Over the past few months, we've been supporting clients respond to business-critical issues that have arisen as a result of the pandemic and we have seen a lot of change.

So, on the 24 May 2020, almost 100 days since the country was placed into lockdown, we invited a number of our Local Government clients to a virtual round table event to reflect on their recent experiences and discuss the challenges they have faced.

We also explored the opportunities that lay ahead for their Authority, and the sector at large.

This short report summarises the discussions at that event. If these somehow echo your own experiences of the past few weeks and your aspirations for the future, we invite you to join the conversation on LinkedIn.

Introduction

A number of reports in the media have described Covid-19 as a black swan event. But is it, really?

The triple test for a black swan event is that it is an <u>unforeseen event</u>, that carries an <u>extreme impact</u>, and is <u>retrospectively predictable</u>.

No one would question the severity of the impact that this pandemic has had, but whether the event was a genuine surprise and only predictable retrospectively is another matter.

After all, health experts have cautioned about the probability and risk of pandemics for years, and Hollywood has profited from the idea through countless movies!

A number of interesting themes were raised, but three considerations that seemed to resonate the most were:

1. the influence that different attitudes to risk has on people's behaviour;
2. the significance of a simplified agenda on the ability to deliver change; and
3. the impact that galvanising social change can have on mobilising communities.

These three elements stood out because, managed together, they can, in the words of one of the participants, *"supercharge the delivery of services"* to deliver quick but also lasting benefit to local residents, businesses and communities.

Join the conversation on LinkedIn:
www.linkedin.com/company/gbpartnerships/

Linked in®

New appetite for risk

The management and administration of Local Government has been through significant change over recent years and a lot has, and continues to be, achieved despite (and perhaps because of) the austere times that accompanied this change.

Notwithstanding this, the culture in Local Government has traditionally been somewhat cautious, and policy, practice and process has often stifled innovation, drive, and delivery.

Yet this seemingly entrenched culture disappeared almost overnight when faced with the realities of Covid-19.

Decisions and actions that would normally require discussion papers, endless consultations, options appraisal, committee meetings, voting procedures and more, happened with unprecedented speed, accuracy, and effectiveness.

A number of factors have contributed to this but "*a new acceptance of risk and a new willingness to engage in riskier behaviour*" was perhaps the single most impactful factor in Southampton, according to the Council's Leader, Cllr Christopher Hammond.

The necessity to get things done – quickly – forces people out of their comfort zones and organisations to perceive and think about risk in different ways.

These changing attitudes to risk affect people's beliefs, judgments and even values, which in turn impact the way they behave and act.

Martin Smith, Regeneration Manager at Barnet Council explained how they had "*been pottering along doing some schemes that were taking forever [and] within a week of lock-down, we had this whole new scheme of road closures and cycle lanes… it had moved everything on what would have previously taken us about ten years*".

Likewise, Ellie Fry, Head of Regeneration of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council explained how the Council "*managed to roll out teams in three days when it would usually take three months*", disproving cynics that the Council cannot respond to change, and proving instead that "*our workforce can change quite easily when there's the necessity to do so.*"

And therein lies a great challenge.

How can extra-ordinary acts of behaviour witnessed in recent weeks become ordinary ways of doing things in the weeks, months, and years to come?

One consideration is to tear up the rule book and fundamentally ***replace*** (not just challenge) the policies, procedures and bureaucracy that has been underpinning service delivery in Local Government. This concept is not new.

Local Government process has been questioned and reviewed endless times. Many things have changed, but many others haven't.

In most of these cases, the *Eeyore* argument prevailed because of a long list of refutations ranging from rational considerations of "what if" challenges and uncertainty of the unknown, to banal objections stemming from grounded views that *"we've always done things this way"*, or, *"we can't change because our policy doesn't allow us to"*.

Covid-19 has shown that Local Government can ***effectively*** deal with the "what if" scenarios and manage the uncertainties of the unknown, and that there is no space for the "we've always done things this way" argument, and no excuse to accepting "policy doesn't allow us to" change.

Instead, the attitude to risk that it has shown it is capable of adopting when necessity demands, should make Authorities bold to change. It should raise aspirations, so that ideas that Members and officers' thought were off the table because they were just too difficult, can be seen to be tangible realities.

Local Authorities must start to work on an expression of what they have been through, what they believe must change, and how they must go about doing that.

Fundamental to this is a fresh look at their governance arrangements, their decision-making processes, and their rules-based culture.

Simplifying the agenda

Changing behaviours and managing more risk is, however, not enough. Another key requirement for change is to enable Authorities to adopt a laser sharp focus on the priorities that matter the most.

"Covid-19 was a single issue that was able to divert everybody's mind onto a single agenda and working in partnership around this was much easier than how things normally work" (Ellie Fry) and *"it would be highly beneficial if that progress could be sustained."* (Martin Smith)

Local Authorities deliver a large range of complex services with ever dwindling resources and the demand on them post this pandemic is only going to increase.

More resources are an obvious necessity, but an absolute 'must' has to be finding a way to simplify the agenda.

Every authority at all tiers of Local Government has a strategic plan or some form of stated strategic intent. But are these strategies a true reflection of a clear plan of action designed to achieve a shared and common long-term goal or objective, or are they more a collection of desired outcomes, negotiated between competing political and departmental 'factions'?

"Covid-19 has shown what we can do once we focus and mobilise, and how much potential there is in the organisation.

Moving forward we need to think about how we embed that can-do attitude [while] prioritising our operations – rather than improving 100 bronze level services, do we need to focus on driving 5 gold level services?"
(Councillor Christopher Hammond).

Prioritisation can be about choosing to focus on 5 services out of 100, but this may be difficult for Local Authorities who are compelled, often by statute, to deliver 100 services.

However, prioritisation can also be about choosing which 5 out of the 100 services to focus on for a particular period of time, or a particular user group, or a particular outcome.

The Local Government agenda always seems to be depicted as a marathon – a seemingly interminable, long-distance race of difficult tasks and activities. It probably is!

But what if Local Authorities had to approach this indominable task as a collection of sprints, rather than a single race?

More of a relay, or multi-sport event, than a marathon, wherein the goal is to focus on winning one race or event at a time.

Perhaps, this approach would provide the conditions for a better consideration of the specific challenges of each 'sprint' or 'event', the different skills and attributes required to address these, and the ability to concentrate resources to properly support each 'sprint', rather than spreading resources so thinly that nothing gets done at all, or done well.
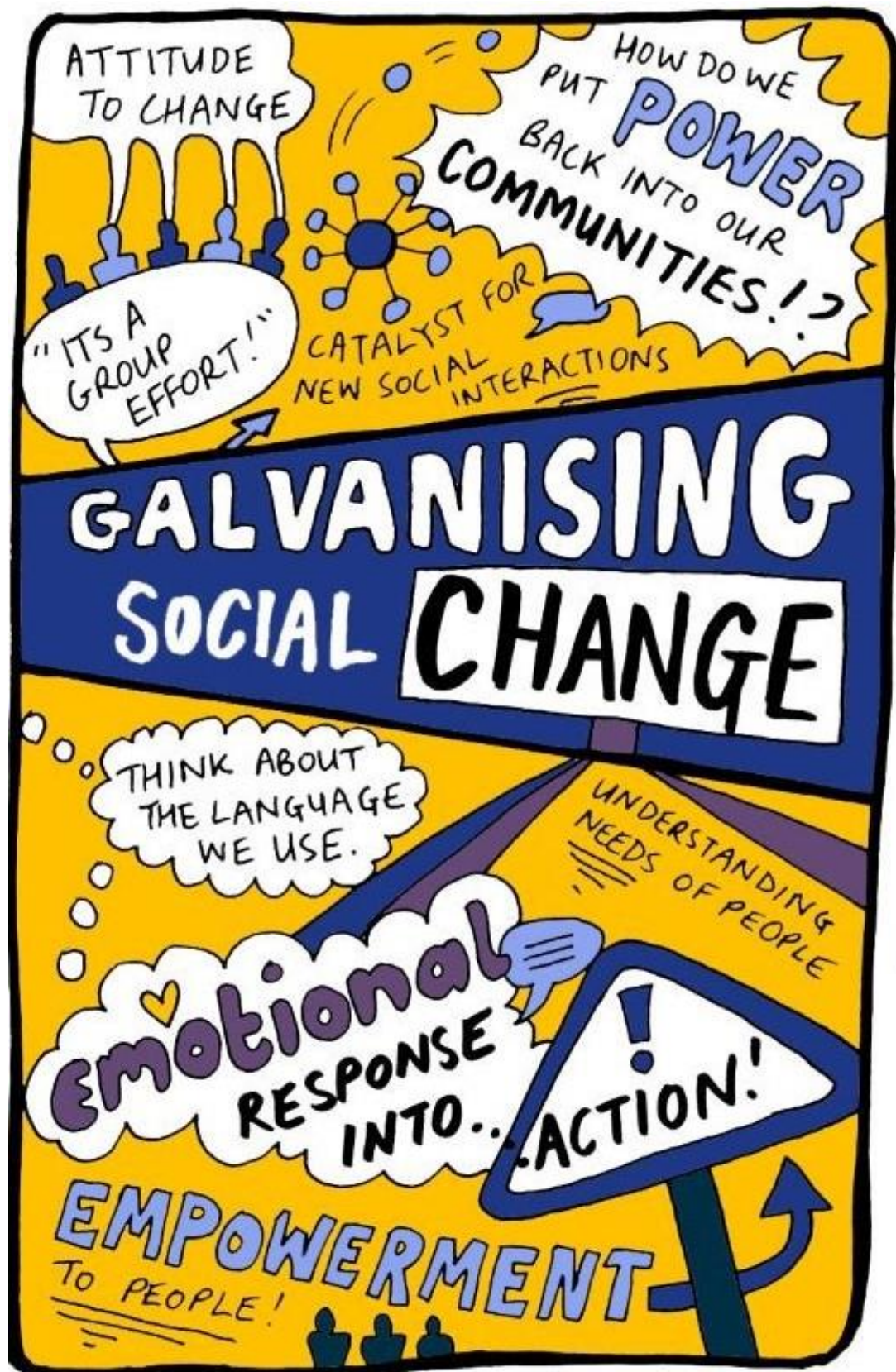
Galvanising social change

Of course, the question is "who is going to determine the sprints and the sequence of these sprints?" The answer has to be "the people".

When the nation went into lockdown, the Government invited and encouraged people to help themselves and each other. Empowered to do so, many from all walks of society stepped forward to actively support neighbours and strangers alike – from carrying out physical chores like shopping for the vulnerable and elderly, to showing acts of kindness like supporting a lonely neighbour, or a stranded foreign student.

Unfortunately, spurring such a social movement is more of an exception than the norm. The norm is a parent/child relationship between Local Government and its customers and, often, but not always, one wherein each party has been accused of an over reliance of the relationship by the other: where Councils feel that they are blamed when things go wrong, and customers feel that services are dictated to them by their Council.

Yet Covid has shown that when a social contract is properly defined, and responsibly shared, a lot more can get done, in a much shorter period of time, and with limited resource.

With the easing of lockdown measures *"we are now starting to see the seeds of people pushing back against the directive nature of the government guidelines. We are going to have to think about the language we use and being mindful about how we engage communities. We can't just dictate. We need to think about how we put power back into our communities."* (Councillor Christopher Hammond).

The parent/child relationship between Local Government and its customers must desist or at the very least change. Local Authorities must change from being a provider of services to being a catalyst for change. Their role should be to provide the right stimulus to affect the behaviours that will enable people to feel they have the power, and the right, to step-up to the mark when it comes to change. To be the change, and not the recipients of change.

So, in addition to tearing up the rule book by adopting a different attitude to risk, and simplifying their agenda with a laser sharp focus on 'sprint' based priorities, Local Authorities must also engage as leaders, not parents, to galvanise their communities into taking positive action.

Conclusion

So where does this leave us? And what are the next steps?

Former US President Barack Obama paid tribute to the late Steve Jobs (Founder and CEO of Apple Inc.) by describing him as one of the greatest visionaries and innovators of all time, because he was "**brave** enough to think differently, **bold** enough to believe he could change the world, and **talented** enough to do it".

Is Local Government **brave** enough to truly shake things up, think differently and focus its limited resources on fewer, bolder, more impactful priorities? Is it **bold** enough to believe it can indeed take more risk in the exercise of its duties? And is it **talented** enough to cement the learning from the 'crash course' that was Covid-19 and 'supercharge future service delivery'?

Perhaps we're biased by what we see across our client portfolio, but based on this experience, we believe a new chapter of public service delivery is both possible and within reach, and we look forward to supporting this exciting new change agenda.

Stephen Giacchino
gbpartnerships
Consulting

gbpartnerships.co.uk/consulting