public service delivery and see a new era of localism which promotes community wellbeing and growth.



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