

Select Committee on Public Services

Oral evidence: Public services: lessons from coronavirus

Wednesday 3 June 2020

4 pm

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Members present: Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top (The Chair); Lord Bichard; Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth; Lord Davies of Gower; Lord Filkin; Lord Hogan-Howe; Lord Hunt of Kings Heath; Baroness Pinnock; Baroness Pitkeathley; Baroness Tyler of Enfield; Baroness Wyld; Lord Young of Cookham.

Evidence Session No. 2

Heard in Public

Questions 10 – 18

Witnesses

[I](#): Anna Round, Senior Research Fellow, North East, IPPR North; Vicki Sellick, Executive Director of Programmes, Nesta; Jessica Studdert, Deputy Director, New Local Government Network.

Examination of witnesses

Anna Round, Vicki Sellick and Jessica Studdert.

The Chair: I welcome our three witnesses for the second session. May I ask you to introduce yourselves, say who you are and where you are from, rather than making a statement at this stage? You will get plenty of chance to say things as you are answering questions.

Anna Round: I am a senior research fellow at IPPR North.

Jessica Studdert: I am deputy director at NLGN, the New Local Government Network.

Vicki Sellick: I am Nesta's executive director of programme and lead on our work on government innovation.

The Chair: Because we have done this alphabetically, Baroness Wyld, who is at the bottom of the list as her name begins with W, gets to ask the first question in this round.

Q10 **Baroness Wyld:** It is very rare to go first, so I am very privileged. I

need to declare my interests before I start. I am a non-executive board member at Ofsted. In the health space, I am employed as freelance consultant on an ad hoc basis with the Chadlington Consultancy, and from time to time one of the clients I am involved with is Penn Medicine, which is an academic medical centre in Philadelphia.

Welcome to all the panellists. In your view, have public services worked well together—or not, as the case may be? Depending on your answer, would you like to draw our attention to any particular case studies?

Anna Round: One of the observations that we have made in gathering together evidence on which to draw in this session is that at the moment a lot of public services are busy just doing their day job, so sharing information about what they are doing is perhaps not the highest priority. We have talked to quite a few organisations, and there is a lot of very good work that is making a big difference at the grass-roots level. There is a real job to be done, as we go into the second phase, as we go into recovery, of drawing together some of that learning from grass-roots approaches and from very local place-based approaches so that we keep and share that learning, and ensure that it is resourced going forward.

I will talk primarily about local government examples here. We find that there is an enormous amount of really good practice locally. A lot of that is to do with working together across services, and drawing in partnerships with the community and voluntary sector, both with formal community and voluntary sector organisations, and with communities more broadly, using links into those communities through existing local government services and through less formal relationships, and with businesses.

One example in the north-east of England is where the local authority has used some of the capacity that has been created as a result of services where people are in contact with service users not working as normal. That is being used to co-ordinate volunteers across the city with the need, and is built on local authority networks, on existing partners, and on existing community and voluntary services. We have seen that that has happened not just in the north-east but in quite a lot of other areas. We have seen quite a few examples of that sort of building on established networks and established ways of collaboration, and I think that has happened quite broadly.

Jessica Studdert: I would say that it has been a slightly mixed picture when it comes to working well together. On the successes, which I will start with, local systems have been working quite well together. When you see partners in a place, whether it is local government working with health partners, partners in the emergency services—the police, fire, ambulance—or working with the voluntary sector, we have seen quite a lot of organisations coming together to meet need.

From the local government perspective, the early days and weeks of lockdown involved a very rapid process of identifying need in the area. It was about identifying who was shielded, who was vulnerable—in other

words, not shielded but had vulnerabilities—and the wider public, and identifying what they needed and how to get that help to them. A hallmark of the local government response is an understanding that as an individual organisation the challenge is too great. We have seen a lot of collaboration between organisations where it has been about getting needs responded to as quickly as possible.

There are lots of examples of that. In Birmingham, the NHS and local government worked together really well on an early help scheme. There is a really accessible website which families can go to, apply for a grant instantly and understand what support is available. We have seen that replicated in a lot of areas. In Greater Manchester, it works very well because there is a well-established partnership across health, local government and other partners. Where there have been established partnerships in particular, they have kicked into gear and the response has been very strong.

One of the hallmarks of the response nationally has been the overwhelming community response, where people have been organising themselves into mutual aid groups, popping up in neighbourhoods, using WhatsApp, using adverts in the local newsagent to identify who needs help and who can provide help where there are volunteers. One of the best examples of public services working has been when they have been able to tap in to that community energy and existing local infrastructure of neighbourhood, neighbours supporting neighbours, and support it. They have been able to tap food distribution into those existing networks, tap in where there are others offering free volunteering, and to match-make in that sense. We have seen some really positive things coming from local areas, communities themselves and public services together.

One of the highlights at the beginning where it has not been quite as positive has been the central-local disconnect. It has been quite a centrally managed process, which has often bypassed the existing resources and assets you have in local areas, particularly local government. We have seen examples of data not being shared well. For example, local authorities did not have information from the NHS about shielded groups very early on, even though they were responsible for delivering food and essential supplies to them.

We have also seen contact tracing systems not going local as a first port of call but being set up in a different way that bypasses existing public health capacity. We have seen a mixed picture of very strong and interesting innovations coming from local areas and a lot to build on for the future when we are thinking about public service reform, but a slight feeling of disconnect between central government and how it interfaces with local areas.

Vicki Sellick: I would echo exactly what Jessica has said. There are lots of good examples of services working together at a very local level, with immediate response needs, whether it is shopping, befriending, accessing volunteers, checking in on elderly neighbours, getting people to hospital appointments, et cetera, and on a macro level schools and nurseries

being very thoughtful about how they need to provide capacity for other front-line workers, essentially, and seeing their role in a wider public service ecosystem.

On the question of the great downsides of being central rather than local, I would also point to contact tracing and the fact that, sadly, so many of the announcements in the last month or so have been made without first informing the local providers. Headteachers were unaware that they were going to be asked to open on certain dates, et cetera. That is a high public profile example of some of the challenges we have had of a centralised system that has many local operating networks. The flow of information and the way that has been integrated means that collaboration has not been up to the mark.

Q11 Lord Young of Cookham: We have heard some really encouraging examples of good working relationships during the pandemic. To what extent has that been dependent on good relationships between the people concerned and strong personal commitments at the top of the organisations rather than the particular structures? To what extent have the existing structures got in the way of those working relationships working even better than they are at the moment?

Vicki Sellick: We have been working with a group of 20 local authorities over the last year or two, people who we think have been establishing new operating models and new ways of giving away power and responsibility from the top down. You are right, Lord Young, that they are often characterised by senior leaders who want to instil a different DNA within their organisation. This is not just about councils and local authorities that want to say, "Let's put digital at the heart and ensure we have the infrastructure to be able to operate remotely to remove bureaucratic systems", for example. It has been leaders who have said, "I trust my front-line social workers to make quick decisions in crisis moments, and I will give them more autonomy to go beyond the bounds of what they are allowed to do normally on their safeguarding checklists".

A very small example involves alcohol workers working with people who are incredibly alcohol dependent and who have been alcoholics for a long time. As the lockdown was announced, they were able to make quick decisions about who would have safe access to alcohol. Although that is bad in the long term, it was incredibly important in the short term so that we did not have people street-drinking or trying to undo social distancing rules to access alcohol quickly and in a crisis, and instead for them to have that controlled access to alcohol to be able to see them through a particular period.

It is the idea that your front-line staff are the experts in what they are doing and can make risk-assessed decisions on a case-by-case basis. We have seen the best and most efficient and effective models where people have this DNA instilled in the council, where they want not only to devolve power to their front-line workers but to work very differently with the other actors in each place: with the private sector, with charity and social enterprise, et cetera.

Jessica Studdert: It is a really interesting question. Probably the speed and scale of the response required have meant, certainly for local government, the sector I am closest to, that normal structures have almost been suspended. There has been an enormous clarity of purpose and mission to identify who has need and to meet that need.

In reality, that has meant that a lot of people have changed their job descriptions overnight. Their normal job role is not needed any more and they have had to set up a food hub from scratch, for example. We have seen a lot of front-line autonomy and leaders who perhaps, the way I describe it, are leading on a tight on values, tight on missions, loose on delivery method, which means that people need to use their own initiative far more.

You could say that the normal rules of how local government operates have been suspended. The more traditional role of local government pre the crisis would largely be about allocating finite resource, judging thresholds of need, and assessing how to allocate finite resource to infinite need. That has disappeared overnight, and it is all about how you get people's needs met. There are no thresholds, no eligibility requirements and no definitions of people. There has been an enormous freeing up of local government as a workforce to work much more collaboratively with partners in the voluntary sector and with community groups, and to have much more human conversations with people about what they need and how they can help them get it.

There are some really interesting questions about the role and power of culture and leadership, with or without existing structures. The operating environment for local government is a bit more permissive for innovative ideas and a creative problem-solving approach; in normal times, pre Covid, the risks of innovation and change may be overwhelming in comparison to the risks of the status quo. In the risky environment of a pandemic, the risk/reward profile has shifted, so there has been a much more permissive environment for iterative ideas: to try something, scale it up if it works, and stop it if it does not. There are lots of ways of working that we can learn lessons from to keep that spirit and culture as we move on to think about public service reform in the round in the future.

Anna Round: I would echo a lot of what Jessica has said. We have spoken to people in some local authorities who have said that moving much more towards that partnership and asset-based way of working with communities has enabled an agile and very effective response to Covid locally. People have set up partnerships with communities where the local authority is much more of an equal partner, bringing what it does well and what it can do well to the table, alongside communities that are invited to do the same.

Having a particular kind of conversation with local authorities that is devolved, asset-based and community-led has been really important, with a sense of working towards solving problems and consulting, and being very clear about what a local authority can do, which is to provide

support, contacts, a point for sharing intelligence and a sounding board. There are specific things that local government is very good at within those relationships. Leadership is important in this, but organisational culture and permission to work in innovative ways are probably as important, and more important in the long term in sustaining that way of working.

Another really important thing, and it comes back to what Vicki said earlier, is enabling trust and having the confidence to trust. Obviously, that is different in the short term when you have very clear, straightforward and easily shared goals. How we read that out to the longer-term goals and roles for local government when we are out of the immediate crisis will be really interesting.

Q12 Lord Hogan-Howe: You have identified some good examples of practice between central government leadership and local government leadership. You have also identified good practice where, locally, good leadership within an organisation has enabled people and empowered them. What can we take into the future from the crisis, locally, where there is a disjointedness between service provision, when there is no crisis and no emergency to drive it? What have we learned that we can replicate in the future in structures and processes?

Anna Round: Empowering local areas is a really important lesson. The local response has been very strong. Quite a lot of that has been under the national radar. We can learn to have a good and open conversation between tiers of local government, and between local and central government, about what local government has achieved, what local areas need to maintain that learning and to keep doing things well, where they have been able to do that, and the places where the local-central relationship has not made that easy and has not supported a good place-based response. We probably need to learn about the kind of open conversation that we have seen in local areas with partners for the local-central relationship going forward.

Jessica Studdert: Certainly one of the factors about the response has been the extent to which communities themselves have been mobilised to help in the very near neighbourhood, in the sense that a lot of us being housebound for lockdown has meant that we have had a strong sense of our local community. Those kinds of less tangible senses might be carried forward into how we think about public services and resourcing local authorities and local public services. On the one hand, community capacity exists, and it is a question of how that can be used much more and how people can have much more control over the services they use and influence how they are designed so that they are more accessible in many different ways.

I would say strongly that the funding situation for local government is incredibly precarious. Finance for local government has not been at all secure throughout this process. Local government was told early on by the Secretary of State that it could spend whatever it takes to get needs met in communities, but there has since been a significant rowing back of

that early commitment; £3.2 billion has been allocated to local government, which is very welcome, but the estimates range from about £10 billion to £13 billion for the overall costs of outlay of the service response and lost income for local authorities. The disjointedness will be embedded much more if we do not put local public services on a much more sustainable footing.

I would contrast the experience of local government with the experience of the NHS, which has had its costs met in full. Trusts have had their deficits written off, unquestioningly. That puts a public service in a much more secure place to be able to plan for the future. From the perspective of local government, cuts to its funding, and a lack of certainty over the future of its funding, makes it much harder for it to plan, to have a four-year investment plan in the area, to collaborate with other services, and to think about how to do things differently and innovate. The disjointedness is a really important question, and one of the areas we all have to be thinking about is how you can bottle the spirit that has been happening in the sense of mission and clarity of purpose, and bring that forward.

Vicki Sellick: One of the biggest lessons we can take away from all of this is that public sector workers are innovators. We have long championed this at Nesta, as you might expect, given that we are the UK's innovation foundation. Quite often the public sector has this reputation for being slow to act and adopt new ideas, and this crisis has proved the exact opposite. Very quickly in Leeds they organised how to cook and distribute 4,000 meals a day. Very quickly in Staffordshire they had rewritten everybody's job descriptions and had a one-council approach where people were reassigned to new tasks providing an emergency response, et cetera.

We must now champion public servants as being just as innovative, agile and cutting edge as some of their colleagues in the private sector in the way they have responded to this crisis. If we could take some of that spirit forward and some of that championing, it would help us recruit good talent into the service and be a hallmark of trust of the sorts of things that central government might ask local government to do, or the sorts of things that we the public might ask our public service sector leaders to do for us.

It has also taught us that responses are about place and not about institutions. Some of the examples we have already heard this afternoon have highlighted that this is about local services working together very closely with the communities they serve, rather than this being about a single institution coming up with an answer and rolling it out. Where that has happened, it has proved often to fail, to fall slightly on deaf ears, and there has been a slight mismatch with whatever the demand is. It is trying to bottle this sense that you need to work for thriving local communities and that each actor has a part to play—citizen, community, charity, social enterprise, public sector and the wider state. That is really important.

The third area, I guess, is that digital is now the new normal. Not only have we seen digital services that were planned to be rolled out over two years adopted over two weeks, we will see changes now in how education is delivered. Not only are parents and students expected to do a little bit of homework online but students are being taught online much more frequently and parents are able to engage, whether on basic phonics for young children or much more complicated learning, lessons and testing online through edtech platforms.

I think that will be a completely normal part of the teaching profession now. It will be the same for how we access GP appointments. There has been a huge surge in how many people are happy to have a phone appointment, which is slowly being followed by a curve of how many people are happy to have a virtual videoconferencing appointment. That will become much more normal now.

What will follow from that are lots of efficiency savings and much more data, which can be used to work out what is going on and what might be complicated for the public sector to deal with. It might mean that we now need a workforce that works from 7 am to midnight, rather than from nine to five, because people will want to have online consultations at different times, et cetera. We need to know what that would mean, and how we could use that as a real benefit in creating more flexible jobs that allow people to do childcare and other caring responsibilities, rather than being a real drain on what is already a tight set of resources for schools, GP surgeries and local government.

The Chair: I am now going to move to Lord Hunt. You had just started to answer what I think he is going to ask.

Q13 Lord Hunt of Kings Heath: We have just had a really encouraging response about the innovation that we have been seeing from the front line. Jessica also said that local government has suspended the normal rules of engagement, and by doing so shows just how innovative it can be.

I want to ask about data sharing. Often we hear from public bodies that they would like to integrate services more but they have a big problem about data sharing. One does not know whether that is reality or an excuse, but have we seen examples where different agencies have been able to share data that we could build upon for the future?

Vicki Sellick: Over the last two or three years at Nesta we have been working with a number of different places on offices of data analytics. Essentially, they are a central hub in a single place that take data from police forces, healthcare trusts and local government—agencies that together sign agreements to be able to use one another's data and interpret it through this central hub.

My expectation going into that was that we would need a lot of staff, lots of different data analysts and people working on it. Actually, they are lean, mean, efficient machines. They need a relatively small amount of resource, because the power of AI means you can interpret data for the

patterns you want to find, but you can also find patterns you were not expecting. The computer will tell you things that you were not expecting to find. It means that you can do that with a relatively modest investment in the technology.

We have seen some brilliant data-sharing examples. However, I have to say that I have not heard very many examples of people doing that really well and quickly during this crisis. It tends to be the people who were already established and had set themselves up well. London is probably the best example. There is the London Office of Technology and Innovation, through which different boroughs invest in a central hub. Lots of different organisations have shared access to different IT resources and different datasets, for developing apps or for a quick interpretation of things, and different digital interfaces, but in an open source way so they can be replicated. Other councils and boroughs can take the same code and put it into place very quickly.

Someone in the previous round of evidence mentioned that one of the challenges of this crisis is that lots of public sector commissioning has been outsourced to companies at great expense and without some of that open source written in from the beginning. They had to act fast and they took the terms that were on the table, rather than saying that everything that is built must be built in a way that means it can be quickly copied by other people and different public service agencies around the country. I am nervous that some of the things we know have worked over the last few years have not been adopted in this crisis.

The Chair: That is very interesting.

Jessica Studdert: I would look to Greater Manchester for some good examples of health and local government co-operation and collaboration. It has a data-sharing agreement and there have been some good examples there across public services. A number of councils in London have good collaboration. One is Hackney, as Vicki said. Hackney is using a unique property reference number at the moment to identify people who it thinks might be vulnerable to future effects of the pandemic, for example people in the private rented sector or in social housing, or people who are self-employed, who might become economically vulnerable, as well as people who might in health terms be vulnerable to future waves of the epidemic. There is some interesting data work going on.

A key point about data is that it is often seen as being harvested for its own sake. From the perspective of local government, the real win would be to understand people's needs in the round, so that rather than one person having lots of different services—housing, employment, health—intersecting separately, all these services would have a whole understanding of the person. From the perspective of the individual, you could want your data shared because it would stop you having repeated conversations with different people who do not understand all the aspects of your life. There is merit in having a very human conversation about

what all these public services need your data for, because it might make your life a bit easier.

The Chair: We have had that argument for a long time. Anna, do you have anything you want to add?

Anna Round: Two things briefly. First, I absolutely echo that. A wider point is how everybody's digital literacy has changed and how the crisis has exposed the need for a different kind of learning and conversation about understanding digital. That might include understanding where data sits within a public service and how data sharing is part of a public service. We have heard about areas where central-to-local links have not necessarily been as good as they could have been. While there have been some really good examples of data sharing at the local level, central government sharing data with local government and local agencies has not necessarily been great. There is often not one single channel, so that opportunity to bring data together has been missed.

Q14 **Lord Bichard:** There are great examples of how some local areas have responded very positively to the pandemic. Clearly, that varies, and some have been better than others. You have gone on to give us some reasons why some have been better than others. You have talked about leadership, culture, trust and sense of place. I want to encourage you to think about whether there are other issues that have made a difference. In other words, have some local areas started from a better place and a better position, and what can we learn from that when we start looking at the future of public services, or, as I would say, services for the public good?

Jessica Studdert: I think you are right to say there are a number of factors. There are different spatial scales that different local authorities work over. The challenges for a large county, for example, that covers a massive geographic area would be very different from those of an inner London borough that looks at a smaller footprint but has a very high-density population. There are definitely geographical and demographic factors.

I would say that the primary factor that may influence a more rapid response is existing relationships. Local authorities that already have good dialogue, good forums and good working relationships with their voluntary sector were very quick off the mark in understanding their route into communities to become a trusted resource for neighbourhoods.

Similarly, where there are existing devolved relationships, not just in Greater Manchester but in other areas of the country, which have good working relationships in health and care and the wider system, local authorities were in a much better place to get into this than having to go from a standing start.

Anna Round: I would agree. Where we have seen great examples, they are often built on networks, relationships, partnerships and ways of working that were already in place. There is also the fairly stark issue of

local authorities having come from a long period of extremely constrained funding. We have seen great creativity and huge commitment, but that has been constrained by financial austerity over a long period and has had the knock-on effect on staffing and the amount of resources and assets that local authorities have to work with. As well as the issues of funding in the Covid-19 crisis itself, there was a long period that will have made things harder for local authorities to use some of the great resources that they could deploy.

Vicki Sellick: One further example to add to those already given is places where the mentality, narrative and communication, particularly from council leaders, have been, "We're in it together and we're making choices together". I think that feeds in to what Anna has been saying. This is particularly true of places that narrated the period of austerity by asking their residents, "What would you like us to prioritise? What shall we do together, and what will your role be versus what our role will be?" That was famously advocated for in Donna Hall's work originally, but more recently York City Council has had very honest conversations with its residents: "How will we each take a role in building a thriving place, looking after the most vulnerable and making the best situation?" It has meant it could lean on the relationship not only with other actors in the sector but directly with its residents as they have responded.

Q15 Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth: Thank you to our witnesses. One very interesting feature that we have picked up as you have been giving evidence is the very effective collaboration that we have seen with local authorities working with the voluntary sector and, indeed, with the private sector. One key issue is how we will be able to ensure that continues as the crisis abates and as we come out of it. I would be interested in hearing your feelings on that.

Vicki Sellick: As we have said so far, the people who have already established that trusting relationship will find it much easier to stick with this, as opposed to the people who have had to build it very quickly over the last 10 weeks. Already we are seeing some examples. Over the last two or three weeks we have been out interviewing staff from 20 different local authorities as part of our studies. Already we are seeing the pendulum swing back on a few things, such as how much front-line workers are trusted to take decisions themselves and a swing back on whether you give money, autonomy, decision-making power to voluntary sector organisations, et cetera. Again, some of this is reinforcing a point we have made multiple times in this hearing, that it is about those people who have embraced a sense of local government particularly being a place-maker and holding place tightly, but not caring whether it is the delivery agent for everything, and realising it is responsible for outcomes but it does not need to be the doer on all of it, and it can trust partners in different fields to do the work in the way they see fit.

Jessica Studdert: I would absolutely echo what Vicki said, and keep in mind the distinction between means and ends. Often we talk about delivery means and processes, and forms of delivery, entirely detached from the outcomes we want. If we are clear on the galvanising sense of

mission, and people themselves understanding their place in a future where everybody shares a place, the delivery mechanisms come in alongside that and underneath that, and voluntary organisations, community groups, people themselves coming together to form groups may be a more powerful way of delivering things in the future.

People taking control of things much more directly themselves and communities themselves being in the driving seat might be an avenue to be exploring future public service delivery, because it is a really galvanising force and can get people excited. We have seen in this crisis that community capacity exists. It needs to be mobilised and harnessed in the right way and it can be incredibly rewarding for places.

Anna Round: It is part of keeping up that relationship of trust between communities and local government. The same can be said for the relationship between local and central government, where local government has done some really great work on the ground.

We have talked about sharing quantitative data. One point that has come through as hugely important in local areas—again, this was already going well and has been a huge driving force in effective responses to Covid—is sharing the human sociological intelligence about places, about communities, about how things work very locally, and that is about enabling and listening in conversations. Having the space for both kinds of data sharing has been important.

To add a slightly less optimistic note, some of those community resources and assets will have additional pressures on them as we move in to the recovery phase, as some of the economic impacts continue to exist. The need for resource for different kinds of sustenance so that those can continue to be a really positive force in the long term is something else that needs consideration.

The Chair: Lord Davies, we have sort of covered your question already, but I wondered if there was anything else that you wanted to follow up.

Lord Davies of Gower: It has been covered by Lord Hunt's previous question and particularly by Vicki's answer, so I think we can move on.

Q16 **Lord Filkin:** Throughout the discussion you have covered quite a lot of points on this question, so you might want to focus on things that you think are additional. What are the lessons from the crisis for future models of service delivery?

Jessica Studdert: I will try to boil it down to three lessons. First, there should be a shift from the traditional approach to public services, which directly commissions or directly delivers and essentially seeks to do to people—to give them a service—towards one that fundamentally seeks to work with people. That would be a much more preventive approach that was based much more on people's innate assets and capabilities and working with people in a different way. You would shift from services doing things to people to working with them.

I think we have understood much more what we have always considered to be less tangible facets of people's lives, which are really important to them, such as social networks or loneliness. You cannot have a loneliness service. You need to understand how people's lives are and activate and mobilise networks and support their place within that. That would involve shifting from a local government role to being much more of a direct provider and deliverer of services, to seeing itself as an enabler and as a platform to patch resources and assets together in different places and meet needs in different ways, using digital capability for that.

Just as important for local government is knowing when to step back and when to just let things happen, because they are happening already in communities, and to play a much more supportive role. That could be echoed throughout the system, and central government could step back when local government has the capability to proceed.

My second point was covered by a question before, which is that culture can be much more powerful than structures. We tend to think of public service reform as being a Big Bang structural reform that we create on paper and implement and it stays fixed in a point of time. Reform of public services is more iterative. We should have a constant learning process, but we should be thinking about less tangible things that really do matter, such as culture, creating a can-do attitude, and the importance of relationships above and beyond existing structures. We can get very bogged down in structures.

Thirdly, we have talked a bit about digital. We have done a lot during this crisis to get things that we used to do offline moved online. That has been great. Barriers have been broken and people have become much more digitally literate overnight. The next stage from that is really for those processes themselves to change, to take advantage of the capabilities that digital creates.

That is not just a single dialogue bilateral relationship. It is much more about digital as an enabling platform and digital democracy. Vicki will know much more than I do, and I know that Nesta is doing a lot of work on this, but we have to shift the idea of democratic processes being once every four or five years at election, so that people are much more involved in decision-making on an ongoing basis through using open-sourcing ideas, crowd-sourcing ideas and people voting in participatory budgeting. We are in a really good positive place with digital, and now we need to move on to see how digital itself can transform the system back.

Anna Round: I would absolutely echo the point about asset and place-based working as being two really important areas of learning. Potentially, there is some less positive learning about the places where Covid has shown up some of the inequalities, and in some cases the gaps, particularly those associated with austerity, and how some previous changes have brought real challenges for public services. The digital point is extremely interesting.

A slight problem in all this is that we have had a huge move to digital, but we still have a digital divide in society. At the moment, people who

are on the wrong side of the digital divide can end up with very little voice. We have a task learning about what the experience has been like if you have ended up on the wrong side of that digital divide, about how we can shift people across it effectively, safely, sustainably, and how those voices can continue to be part of the mix.

Another thing—this is about learning from the crisis and working out how we move on in the future—is the human element. A characteristic of a lot of the really effective responses is people going above and beyond. What they have very often done when they go above and beyond is give of that human side—the things that reduce isolation, improve empathy and build trust. It is really important to look at how to nurture and sustain, and to recognise that and build systems that encourage that human element.

We need to recognise that human beings are a resource that needs to be nurtured and replenished. There are some really good examples, again quite local at the grass-roots level, of public services that have done good things in looking after their staff, their mental health, and in their immediate response to very distressing circumstances and very heavy workloads. That is really important learning.

Q17 **Baroness Pinnock:** I will declare my interest again as a councillor in Kirklees Council in West Yorkshire. I know that Nesta has been involved in consulting with it.

My question is about thinking, as we move out of this phase of the pandemic, what step-down services will need to be established as we end the crisis element of what we are doing now.

Vicki Sellick: I think we are quite a long way from ending the crisis element. While everything feels different suddenly as various bits of lockdown are eased, we know that schools are unlikely to return before Christmas, and the same will be true of how people access a whole load of other services. We are nervous particularly about the number of people who have not attended healthcare appointments in the last three months.

A particular focus for us is families who are most likely to be in crisis—children who are living in absolute poverty or families where we think there is domestic violence. A second is healthcare appointments: the number of people we were expecting with undiagnosed cancer, for example, or the people who did not attend with a mild set of symptoms who need to go through a diagnostic process. That is where the first part of the response needs to go.

Another issue concerns getting children back to school and back learning. At Nesta, lots of our work has been on how technology can empower and enable students and reduce inequalities, particularly how it can promote young girls from ethnic minority backgrounds into fantastic careers in the future. The nervousness is that even the three months out of school has already set many children back a year in their learning. You may well be able to catch up if you are aged four, but it will be much harder to catch up if you are 16. We need some real attention, not only on getting all children back into learning, whether that is a mix of part time in the

classroom and online all home, but on catching up for those young people who, sadly, will not have been doing much home learning over the last three months, and may well not have access to more over the six months to come. The step-down really ought to be focused on them.

Anna Round: The point about vulnerability is really important. Covid has created new kinds of vulnerability, and created particular problems for people across a really diverse range of vulnerabilities. We need to get good evidence about what sorts of services people with different kinds of vulnerability need. The task will be one of sharing that data and that human intelligence and working in very place-based and asset-based ways. I absolutely echo the point that education is really important.

There is also the question of how we move within public services from crisis mode with those very clear goals and outcomes, with a funding environment of "This will be paid for", to understanding the long-term environment and the constraints on funding in the longer term. There is learning about being quite open about what those funding constraints will make difficult.

Jessica Studdert: I would absolutely echo the point about funding. From a local government perspective, some services have been quite quiet during lockdown—for example, children's services. A lot of referrals into children's services come via schools, so schools being shut means they are quieter than usual. Evictions have been suspended, so housing services have been less in demand. Local authorities are expecting spikes in demand as lockdown eases, and the new cases that emerge could be at a more critical crisis point than before.

I would think of it less in terms of new step-down services than reinforcing existing services. That is why the dangerous funding situation that local authorities have been put in, with the lack of clarity over their current costs being met, and looking at a future economic downturn, which will affect council tax and business rate take and will affect their income over the longer term, is incredibly damaging to their capacity. They have children's services and housing support. The local safety net exists. It just needs to be invested in and we need to understand the consequences of not investing in it.

Q18 **Baroness Pitkeathley:** Anna spoke very eloquently about inequalities just now, so perhaps I will ask for brief answers from Jessica and Vicki, as we are very close to our time, about lessons that we can learn about reducing inequalities in the new approaches that we are hoping public services will adopt.

Vicki Sellick: One success we can definitely point to is the national approach to homelessness, where overnight we have seen people taken off the streets and put into safe and secure housing, and commitments from the Minister that that will continue for a long time. That is not just an emergency crisis response. It is looking at a person with a complex narrative behind them who needs a multi-agency response.

What we can learn from that is that we can move very quickly when we want to. We can untangle the politics as well as the process, and move very quickly, if we are convinced that there is a group that needs our help, essentially. There is something to be learned there about how agencies work together, particularly how they view citizens and the complexity of their needs, not just the single need they are presenting to the single public service they are accessing at the time.

On more of a downside, I am really nervous about schooling and about how inequalities have increased. For example, the Sutton Trust put something out last week saying that school teachers in private schools were getting 87% of the work they had assigned back from their schoolchildren. In the top-performing state schools, they are getting about 20% to 25% that they have assigned sent back. In underperforming or less well performing state schools, they are getting 8% back. Not only are private school students getting more teaching, but we know how effective that teaching is and that the online things parents are meant to be doing at home are being received in such a different way.

I am nervous that we have not been more strategic about that from the beginning. The lesson has to be that this was an obvious inequality that we could probably all see coming, so what would we need to do differently in our response next time? We have to recognise that state school students who have low access to IT and low levels of parental engagement at the beginning, and who live in families with workers who might have precarious work are unlikely to engage in the online material sent by schools. It is a question of how we will redouble our efforts to reach them in the first few weeks, rather than realising two or three months in that the inequality is widening and now we are struggling to catch up. That is a real lesson.

Jessica Studdert: One of the stark features of the inequalities that have been exposed by Covid is that they vary significantly geographically and demographically. Inequality is not spread equally across the country, and by definition it varies from place to place. Inner city inequality is a different experience from being poor in a rural area, for example. Your experience as a BAME individual might be palpably different, or your experience as a woman might be very different from that of a man.

When we think about public services and the principle of universalism, for example, the NHS being free at the point of need and accessible to everybody, those inequalities have persisted despite a system that is accessible to all. We need to understand at a much more granular level the impact of health inequalities, and how vulnerable that makes populations to something like an epidemic, and how in the future we can see public services as much more agile and place based, understanding the specifics of the communities they work with and being able to respond differently in different areas, and that variation being a way of countering that inequality rather than embedding it deeper. I think that is just a different way of understanding how we might approach public services to cope with variation.

Baroness Tyler of Enfield: When we finally emerge from this pandemic, whenever that is, what sort of shared approaches should public services put in place to support service users? I am particularly interested in the point Anna raised about the people who have been left behind by the move to digital.

Anna Round: One area is the provision of equipment in education. There has been a huge divide here. If education becomes more digital, we need to look at basic digital services, and digital literacy, digital enablement and things such as online security, understanding how to stay safe in various different ways online and access to good quality broadband. These will all become important.

There is the technical side of digital enablement. There is also a hugely important question, and this would be particularly the case in education, of looking at what digital can do usefully and what it cannot do. The role of digital in doing the human things that are really important in education, making those accessible, curating those and stepping back when the role of digital is not the first thing, or when the non-digital context is the ideal, is important. One digital skill is to understand where digital is useful and enabling and where it is not.

Again, in looking at the inequalities that have emerged in the pandemic, certain types of vulnerability in the home have changed, particularly for children, but more broadly, with loneliness being a huge issue, and again, it is about looking at how we move forward in that, and digital enablement and learning being a part of that.

Another of the inequalities that has happened through Covid, and again this has a digital aspect but it goes beyond digital, is people who have moved from precarity into crisis when it comes to income, unemployment, changes in family circumstances, changes in caring responsibilities and changes in job conditions. We will need to look very seriously at all of those as we move on.

The Chair: Thank you. I am really sorry that we do not have time to ask the last question about families but, if you have anything to say about that, drop us a note. I am sorry I cannot bring Jessica and Vicki in, but we have just run out of time, which is inevitable in these sessions. I am really appreciative of what you have done and for the enthusiasm and commitment that all six witnesses have brought.

As I said at the beginning, this is our first evidence session, and we are all suffering from the clunkiness of technology doing it rather than being able to see one another face to face. I hope we do not lose sight of the fact that there are some good aspects of seeing each other directly. Thank you very much.