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What can local government learn from coronavirus crisis?

Robin Hambleton

The concept of New Civic Leadership will be seen as increasingly important in the months to come, writes the emeritus professor of city leadership, University of the West of England, Bristol.

The covid-19 pandemic is shaking up our world in ways that are difficult to comprehend. The sheer scale of the challenge, the astonishing international pace of change, and the awful intensity of human suffering have thrown down an immense gauntlet to civic leaders at all levels of governance – neighbourhood, local, national and international.

Clearly the top priority for local government leaders is to respond creatively to the urgent public health crisis that their communities now face. Local authorities across the country have already shown that they can exercise a vital leadership role - in directing citizens to accurate information, in taking action to address particular concerns relating to vulnerable groups in the population, and in working with partner organisations to devise collaborative community-based responses.

What are the big questions that are raised for civil society and for future public policy by the pandemic? There are many, here I raise three.

Was our country ready for this onslaught?

It is important to go back to November 2019, before the first murmurings of a strange new virus were starting to emerge from Wuhan, China, and ask probing questions about the state of readiness of British public services, as compared with other nation states.

LGC readers have known for years that the cuts to frontline services that local government has been forced to make in the period since 2010 have been more than misguided. The pursuit of so-called 'austerity' has had an appalling impact on the quality of life of local communities, particularly the lives of poor people.

But the covid-19 pandemic, partly because it is global, has revealed new insights on how disastrously out of step UK public policy has become. For example, it is well known that the National Health Service has been grossly underfunded for a decade.

NHS budgets rose by 1.5% a year in the ten years between 2009/10 and 2018/19, compared with the 3.7% average since the NHS was established. This reduction was introduced despite the fact that health care needs were growing inexorably in this period – as a result of an ageing population, a growing population, increases in obesity, diabetes etc.

What has not been so visible is that, according to a 2012 study, the UK has just 6.6 critical care beds per 100,000 people, compared with Germany's 29.2, Italy's 12.5 and Spain's 9.7.¹ The fact that the UK ranked 24th, in this study is deeply troubling.

Of patients in hospital one in five may need intensive care if they are to have a chance of recovery. The pressure on intensive care unit care will shortly be unprecedented and needed beds are just not going to be there.

Added to this the UK has fewer doctors and nurses per head of population than almost any developed country. More analysis is needed but the preliminary evidence suggests that the UK government was, in 2019, not well placed to respond to a major societal challenge.

Why weren't we ready?

Neil McInroy, in his recent LGC article, documents the background to the current crisis rather well.² He notes that austerity has left our public services critically weakened and that the growth in precarious work has left many people and families extremely vulnerable to economic downturns.

Eight years ago Michael Sandel, in his acclaimed book – *What money can't buy. The moral limits of markets* – explained how market triumphalism was taking societies on the wrong path. He noted that: 'The most fateful change that unfolded during the past three decades was not an increase in greed. It was the expansion of markets, and of market values, into spheres of life where they don't belong',

It may be a stretch but, at this point, it would appear that the covid-19 emergency, coupled with the risk of the current economic downturn sliding into a full-scale depression, is having an impact on Conservative Party thinking. Already the Cabinet has been forced to recognise that a small state cannot possibly keep its people safe, let alone, create a fair and prosperous society.

It is too early to say whether or not Sandel's wise analysis of the limits of markets will come to be understood by our government. But understanding why the UK has been far less effective than, say, South Korea, in responding to the covid-19 crisis will be incomplete without a radical rethink of the relationships between markets, the state and civil society.

What are the implications for local government?

The current crisis highlights numerous strengths of local government. Local knowledge, local civic capacity and local leadership are all proving to be invaluable assets as the country responds to the seismic challenges set down by covid-19.

Elected local governments across the country are showing that they are ready and able to provide imaginative place-based leadership for the common good.

In an LGC article published last August – *How Bristol rallies the power of place* – I explained how local authorities are pioneering collaborative approaches to public problem solving.³ I describe this idea of place-based leaders co-creating solutions to societal challenges as New Civic Leadership.

In the coming months this New Civic Leadership will, I believe, come to be seen as increasingly important. It may even be that central government will recognise that, if the country is to recover from the covid-19 pandemic and build the institutional capacity of our state to withstand future shocks, society will need a much stronger system of local self-government.

Robin Hambleton, emeritus professor of city leadership, University of the West of England, Bristol; director, Urban Answers.

Endnotes

¹ Rhodes A. et al (2012) 'The variability of critical care bed numbers in Europe' *Intensive Care Medicine*, 38, 1647-1653.

² McInroy N. (2020) 'Coronavirus response points to future local government role', *Local Government Chronicle*, 19 March.

³ Hambleton R. (2019) 'How Bristol rallies the power of place', *Local Government Chronicle*, August, 30-31.