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After the applause: understanding public management and public service ethos in the fight against Covid - 19

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19 has led to renewed public support for public services. Frontline workers symbolize a renewed ideal of public service ethos (PSE), though little attention has been paid to how the public managers delivering vital services interpret and mobilize PSE. We show how PSE is implemented by public managers reflecting their local contexts. We examine the theoretical roots of PSE and challenges by newer theories of public management before illustrating its contemporary manifestations through three case studies of local government responses to Covid-19 in England, showing how PSE has been adapted in current contexts and continues to inform public management practice.

KEYWORDS Public management; public service ethos; Covid –19

Understanding public management and public service ethos in the fight against Covid – 19

Covid-19 response by public services shows that frontline workers in healthcare, local government and social care have come to symbolize a renewed ideal of public service ethos (PSE) – the prioritizing of societal rather than self-interest and service, duty, equity and community (Lawton, Rayner, and Lasthuizen 2013). The Covid-19 pandemic quickly led to increased attention to public services in the media, focusing on the sacrifices frontline workers made and support for public sector key-worker wages increases such as NHS nurses (Campbell 2021) and for exemptions from UK National Health Service (NHS) surcharges for immigrant keyworkers with some included in the UK Honours list. However, far little attention has been paid to the question of how public managers responsible for coordinating and delivering vital services interpret and mobilize PSE and explore how PSE is implemented by public managers.

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PSE has occupied an ambiguous space in theories of public management over the last few decades, seen by some as outmoded. Since the 1990s, public sector management has seen successive waves of change driven firstly by private sector-style managerialism into the public sector (Hood 1991; Moore 1995), in the form of New Public Management (NPM) with its associated focus on efficiency, metrics and performance and then later by competing theories of public value and collaborative governance.

In this paper, we re-visit the concept of PSE in light of Covid – 19 and the response of public management and public managers. We examine what the implications of a renewed PSE might be for public managers, informed by case studies in three areas of England, each of which demonstrate different practical and conceptual tensions in public management. We focus on Directors of Public Health, city managers, and leaders in local and regional settings to illustrate the key themes and tensions in contemporary PSE in different contexts. We argue PSE is not a uniform concept but is contested and changeable, and public managers with different agencies, responsibilities and socio-political contexts may implement it variably in diverse regions and localities. Contrary to doubts about its continued relevance, this paper argues PSE remains an important driver for public managers and that the pandemic crisis facilitated its renewal.

Public managers have experienced huge resource pressure over the last decade to deliver quality services. Local lockdowns in England prior to national lockdowns in November 2020 and January 2021 saw vehement disagreement between regional Metro Mayors and central government, despite the announcement of £500 m investment by UK central government to support local authorities' Covid-19 response. This is amidst an ongoing debate concerning economic rebalancing from the South to the North of England by the UK government (Global Government Forum 2020). Our cases of Leicester City Council, the North of Tyne Combined Authority (NoTCA), and Brent in London demonstrate the needs and issues facing public managers across regions and localities. Consequently, we have focused on the following research question: how have public managers interpreted PSE in their specific context and what are the patterns of similarity and/or variation in these interpretations? Before presenting our cases, we first outline the traditional meanings of PSE, and its distinctiveness from later approaches to public management such as NPM, New Public Governance (NPG), public value and Public Service Motivation (PSM). We conceptualize PSE as agile and contested, and as an assemblage of ideas relating to service and ethos across multiple levels within organizations and by public managers.

Public service ethos

The role of PSE is long established and inherent in the Weberian concept of professional vocation in the public interest (Howell and Shand 2015; Shand and Hyde 2016). It is typically described as employees in public sector organizations subscribing to a different ethos to those in the private sector by applying long established values and rules (Public Administration Select Committee 2002). PSE assumes that public service employees seek to prioritize contributions to society over their personal self-interest (Lawton, Rayner, and Lasthuizen 2013) through service, duty, equity and community rather than ideas of efficiency associated with neoliberalism and NPM.

The historical emergence of PSE occurred in the UK Civil Service in the 19th Century, following the publication of the Northcote-Trevelyan Report in 1854 and subsequent ideas of ethos and values in the UK Civil Service and wider public management (Chapman 1993; Chapman and O'Toole 1995; Chapman 1998; Carr 1999; Horton 2006; Chapman 2019 [2010]). This report marked an important transitional point for PSE and its values including those of honesty, integrity, probity and accountability (Romzek and Dubnick 1987). Consequently, PSE-subscribing actors are inspired to prioritize public interest over their own private interests (Nolan 1995; Lawton, Rayner, and Lasthuizen 2013). PSE values have been tested by managerial approaches, chiefly NPM (Hood 1991), but also by public value (Moore 1995; Benington 2011) and NPG (Osborne 2010). NPM emphasizes measurement and performance management, use of league tables, and targets in delivery of public services (Christensen and Lægread 2011). For example, current UK government performance management targets on police arrests prioritize policy areas such as knife crime, or alternatively NHS waiting times (Elkomy and Cookson 2020) without consideration of underlying causes, how they are achieved or their widening impact.

Within the UK public sector, the implementation of NPM, managerialism and marketization has encouraged the delivery of public services by the private and to a more limited degree the not-for-profit sector. The growth of multi-sector collaboration has been facilitated by changes promoting citizens as consumers through policies promoting citizen participation and co-production (Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) 2021). This has further challenged traditional ideas of PSE. The advent of NPM and subsequent NPG and public value do not mean previous ideas are wholly supplanted by new theories rather that these tides of reform, such as efficiency, collaboration or value have sought to undermine PSE (Light 1997, 2006). This enables us to frame PSE as a flexible and tenacious concept that endures despite these reforms. The result has been the hollowing out of public service values as a result of introducing public choice and business perspectives into public service delivery (Elcock 2014).

In this paper, we approach PSE as a type of 'interpretive scheme' that may both inform and reflect public management practices. By 'interpretive scheme' we mean the assumptions and norms associated with a particular idea or set of ideas, which can be mobilized by actors to make sense of their world, their place within it and decide how to act and what to think (see Bartunek 1984). In public administration, scholars have used the concept of 'interpretive schemes' to explore how public managers construct and evaluate problems, potential responses and make decisions (Vakkuri 2010). While they denote shared understandings of an idea or ideal, they are not static and can be deployed by individual and collective actors in various ways. One line of inquiry therefore is to examine how interpretive schemes are being used, informing practices and potentially also being revised, particularly in response to different contexts and dynamic circumstances. The impact of Covid -19 on demand and delivery of public services creates an opportunity to explore whether PSE is still relevant to public management and if so, how it is informing practice. In this context, we seek to investigate the following research question: How have public managers interpreted PSE in their specific context and what are the patterns of similarity and/or variation in these interpretations?

Admittedly, PSE has not been as prominent in scholarly debates about public management over the last two decades. Alternative approaches such as concepts of NPM and the post - NPM ideas of NPG, public value and co - production, which

stress underpinning ideas of efficiency, accountability and collaborative governance, respectively, have been the subject of much more discussion. In order to analyse the relevance and contemporary meanings of PSE, we explain how these approaches vary in their assumptions and emphasize these underpinning ideas, drawing upon the framework set out by Hood (1991) set out in Table 1.

These newer approaches in public management contributed to PSE being characterized as increasingly outdated and contested, diffused across multiple levels and places and potentially less relevant in the context of public services delivery by public, private and third-sector actors. However, despite criticism and neoliberal policy attacks, there is evidence that assumptions and values associated with PSE have survived managerial reforms to public sector delivery (Needham 2007; Booth – Smith and Leigh 2016; Le Grand and Roberts 2018). There is also no ‘one’ model of PSE.

NPM differs markedly from traditional notions of PSE in focusing on the need to prioritize efficiency and performance (Hood 2000). Post – NPM ideas such as public value also emphasize value as part of the public interest and critique NPM as not reflecting the realities of service delivery. For example, NPG demonstrates the importance of different sectors in collaborative governance and the delivery of public services (Osborne 2010). However, underpinning ideas of NPG like partnership delivery and collaborative governance complicate PSE. The range of actors engaged in collaborative delivery such as NPG across the public, private and third sectors is distinct from traditional ideas of PSE, focused on public sector institutions (Carr 1999; Chapman 1998) and may lead to a dilution of ideas and meaning of PSE among public managers. Moreover, PSE differs from ideas of co – production in that ideas are delivered in top-down service through public sector institutions (Chapman 2019 [2010]).

In addition, there is a need to clarify the relationship, and differences, between PSE and PSM (Ward and Carpenter 2013; Chen 2020; Corduneanu, Dudau, and Kominis 2020; Piatak and Holt 2020; Ritz et al. 2020; O’Leary 2021; Piatak and Holt

Table 1. Use of key terms, theoretical eras and PSE (Hood 1991).

Theoretical eras and PSE	Context	Term	Relationship to PSE
Public Administration	Public managers accountable for metrics and targets	Accountability	Mistaken focus on public managers as bureaucrats rather than workers driven by PSE
New Public Management (NPM)	Efficiency in public services	Efficiency	Challenges traditional view of PSE as emotional and immeasurable
Post NPM:			
New Public Governance (NPG)	Partnership and collaborative delivery of public services	Collaboration	PSE present across a range of organizations in delivery; diffused across sectors
Public Value (PV)	Services that provide value to the public	Value and public interest	Responsible management of public finances and public health
Co – Production	Public services produced with service users	Collaboration	PSE experienced by service users and public services staff (frontline and managers)

2021). Ideas of PSM have been examined in previous debates in *Public Management Review* (Chen 2020; Corduneanu, Dudau, and Kominis 2020; Piatak and Holt 2020; Ritz et al. 2020). These narratives and debates enable us to revisit the linkages and differences between PSE and PSM. PSM critique ideas of NPM and resultant managerialism in the public sector and asserts the underlying motivations of public servants. PSM is more developed theoretically than PSE and over the last fifteen years, PSM has generated a body of (largely quantitative) literature. Both PSM and PSE encompass ideals, values and norms such as civic duty, compassion and self-sacrifice (Perry 1997) between the public and private sectors (Stackman and Becker 2006) and calling to care in service provision (Perry and Wise 1990; Perry 1997; Brannen, Brockmann, and Mooney 2007; Camilleri 2007; Cree and Davis 2007; Vandenabeele 2011; Moynihan, Vandenabeele, and Blom – Hansen 2013; Mosher, Vandenabeele, and Blom-Hansen 2013; Pederson 2013; Thompson and Christensen 2018). Some authors (see for instance Perry 1997) have also suggested the underlying aspects of PSM compose family, political orientation, and faith, ideas which have been explored in the literature on PSM (Ritz, Brewer, and Neumann 2016). These more normative aspects of PSM sit alongside rational and affective constituent parts of PSM (Perry and Wise 1990). However, there are important differences between PSM and PSE. PSM draws on mainstream psychology, is focused on the individual and assumes motivation is something that already exists that can be measured and quantified (Paarlberg and Lavigna 2010; Washington 2020). In contrast, we conceptualize PSE as an interpretive scheme that reflects shared understandings is constructed and exists in a mutually constitutive relationship with practice and institutional arrangements.

For this and other reasons we consider PSE distinctive and worthy of dedicated attention. Despite challenges to PSE from more recent theories of public management, the values and ideas inherent in PSE remain well established in academic debates (Moore 1995; Stoker 2006; Meijer 2014; Liddle 2016; Myers 2017), have lasting relevance and may be experiencing a resurgence and renewal. At the same time, we recognize this may exacerbate inherent contradictions within the underlying premises of PSE.

While we have so far examined more historical literatures on PSE, and the theoretical impact of ideas such as NPM and NPG, we now turn to the very recent ‘real-world’ developments we argue warrant a reconsideration and revisiting of PSE. Most of the extant debates on public management during periods of crisis have focused on the communication of pandemic-related science by governments in the Covid-19 response (Van Dooren and Noordegraaf 2020). So too, the role of the not – for – profit sector and related funding (Bostock et al. 2020); public policy in crisis management (Brandebo 2020; Van der Wal 2020); and the need for cooperation in delivery of responses to the pandemic (Blondin and Boin 2020). Scholars have emphasized the Covid-19 pandemic and response, as setting a new research agenda in public administration (Dunlop, Ongaro, and Baker 2020). Yet discussion of PSE appears to be lacking.

Therefore, part of this agenda should include the need to contextualize the conceptual significance of PSE, how it may evolve in future, and crucially wider theoretical implications for PSE, and broader ideas of public interest, public value or collaborative governance. In particular, our focus is on how PSE is constructed and mobilized by public sector managers, rather than just frontline public service

workers, for example, nurses and carers. While Hoggett and Miller (2006) have argued normative ideals referenced by PSE are at odds with the rationality of professional life, we suggest that public sector managers may be actively involved in finding ways to make sense of, and accommodate both, in their embodied and reflective practice in response to the realities of service provision. Such active meaning-making may well have been heightened as a consequence of the pressures brought to bear due to Covid-19.

Public sector managers had been drawn into a pro-business and economic value-driven culture of private sector actors through the use of public and private collaborations. For instance, public procurement and strategic commissioning with the private and third sectors have been heavily promoted by the UK government as a way to deliver additional capacity through the Covid-19 crisis. Within a local government context, UK local authorities have continued to be driven to outsource services resulting in an estimated procurement spend of £100bn (47% of their budgets) annually in public health (Institute for Government (IfG) 2018; Tuddenham and Ham 2020) and social care alone (Association of Directors of Adult Social Care (ADASS) 2020). Procurement and commissioning processes are contractually complex and require technical expertise (Glasby 2012), with the government promoting Covid-19 investment as a key lever in local economic recovery (Tussell Research Limited 2020), although the impact of this investment on the local economy and its motivations may yet be contested. In addition to the private sector, the third sector is part of this landscape of public services delivery networks, as described in NPG (Osborne 2010). Indeed, the third sector has been integral in the UK's Covid-19 response, some of whom, such as social care workers, have been most impacted by lack of PPE, economic and employment precarity and considerable infection risk. The everyday implications for public managers in Covid-19 response are multiple, due to funding constraints and allocating over-stretched resources and complex modes of delivery (Sorensen and Torfing 2019).

In summary, within existing debates about PSE and public managers, PSE has been challenged by NPM, NPG and broader ideas of collaborative governance. Managers are still subject to centralized control (Ferlie, Hartley, and Martin 2003; Ashworth et al. 2013) and the involvement of multiple parties in service delivery creates a complex landscape to negotiate and navigate (Eriksson and Hellström 2020). PSE is open to interpretation by public managers dependent on their respective contexts, along with managerial agency and how it is mobilized by public managers will vary. PSE elevates public interest, equity and duty rather than performance measurement and efficiency and tends to essentialize the difference between public and private sector managers (Hood 2000; Ashworth et al. 2013). PSE has not vanished, although its application is greatly challenged, co-existing alongside a public managerialism that emphasizes performance management, metrics and efficiency (Bourgault and van Dorpe 2013). Accordingly, some scholars have called for the 'new PSE' (Brereton and Temple 1999; Aldridge and Stoker 2002; Booth – Smith and Leigh 2016) based in established understandings but acknowledging the need to re-examine its meaning in contemporary contexts such as collaborative governance including how it can incorporate ideas considered antithetical to it, such as NPM, NPG and public enterprise (Shand and Hyde 2016). Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic requires us to re-examine PSE and its continued relevance in crisis and emergency response that involves private and third-sector organizations.

PSE in the UK: public management and public service ethos

PSE and public managers have received comparatively little attention in the academic literature, but it would be a mistake to assume it only applies to frontline staff providing public services. Consequently, it is important to differentiate between public management and public managers. Whereas ‘public management’ can be described as leading, administrating and resourcing public organizations – increasingly including the private and voluntary sectors – public managers are the managers of those organizations (Needham, Mangan, and Dickinson 2016; Van der Wal 2017).

Recent debates promote that PSE needs to be adaptive to reflect the public managers experiences and the role of public managers as a 21st public servant, manager, or councillor (Needham, Mangan, and Dickinson 2016; Van der Wal 2017; Bose 2020; Needham et al. 2020). Public managers are required to engage with citizens in new ways, and foster relationships with a wider set of actors (Needham, Mangan, and Dickinson 2016); an understanding of being a public manager in a world of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (Van der Wal 2017, 2020); and being catalysts for local-level change (Needham et al. 2020). Public managers work in a constantly changing environment. Covid-19 response has initiated a ‘renewed’ PSE, a phenomenon that emerges in times of crisis involving emergency response (Brogan 2005). However, it is likely that different interpretations of PSE co-exist (Ainsworth and Ghin 2020), differences that may reflect the specificities of occupation, location and operations. These conceptual challenges to PSE and the context of Covid – 19 response warrants scholarly attention and an opportunity to revisit PSE.

Local parameters of the PSE

Though central government has led in the removal of power and decision-making from local public health services, the role of local government is to provide leadership and stewardship of place (Needham, Mangan, and Dickinson 2016; Parker 2019), with those local powers enshrined in legislation (HM Government 2000; 2011). Covid-19 saw further emergency amendments to existing legislation, for instance to specific protection *duties*, through amendments to the Care Act 2014, the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020, and a review of 65 safeguards for children in care by the Department of Education in spring 2020 (HM Government 2014; Adoption and Children (HM Government 2020). Here we investigate local variations within one UK country, examining PSE in wider collaborative governance contexts.

The UK government response to Covid-19 has been mostly centralized with the focus on control from Whitehall and Public Health England, in contrast to local government and local public health departments (Murphy and Walker 2020), alongside areas of cooperation such as stressing the importance of vaccination. Local government public managers rapidly reviewed local services in their Covid-19 response, with Local Resilience Forums (developed under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004) co-ordinating arrangements between multi-agency partners.

The reliance on keyworkers and front-line workers appears to provide evidence of a renewed PSE. This is not one that equates to the staid, bureaucratic image of civil servants deliberating on and enacting PSE after extended reflection (Pratchett and Wingfield 1996; Du Gay 2000; Horton 2006), or a PSE of public interest (Parker 2015)

but a PSE of crisis response and delivery. Extant debates on governance responses during the pandemic have focused on leadership in turbulent times (Ansell, Sørensen, and Torfing 2020) and the effects on trust during a global health crisis and the role of public administration responses (Deslatte 2020). PSE is not a static concept and like all meaning subject to change. We focus on the role of PSE in collaborative governance in response to the pandemic at the local level (Deslatte, Hatch, and Stokan 2020) and examine the question, how have public managers interpreted PSE in their specific context and what are the patterns of similarity and/or variation in these interpretations?

Methodology

We undertook a thematic qualitative analysis of web pages and media sources (Mackieson and Connolly 2019) across three cases in England. This focused on comparing the key public management responses to the pandemic in terms of funding, support, and partnerships. We undertook a thematic analysis to identify the ways in which PSE-related ideas emerged and are constructed in the three cases by public managers. Philosophically, in our thematic analysis, we used a constructivist position to apply a reflexive hermeneutical understanding. This includes ‘involvement with data in terms of interpretation of materials through producing meanings, critique of interpretation through theoretical perspectives such as power, politics and ideological positions the ideal situation incorporates theory being re – moulded by the data’ (Howell 2013, 187). This approach emphasizes a reality based on an interpretive scheme and local experiences ontologically. This constructivist approach allows for the possibility that PSE may well be manifested in diverse ways, reflecting both the different actors coordinating response and different contexts in leadership of place. Our focus on constructivism reflects the variety of organizations across multiple levels that deliver public services, rather than an institutional perspective reflecting traditional ideas of PSE and public administration.

Cases were chosen to capture differences in (i) city council (ii) city regional and (iii) inner London contexts on the basis that this provided differing governance settings of the impact of Covid, particularly as the three areas experienced high numbers of reported Covid – 19 infections. Our first case of Leicester experienced the longest period of lockdown in England through periods of both local and national lockdowns. The second case of NoTCA was selected as it encompassed a large geographic area and bordered on Scotland whose Covid-19 response differed. Thus, it was close to communities living under different restrictions. Brent was selected to capture a London area with an early high incidence of Covid-19 numbers. This is an important point of comparison in understanding a renewed PSE: our study examines city regional and local contexts that include a range of public managers engaged in response to the pandemic. The three case studies cases were investigated during the summer of 2020 which enabled us to identify connections between PSE, Covid-19 and local public management in England as well as the interpretation, mobilization and application of PSE across different contexts.

Our analytical approach is reflected in our interpretation of PSE. We operationalize it as a set of shared assumptions that inform and reflect practice but that are also multidimensional, confused (Rayner, Lawton, and Allinson 2011) and contested. We operationalize PSE as agile in adapting – renewing – despite the challenges of NPM,

Table 2. Coding and themes.

Cases	Data coded	Key themes	Examples of data
Leicester City Council	(1) Renewal of PSE (2) Flexibility (3) Public interest (4) Place	1) the reinvigoration and renewal of PSE; (2) the requirement for public managers to work creatively and flexibly, applying PSE differently in varying contexts; (3) the malleability of the public interest; (4) control of local space	Local – national tensions in PSE (1, 2, 4) Core values of public interest (3) Collaborative approach between local authority, City Director of Public Health and Public Health England (2) Confusion around lockdown boundaries (4)
NoTCA	(1) PSE (2) Flexibility (3) Public interest (4) Place	1) the reinvigoration and renewal of PSE; (2) the requirement for public managers to work creatively and flexibly, applying PSE differently in varying contexts; (3) the malleability of the public interest; (4) control of local space	Focus on local economy (3, 4) Malleability of PSE and shared accountability (1, 2) Collaborative approach in Covid-19 response (2) PSE could be interpreted in varying ways by different actors (2)
Brent	(1) PSE (2) Flexibility (3) Public interest (4) Place	1) the reinvigoration and renewal of PSE; (2) the requirement for public managers to work creatively and flexibly, applying PSE differently in varying contexts; (3) the malleability of the public interest; (4) control of local space	Ambiguity of public interest and PSE (1, 3) Economic recovery and regeneration (3) Isolation of case within large geographic area (4) Local – national tensions (2, 4)

NPG and public value. PSE is conceptualized here as an assemblage of ideas, norms and feelings related to service, duty and community across multiple levels (local, regional, national, supra national, global), that is mobilized and understood by public servants in different organizations across public, private and third-sector contexts in varied ways, as in ideas of practice variation (Lounsbury 2008, 2011).

This also foregrounds the importance of location and place. Place leadership impacts on social and economic development (Beer and Clower 2014; Hess and Waller 2017; Sotaurata, Beer, and Gibney 2017; Healey 2018; Sotaurata, Kurikka, and Kolehmainen 2020) and provides influence across institutional, organizational, geographical and/or sectoral boundaries (Sotaurata, Kurikka, and Kolehmainen 2020). Place leadership can help in considering *how* public managers make sense of their resources, their roles and the parameters within which they can act, in times of crisis.

We researched publicly available media and internet sources (Hess and Waller 2017; Baines and Karatas-Ozkan 2019) to review the crisis response of the three selected cases. Firstly, we considered how the three case study local and regional government websites communicated Covid-19 related issues. Second, we examined media reports about the localities, as sources in the public sphere can provide quick access to rapidly unfolding information and initial analysis on new or emerging research topics. We undertook this approach to map the potential meanings and interpretations of PSE in these different contexts and how public managers translated these into actions in response to the pandemic. We reviewed the vision and values statements for each case study. In Leicester and Brent, these were articulated in ‘core values’ statements on their webpages, and in the NoTCA mission statement and economic vision. In Table 2, we set out how we coded these findings, how the themes then emerged, and examples of this data for each case study.

Table 3. Key demographic context and key themes across the case study areas.

	Leicester City Council	North of Tyne Combined Authority	Brent Council
Population covered	300,000*	880,000**	313,616***
Tier level when in England tier system, Autumn 2020	3	2	2
Key Public Managers in Covid – 19 response	Leicester City Council; NHS; City Director of Public Health (DPH); Leicester City Mayor	North of Tyne Combined Authority (NoTCA); Local Enterprise Partnership; NHS; Chamber of Commerce	Brent Council; NHS; Mayor of London
Key themes from the findings and similarities and differences in PSE	Local – national tensions; first local lockdown in England; transparency; public interest	Collaborative approach to crisis response; early focus on regional economic recovery; PSE shared across public and private sector actors	Public interest; place leadership; social justice and equality as core aspects of PSE in practice

Sources: *Leicester City Council, 2020a **North of Tyne Combined Authority (NoTCA), 2020 ***Brent Council, 2020a

Findings

Table 3 sets the context for PSE in public management during Covid-19 response, focused on key demographics and actors within the cases examined. The context for the cases is set out in Table 3, including the tiered system of categorizing local restrictions in England used in late 2020, with tier 3 being the highest level of Covid – 19 restrictions. We have omitted the number of Covid – 19 cases per 100,000 in the cases due to the rapidly changing nature of these measurements. We first provide an account of each of the three cases followed by discussion of the overarching themes they highlight and examined how public managers interpreted PSE and responded in their respective contexts amid wider collaborative governance delivery.

Case 1: Leicester city and second wave lockdown; local transparency versus centralized control

Leicester was the first English city that experienced an extended Covid-19 lockdown, in summer 2020, and had the second highest level of Covid – 19 transmissions in England in early 2021 (Johnstone 2021). Following initial central government relaxations on Covid-19, in summer 2020, there was an increase in the number of people testing positive for Covid-19 in Leicester. To ensure this rise was quickly controlled, at the end of June 2020 central government hurriedly announced that Leicester and its surrounding area would follow stricter lockdown restrictions for a further two weeks, in contrast to other parts of England. This was within a rapidly changing policy context, with councils granted new powers on a regular basis, for example by Boris Johnson in July 2020 to shut down areas quickly in the event of local lockdown, emphasizing the separation of powers in public management (Rosenbloom 1983).

In Leicester, the immediate response was confusion. Before the official statement by central government was made, Peter Soulsby (elected Leicester City Mayor) said he had been in contact with the Chief Medical Officer in London, and it would have been ‘far better’ if testing levels in the city had been higher. Soulsby described the UK government’s approach to the city’s outbreak as ‘intensely frustrating’ as Public Health England

had not supplied data promptly. At this time, as the locally elected mayor, Soulsby was the front-facing spokesperson for the local government response in Leicester. His role in the media can be contrasted to the public managers hidden from view, rarely named in the media, with the ‘council’ named as the key actor rather than individual managers.

In contrast, the City Director of Public Health (DPH) was regularly cited in the media. Since 2012, every local authority with public health responsibilities must employ a DPH in partnership with Public Health England (Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) 2020). The DPH was arguably the key public manager in this story, in contrast with Sir Peter Soulsby as an elected politician. Illustrating the need for public managers to be reserved in their response, in contrast with the mayor’s political approach, the DPH’s views were more measured as identified in an online interview in summer 2020. On Covid-19, the DPH stated ‘these are not easy calls that we are having to make. We have to balance the immediate threat of Covid-19 against the long-term threats to our society and the economy’ (De Montfort University 2020). This is a balance we have seen played out over the autumn and winter of 2020 as additional local and national measures were introduced. Leicester City Council focused on key areas such as the local translation of central government guidance. There was an emphasis on help for local communities experiencing wellbeing issues or problems meeting costs for locally delivered services, focused on ‘practical advice and guidance based on national government guidelines’ (Leicester City Council 2020a).

The Leicester case illustrates the challenge of implementing local lockdowns, and how they are put into practice. It raises two issues. First, the case exposed local and regional versus national issues in the Covid-19 response, raising questions about whether local lockdowns should be the responsibility of local public managers, or national governments. The initial confusion around lockdown boundaries within Leicester, alongside perceived lack of communication between national and local levels, had vital implications for public managers in the Covid-19 response. Further local lockdowns occurred in England, and tensions between regional and state public managers and national governments were unfolding globally, with regional shutdowns in Spain, Germany and Australia.

Second, the Leicester case illustrates how public managers handle tensions between central and local government alongside party political differences. Local public managers are required to manage crisis situations with transparency and clarity (both core public values, discussed below) and in the public interest. This raises the question of which public interest is expected to be served by local government: the broader national public or their own constituency. The Leicester case demonstrates, both through organizational level and individual level data that PSE strongly overlaps with the public interest and can be interpreted differently by organizations and actors in collaborative governance settings.

Case 2: North of Tyne Combined Authority (NoTCA): Covid-19, PSE and partnership governance – help or hindrance?

Second, with its focus on collaboration between different stakeholders, the case of NoTCA considers how Covid-19 was managed in a formal partnership governance setting. This is important for PSE and public managers, as research on PSE has mainly focused on organizations and professions rather than collaboration (Parker 2015).

NoTCA was established in April 2014 and consists of seven local councils. In comparison with the other cases, the NoTCA website is designed to support how partner organizations promote a multi-agency approach to providing a Covid-19 response. Its focus on partnership provides a different lens, particularly with its interest in improving the local economy and developing a high-skill workforce. This is because Combined Authorities, such as NoTCA, work at a strategic level to convene local stakeholders from the public and private sectors to implement central government economic proposals. In contrast with the Covid-19 public health focus, the NoTCA website concentrated on stabilizing the local economy with the pledge to invest £5 million to help businesses and communities in the North of Tyne respond to Covid-19 (North of Tyne Combined Authority 2020). This was led by a Covid-19 economic response group to promote strong and collaborative economic leadership on the impacts of Covid-19 (North East Local Enterprise Partnership 2020; Key Cities 2020). This group included NoTCA, the Local Enterprise Partnership made up of local business leaders, transportation providers, universities, the Confederation of British Industry, and the Chamber of Commerce (both representing local businesses).

The example of NoTCA highlights two challenges for PSE, public management and Covid-19. The first issue is about the risks of agreeing shared policy and lines of accountability in partnership settings. The current North East Governance system is very fragmented (Shutt and Liddle 2019), with limited civil service capacity and lack of strategic, united voice for the region. Liddle, Shutt, and Pellow (2020) asked whether such complex governance is too fragmented to implement multi-agency delivery. A key question is how the various actors involved in partnership bodies like NoTCA ensure a shared approach to planning for the public interest. This meant partners must agree and apply shared public values to promote the public interest. This can be undermined by the fragmentation associated with this type of partnership working, as partners may also wish to promote their own values. In this case, PSE values of accountability and ownership are raised (Hodgkinson, Radnor, and Glennon 2018). There are the potential tensions of 'shared accountability', in contrast with local government organizations where accountability is more linear. This demonstrates PSE across different actors in collaborative governance and partnership delivery, as promoted by NPG.

A second issue identified in this case is the joint working between the public and private sector, which challenged traditional understandings of PSE (Elcock 2014). Whereas examples of this may be obscure and technical (Covid-19 testing and tracing contracts), the partnership working in this case was celebrated. This shows a renewed PSE can be a part of partnership delivery and is not confined to vocational organizations as in original Weberian understanding (Swedberg 1998). Further, it raised the question as to how far PSE might extend beyond public sector organizations per se, diffusing to those in the private sector who work in partnership to deliver public services. The themes arising in the NoTCA case also demonstrated the malleability of PSE and how this could be interpreted by different actors, and how PSE overlapped with concepts such as the public interest.

Case 3: The London Borough of Brent and Church End – a Covid-19 island?

Third, we focused on the case of Church End in the London Borough of Brent. This case was concerned with how public managers planned to isolate a distinct geographical area within a larger Borough. Which neighbourhoods were hardest hit by Covid-19? This question was asked by Goodier (2020) about Church End, with the highest amount of UK Covid-19 fatalities. Brent displayed a number of high-risk aspects to the pandemic. As a small deprived area with a large British-Somali population, it is in the bottom 20% of poorest areas in England. In the initial stages of the pandemic, 28 people were certified as dying with Covid-19 on their death certificates in Brent between 1 March and 17 April 2020, more than anywhere else in the country (Brent and Kilburn Times 2020).

As a source of information and advice, this was not referred to on the Brent Council web pages. In contrast, the website stated Church End is a borough priority area, currently home to a thriving shopping market, green spaces and promoted for mixed use regeneration, set around the ‘economic revitalisation of the local centre’ (Brent Council 2020b). The specific Covid-19 webpage did not refer to Church End but stated that ‘Brent has one of the highest death tolls in the UK: remember to stay 2 metres apart’ (Brent Council, 2020c). Understandably, guidance on the Covid-19 page was clear and direct, although it noted ‘Council services are stretched as we assist the community during this challenging time, but we are working hard to try and maintain service delivery to our residents as close to “normal” as possible’ (Brent Council 2020c).

These are key issues for public managers as an example of the interface between the promise of economic regeneration, poverty and Covid-19. This area had high deprivation, record levels of poverty and health inequalities. Importantly, concepts such as social justice and equality have traditionally informed the application of PSE in practice, particularly for public managers’ and officers’ desire to work for the state rather than private sector. The reference to economic revitalization also spoke to the discourse of the commercialization of local authority services.

The example of Church End further highlighted questions around public interest, leadership and stewardship of place by public managers. If a geographical area such as Church End – ‘zoned’ within a wider borough – experienced avoidance or required isolation, how do public managers consider the specific public interest of these members of the community? This illustrated the ambiguity of ‘public interest’ in PSE, by raising questions about the scaling of national and local public interest. In sum, when there is a clash between ‘public interests’ which one takes precedence: the national or the local? Public managers interpret PSE values and meanings, and respond relative to their context (Mosher 1968) such as in these local and regional contexts or in other multi-level or collaborative governance settings.

Thematic analysis

Following our analysis of the three cases, we identified four themes that were prominent across each of the cases’ web pages and that relate to the underpinning ideas of PSE we identify in this paper. These themes arose from the web content in each of the three cases and show the common strands in combating Covid – 19 across the cases. We used the themes as a means of comparing across our cases, illustrating that

although PSE can be interpreted differently by public servants and organizations, these commonalities arose in three distinct collaborative governance settings. The themes were: (1) the reinvigoration and renewal of PSE; (2) the requirement for public managers to work creatively and flexibly, applying PSE differently in varying contexts; (3) the malleability of the public interest. The final theme (4) focused on the control of local space – considerations which are not typically associated with the traditional PSE, but we argue are important for a renewed PSE; and consideration of how neighbourhoods with high levels of a virus may need to be isolated in the city's public interest (though this is fragmented by competing interests within communities) and the control and deprivation of liberty. These four themes emerged from the findings across the cases, as set out in [Table 2](#).

Comparing across the cases, it was apparent that Covid-19 may reinvigorate PSE, but this could exacerbate pre-existing contradictions and tensions between PSE and public sector managerialism (and may be what public managers experienced). Moreover, PSE could be understood in different ways by individual public managers and by organizational actors, each of whom aimed to work in the public interest.

Second, the cases suggested that frontline public managers needed to work creatively and flexibly to manage tensions, using professional expert knowledge and skills and agency. The cases provide important viewpoints for public managers: some that are well-rehearsed (political and funding tensions between central, regional and local levels), but also public interest in practice, as well as the recent focus on the management of place through controlling borders (e.g. local lockdowns and interfaces between partner agencies). This identified the importance of PSE in collaborative governance arrangements and service delivery across multiple levels, where a range of actors were engaged in public management. This was especially true during times of crisis, as a common bond of ethos and acting in the public interest was vital.

Third, an observation arising from the cases was the malleability in meanings of PSE. This was not a new observation, but Covid-19 exposed what this meant in practice. PSE could also be linked to front-line practice. Parker (2015) investigated how PSE was constructed and understood by managers from local government, health and education with different meanings for managers in specific organizational settings at strategic, team or personal levels. Ainsworth and Ghin (2020) reviewed literature on public servants' self-identity and the challenge to traditional public services by NPM and private sector management techniques. They identified three observations for understanding public servants' identity: how changes impact at the personal level; meanings for professional and occupational identity; and how the changes modified how employees viewed their organizations. They concluded that the impact of NPM on public services identity is complex with public managers and servants mobilizing different understandings of PSE in environments such as collaborative governance. These identities may clash with the need to implement outcomes that seem at odds with established ideas of PSE. For instance, can public managers remain transparent in their dealings with citizens, or should they withhold information not thought to be in the public interest? The extent to which a public manager can be accountable for managing an intangible and continually changing crisis is questionable.

Fourth, a further issue for public managers arising from the cases was locality border management. In Leicester, this concerned the confusion about how a community – or whole city – could be locked down. Considerations of 'liminal zones' within political boundaries, for example in Church End, might require

enhanced public management responses. In Newcastle, the architecture of Combined Authorities led to fragmentation among Local Authorities in their Covid-19 response (Shutt and Liddle 2019; Liddle, Shutt, and Pellow 2020), alongside tensions between national and local levels over funding and resources. Each of these issues had significant implications for public managers in Covid-19 responses, together with policing communities' adherence to restrictions. The final theme addressed public interest and liberty. It suggested a renewed PSE for public managers would need to take account of the tensions in safeguarding both social justice and public health, including how to work through the contradictions inherent in restricting (some) citizens' liberty for the benefit of the 'public interest'.

PSE in public management and delivery

We argue that the cases show evidence of a renewed PSE. However, it is one that is considerably more complex and ambiguous than previous versions. Moreover, a renewed PSE cannot easily rely on old dualisms between the public and private sectors. Public managers are part of delivery that often involves complex partnerships composed of a range of actors, and this collaborative approach should not be considered as distinct from their commitment to service. Indeed, there have been significant challenges for collaborative governance in the Covid – 19 response, for instance disagreement over the imposition and lifting of restrictions locally and regionally, with Metro Mayors in the UK questioning central government policy, in relation to funding and economic support (BBC News 2020). In terms of how PSE has changed, we emphasize the renewed PSE shows the agility and endurance to maintain relevance in the face of conceptual challenges set out earlier in this paper. Maintaining relevance despite efficiency in NPM and the public interest in public value, as well as collaborative governance through NPG and co – production shows the agility and endurance of PSE. Covid – 19 responses have shone a light on this.

While public service values have been central to previous theorizing about PSE (Nolan 1995; Pratchett and Wingfield 1996) there has been limited attention paid to articulating what is meant by 'value' and which 'public values' should take priority (Van der Wal, De Graaf, and Lasthuizen 2008). There may be variation in how ideas of value and of PSE were interpreted and mobilized, dependency on local and regional contexts, which echo ideas of practice variation (Lounsbury 2008, 2011). We have used our cases to identify and understand what shape these interpretations and variations take across local and regional contexts (Ferry and Khalifa 2019).

If there was a renewed PSE it has so far focused on frontline response. Amidst Covid – 19 response, we witnessed a resurgence of public and media support for public services and established PSE ideas of duty, vocation and community. Public managers, however, have been left out of this discussion. Since the 1990s, public management has focused on the achievement of performance metrics with public managers charged with achieving them and being blamed when targets are not met or policies fail, such as UK Home Office migration targets. In contrast, we argue the emergence of a renewed PSE applies to public managers as well as frontline public services staff. Conceptually, this disrupts the established idea of public managers as situated within a managerial framework that entails distinct attitudes from frontline workers. Public managers, we argue, must be part of how we conceptualize a renewed PSE.

This does not mean that efficiency and performance measurement are not important. Metrics of efficiency, targets, and performance management are not rooted in traditional ideas of PSE, and these determine the delivery of key aspects of public management, security, need and place, as we have seen in our cases. Conversely, Weberian concepts of PSE are, to a greater extent, informed by ideas of duty and service for public managers. Arising from the Covid-19 response, the idea of *value* has re-emerged. This changes the concepts of both economic and emotional value in public services. The cases show the tensions and ambiguities inherent in PSE itself, particularly apparent in practice, by conflicting interpretations of public interest across the three cases, set in the context of collaborative governance. Here, the interpretation of PSE by public managers is influenced by the contexts within which they are employed.

The discourse in pandemic response has emphasized frontline workers, but this renewed PSE must also include public managers. Public managers may also demonstrate PSE in less visible ways than frontline workers. This is conceptually significant. We are not merely seeing the reprisal of Weberian ideas but rather a renewed and contested PSE, challenged by more recent concepts but also adapting to them. Underpinning the key themes identified in the cases was the need to perform effectively. This does not just concern costs, as emphasized by NPM, but reflects the public mood of concern about delivery and contribution.

Concluding remarks

This article has examined the role of public management, public managers and PSE in Covid-19 response. We have focused on the question: How have public managers interpreted PSE in their specific context and what are the patterns of similarity and/or variation in these interpretations? We have argued that the response to the pandemic by both UK government and the wider public has presented an opportunity to revisit PSE, with consequences for the practice of public managers. Our findings show across the cases a reinvigoration and renewal of PSE with public managers applying PSE differently in varying contexts. We also found across the cases the malleability of the public interest as well as the control of local space. These findings show PSE present in collaborative governance contexts, more closely linked to the post-NPM environment of NPG than target-driven cultures of NPM. These findings also have practical implications: increased attention and appreciation for public services through response to the Covid-19 pandemic or increased funding and levels of pay for public services staff.

PSE has also been challenged by theories of NPM, public value and NPG. Ideas of performance management certainly do not correspond with traditional concepts of PSE, though we have seen PSE sit alongside these ideals connected with NPG, such as collaborative governance or multi-level governance contexts. Moreover, PSE still survives alongside ideas of public interest, public value and PSM. We have argued that the response to Covid-19 has provided a reminder – even a reshaping – of the importance of public services. The role of managers is vital in public services, and incorporating an understanding of the complexity, ambiguity and tension of contemporary PSE will benefit large organizations such as local authorities. Here, we have shown the different interpretations public managers have of PSE and the ambiguities of the concept in practice.

In connecting our contribution here to previous debates in public management, the findings show the agility of PSE to retain relevance in the face of NPM reforms (Hood 2000), and to endure across collaborative delivery arrangements such as those in NPG

(Liddle 2016), which we have seen across our cases in Covid – 19 response. PSE also shows difference rather than convergence with PSM (Rayner, Lawton, and Allinson 2011) here and has relevance to ideas of public value (Liddle 2016) as the findings across our three cases show.

There are limitations to the approach we used in this study. We have drawn on publicly available data, from public bodies and public managers. These data emphasize the public facing aspects of response and demonstrate responsive policies rather than interviews with public managers. Therefore, there may be differences between how PSE was interpreted in drafting these responses and the elements of public interest focused PSE we have identified in the cases. Further, the case studies are all from one country.

A future research agenda examining PSE could include a comparative focus. PSE is subject to interpretation by public managers, and like NPM, the influence of different norms and national contexts on PSE require investigation. Future research could examine the implications for PSM given the insights on PSE we have set out here. Future research agendas could compare PSE in Covid-19 response and PSE in the post-Covid era across nation states, and whether the pandemic has altered interpretations of PSE and its relevance, through empirical investigation of public managers' perceptions of PSE. New research agendas might also examine PSE in relation to other public management concepts such as public service logic.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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