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1923

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The generosity of public sector and civil service workers sees the nation's appreciation grow

Reflecting on heartfelt gratitude in the months after lockdown – and the resulting societal shifts



INTRODUCTION BY DARREN MILTON, BOUNDLESS

Overnight, the pandemic altered all our lives. But for those working in the public sector and civil service, arguably those changes were especially marked.

Healthcare professionals played a leading role in the nation's response to the coronavirus, stepping up to the plate to look after us all and keep medical systems functioning. Behind the scenes, civil servants across myriad departments, central and local, worked hard to find new ways to help people in dire need, with economic stimuli and new strategies to manage severe spikes in unemployment. Teachers pivoted to online learning. Police galvanised to keep the public safe. Administrators managed rising public concern. Firefighters took on a range of additional activities, including driving ambulances and delivering essential items to the most vulnerable.

To do this, everyone in the public sector and civil service had to rise to unprecedented challenges – and rise they did. A comprehensive response on a huge scale was delivered in record time, demonstrating the agility and commitment of all involved.

Thousands of public employees switched seamlessly from their day jobs to entirely unfamiliar roles in order to make all our lives easier. They did so without fuss, and with the same sense of responsibility that brought them into public service in the first place.

Which is why Public Service Day on Thursday 23 June has never been so important. It offers an opportunity to celebrate achievements, to give the public a chance to say thank you, and to encourage more people to see the value in working for these esteemed institutions.

And esteemed they are, as a new survey commissioned by Boundless and carried out by insight agency Opinion Matters demonstrates.

Last year, our annual survey was carried out in the heat of the crisis, and it revealed the extraordinary lengths that public sector and civil service workers were prepared to go to to help others, both in their professional roles and personal lives.

When we released findings stating that 72% of public sector and civil service workers volunteered and raised funds during the pandemic, it took the media by storm, with hundreds of news outlets – broadcast, print and online – reporting on the story.

This year, we've had an opportunity to reflect, as the pandemic has calmed down and our means of coping with it have become more embedded. But our survey has still elicited some extraordinary results.

We're seeing a growing appreciation among the general public, and a swell in the numbers of people choosing to join the ranks. There were an estimated 5.72 million employees in the public sector and civil services in December 2021, according to the Office for National Statistics, which was 24,000 more than in September 2021 and 127,000 more than in December 2020. And we're also seeing record increases in feelings of pride from the people who carry out these essential roles.

At Boundless, we conduct our annual surveys because we want to know more about how everyone – employees and the nation as a whole – feels about our sectors. It's also why we advocate for Public Service Day. Officially launched by the United Nations in 2003, it was barely recognised in the UK until 2019, when Boundless began campaigning for it to be celebrated more publicly.

In this year's survey, we find out how our public service stars feel about their roles as we negotiate our return to 'normal' life, and we look at how the nation feels about the people they say make up 'the backbone of society'.

CHAPTER ONE

Making a positive difference to the lives of others

New research has revealed that almost half, 49%, of public sector and civil service workers have been involved in their local communities since they started their career, and 54% joined the service to make a positive difference to the lives of others.

It was the UK's healthcare professionals, teachers, civil service workers and police officers who helped the nation through the difficult times. The public's respect for these workers was revealed in the survey with 37% of Brits describing them as 'the backbone of society'.

Which might explain why some 70% of public service workers now say they are proud to tell others they are part of the sector.

Pride in public service has grown almost 20% in just one year. More than two thirds of our workers now say they feel honoured to be part of the public sector or civil service, up from 52% in 2021 and 54% in 2020.

Numerous studies show that feeling valued at work is linked to better physical and mental health, as well as higher levels of engagement, satisfaction and motivation. These are all factors that lead to healthy and productive relationships between employers, employees and target audiences.

Despite the challenges that public employees have faced, it's clear the opportunity to demonstrate value and commitment has had a huge impact on so many people's sense of satisfaction and self-esteem. This is especially relevant to public sector and civil service workers, as more than half were inspired to work

in the sector specifically because they wanted to improve other people's quality of life.

On Public Service Day, part of the Boundless aim is to encourage local communities to show their gratitude – a card to a teacher, a poster in a window, an appreciative post on social media. Business communities around the country are also called upon to join in by offering great deals, discounts and giveaways to public employees.

A big part of why we do this is because we understand how important a positive relationship with the public is for those in our sector. The statistics from the latest annual survey bear this out:

- 54% joined because they wanted to make a difference to people's lives
- 36% said acts of kindness from the local community motivate them to make a positive difference to the lives of others
- 20% joined because they wanted to connect with the public
- 20% said the spirit they feel from their local communities motivates them in their jobs
- 15% said their spirits are boosted with gifts and donations to say thank you
- 12.5% said they feel supported by local businesses, for example, when they offer discounts for public sector and civil service workers

When asked how they feel about their jobs, respondents said the following:

- Almost a third (32.25%) said they loved their jobs
- Over half (50.5%) said they liked their jobs
- Under 8% said they didn't like their jobs
- And less than 4% stated that they hated their jobs

How public support is moving in the right direction

Our survey results reveal how vital it is for the nation's healthcare professionals, teachers, firefighters, carers, administrators, civil service workers and police officers to feel the effort they put in is appreciated. Our latest survey shows that:

- 37% of the members of the public who were questioned said they believe public sector and civil service employees are the 'backbone of our society'
- 25% say a public sector worker has gone above and beyond their job for them
- 22% say a public sector worker has had a hugely positive impact on their life
- 19% say they're selfless and self-sacrificing people
- 19% say they keep community spirit alive
- 18% say they're kind
- 18% say they're heroic
- 18% said a public sector worker has inspired them
- 15% say they're humble

These are remarkable numbers which show just how much public support has grown.

Last year, when we asked public service workers if they felt appreciated enough, two thirds, 66%, said no. The results then were as follows:

- Yes: 34%
- No, not really: 52%
- No, not at all: 14%

This year we asked the same question and got the following feedback:

- Yes: 53%
- No, not really: 23%
- No, not at all: less than 7%

While it's not a perfect 100%, it shows that despite the period of extreme difficulty we've all faced, the majority of the nation has appreciated the effort that people in the public sector and civil service have put in.

Why big hearts play a part

This is in no small part due to the extra lengths that so many go to beyond their professional roles to make society a better place. Last year, our survey showed that an astonishing three-quarters of the UK's public employees undertook volunteer work or raised money to help others during the pandemic.

Extraordinary figures for extraordinary times. This year the numbers still far exceed national averages and a total of 52% spent their spare time in the following ways (just 17% of non-sector workers took part in volunteer work on a monthly basis in 2020/21, according to gov.uk, down from 2019/20):

- 18% did volunteer work
- 17% looked after neighbours
- 11% did community work
- 3% worked as charity trustees

But our report also shows there's a flip side: there are still significant numbers who do not feel appreciated – nearly 25%. Reports in the news suggest the government is looking to make major cuts over the next three years, with some departments expected to scale back by as much as 40%. This may go some way to explaining why there is some less-than-positive feedback coming in.

CHAPTER TWO

Going the extra mile

Many of those who work in the public sector and civil service are exposed to the needs of others in their day-to-day professional lives. And while their positions enable them to do so much good, they often spot opportunities beyond their remit and embark on volunteer work outside of their working hours so they can make a difference where they see additional need.

We asked our public employee survey respondents what inspired them to do community work. The results were as follows:

- Two thirds (66.5%) said they wanted to give something back to the community
- 59% said they wanted a chance to make a positive difference to the lives of others
- 35.5% said volunteer work had a positive social side and provided an opportunity to meet new people
- Nearly a third (32%) said that volunteer work made the jobs of fellow public employees easier
- 30% said that volunteer work gave them a sense of achievement

Other activities in the local community in which public employees get involved include:

- Looking after neighbours: 21%
- Volunteering in the community: 19%
- Running summer fairs and charities: 10%
- Serving as members of local committees: 8%
- Running sports teams for children: 7%
- Online and digital volunteering: 7%
- Running Scouts and Girl Guides groups: 5%
- Other: 2%

More and more people in our communities rely on the good will of others – on those prepared to give time and expertise without need of financial compensation.

The drive that makes people seek employment in our sector in the first place doesn't get switched off at 5pm. Below are just a few examples of public sector and civil service workers who have gone the extra mile to make a real difference in their communities. Rather than putting their feet up after a long shift, they get back out into the community to do their bit and make other people's lives better.

Civil service:



Rachael Tiffin, Director of Public Sector at Cifas, a non-profit fraud-prevention service, also volunteers when not working in her professional role.

"I am a trustee of an organisation called Public Finance for Women, which is all about gender-based equality in finance. And I also sit on the Standards and Ethics Committee at the London Borough of Tower Hamlets as the independent person on ethical issues with local elected members. It sounds really complicated, but I really enjoy it."

Education:



Adrian Rollins, Deputy Head of School at Nottingham University Samworth Academy, also volunteers, whether as a charity trustee or mentor for minority groups.

"I've done a lot, really. When I was in London, I was part of the national Reach Role Model programme, the first black-led government-funded initiative, from 2008 to 2011. Over 20 Black males were doing one-to-many mentoring of young Black people across the country.

"I worked alongside Alex Beresford, Richard Reed, Rob Neil, a civil servant, and Clive Lewis MP and Piers Linney from Dragon's Den. It was great to work with the young people, but also alongside these very inspirational Black men – learning from each other, understanding that their stories and backgrounds were very similar to mine. Hearing about their experiences was very powerful.

"The government funding stopped in 2011, but the Reach Society stepped up and many of the role models came together and self-funded the charity, which is still going now. I've also committed my free time to a charity called People in Harmony."

Education:



Marva Rollins (Adrian's mother) is Founder of the Rollins Education Consultancy and devotes a considerable amount of time to voluntary work.

"I've spent the past 40 years or so doing voluntary work outside whichever role I had at the time. I worked with the Sickle Cell Society when many doctors and nurses didn't know a great deal about the condition. We were trained to go into hospitals and people's homes, and my phone number was the first one that many healthcare professionals would give out to those in need, so at 2am I might get a call from a parent saying, 'I need help.'

"At the moment, I'm a trustee for Success Club, which is a charity that goes into schools to help children with mindfulness. I met them when they came to my school to work with my Year Fives on mindfulness, and then I became a trustee.

"I'm the only female patron of the Reach Society – it started out as an organisation for black professional males to coach young Black men, but now it's open to all people.

"I'm still a governor of three schools, including a special school and one for neurodiverse children, many of whom have complex needs. They can be hard work for the teachers and other young people as they have a lot of challenges. For some young people and their families, it's a last resort, a place where they're not going to get excluded, they're not going to be ignored.

"I also work on a hotline for people working in education who are in distress, as things are not always good in the education system. And I help people to prepare for interviews.

"So, I do a lot of volunteer work, it's just who I am. I'm my mother's daughter, and Adrian is his grandmother's grandson. She was still cooking for the elderly when she was nearly 80. You've got to keep busy."

Police:



Now retired, Vicky Lees was a police constable at Thames Valley Police, Bicester, for 30 years. She campaigned for a skatepark to be built in her local community park to give young people somewhere great to hang out and enjoy themselves.

"Being on the neighbourhood beat for 15 years, you really get to know the community. I think one of the highlights for me was securing a new skatepark for the youths. One November night, I got a call telling me there were some lads on skateboards and BMX bikes causing problems in the town centre. So, I went down there on my own and I stood back and watched – they weren't doing anything wrong. I went up to them, and they thought I was going to move them on, but I just started talking – and listening.

"Over a period of four years – and after a lot of battles – we fundraised with the children. I got involved with the town council, and eventually we got the go-ahead for a whole new skatepark in the recreational area. It was built, and I opened it – and the youngsters absolutely love it. It's right in the middle of the park so everyone can access it.

"One of my biggest challenges was keeping people happy on both sides and breaking down barriers and misconceptions. Regular people can get the wrong idea about kids on skateboards and BMXs. At first, they see them as a problem, but in reality, they're no different from any other children. The prevailing perception of young people – hoodies, skateboards, BMXs, etc – can be very unfair. The vast majority are good kids with nowhere to go.

"I walk past the skatepark often, and I see tiny children on their scooters having fun with their mums and dads, and the older kids doing all the big tricks on their skateboards and bikes. In the summer it's packed. I love to see all the smiling faces.

"I spent a lot of time on the skatepark, working with local young people, and it did trickle into my days off. But now, in my retirement, I'm looking to get into some volunteer work. I'm a very outdoorsy person, so I'd love to keep doing good things in the community.

"Working shifts as a police constable, you do get used to being tired. You have to have time out so that you're ready to go in for your next series of earlies feeling fully recovered and ready for whatever the shift brings. You do need that 'me time', it's so important to have something that interests you away from the police."

CHAPTER THREE

Restoring communities and building on pandemic gains

The survey also revealed that the challenges everyone faced since March 2020 have brought communities closer together and made Britain feel more united as a society. Nearly a third of us, 28%, think the effect of the pandemic has seen a sense of community grow.

The lockdown provided many of us with an opportunity to reach out to others and connect, albeit while observing social-distancing regulations. People came together to show their collective support for NHS workers with the weekly Clap for Heroes, and many connected with neighbours on social media platforms like WhatsApp. This meant that even the most vulnerable were able to ask for help in a way they might not have felt comfortable doing so before.

We asked more than 2,000 people (non-sector workers) what they thought about community spirit in the UK:

- 28% said that the pandemic had brought the community back together
- 27.5% felt community spirit had grown
- 27% said it was more important than ever
- 13% said community spirit was largely driven by public sector workers
- Just over 10% felt that community spirit was stronger than ever before

When public sector and civil service workers were asked the same thing, the results were as follows:

- More than 32% said it was more important than ever
- 31% felt the pandemic brought the community back together
- 30% felt that work still needed to be done to build a greater sense of community in the UK
- Nearly a third (30%) said their workplace gave them a sense of community spirit
- 29% said community spirit had grown during the pandemic
- Over 16% said they had a strong sense of pride in their local communities
- 10% said that community spirit was stronger than ever

The pandemic demonstrated how important and impactful small acts of kindness can be. Something as simple as buying a loaf of bread and a pint of milk for someone in isolation had the power to make them feel supported. The 'helper' felt the benefits too – giving our time and energy to others can create a sense of usefulness and self-worth.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the value of purpose

'Purpose' is a key buzzword of our time. Tap the words 'work' and 'purpose' into Google and you get 6,690,000,000 results in 0.55 seconds. According to global management consultancy McKinsey, 70% of us define our purpose through our work. For Millennials, it's even higher, with many saying they want their professional lives to be their 'life's calling' and they want to be a 'force for good'.

For those in the public sector and civil service, the pandemic has thrown into sharp relief what core purpose really means. Many public employees have developed a new sense of self-worth, as well as an appreciation for what their efforts mean to those around them.

As we move out of crisis mode and look at the important lessons we can take from the pandemic, we – and the powers that be – need to remember how important it is to create organisations that are capable of navigating the unexpected, the continual changes in work

and worker safety, health and wellbeing. The pandemic cut through red tape and brought the best out of people. There's much we should take from the past couple of years moving forward.

Our survey reveals a growing pride amongst people who work within our sector, and a greater appreciation from the public. There's always work to be done and we can't afford to lose momentum now that the pandemic is no longer headline news. Which is why we're fully supporting Public Service Day again, this Thursday 23 June.



MPs show their continued support for our public sector and civil service workers for Public Service Day 2022

Gary Sambrook **MP for Birmingham Northfield:**

"As Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Civil Service and Public Sector Workers I am fully supportive of Boundless and Public Service Day on June 23 2022. So many hardworking public sector workers across the globe strive for the common good of the public. I also want to wish a special thanks to the 6000 people in my constituency who make up 27% of the local workforce, which allows the economic foundations of our area to flourish, provide vital services and manage important institutions."

Caroline Lucas **MP for Brighton Pavilion:**

"Millions of dedicated public servants make an invaluable contribution to our society, from health and care workers protecting us during the pandemic, to emergency services keeping us safe, and teachers educating the next generation. We should celebrate and thank them as often as possible – as well as ensuring their pay and conditions reflect the enormous contribution they make."

Tahir Ali MP **MP for Birmingham Hall Green:**

"As a member of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Civil Service and Public Sector Workers, and previously having had a career in the Royal Mail, I am delighted to support Public Service Day this year. The work of our Civil Service and Public Sector goes hugely unnoticed, and the championing of this day is a way to recognise their great efforts."

Lord Davies of Gower said:

"We have much to thank the public service community for with regards to their unstinting dedication to duty during the covid pandemic. We should therefore celebrate their work on public service day which I am once again pleased to support on June 23rd."

Darren Milton at Boundless said:

"Community spirit is clearly alive and well and growing across the country with our public sector workers at the very heart of it."

"People in public service roles routinely go the extra mile. In fact, our survey revealed that 48% of those from across the sector in Wales work voluntarily, help neighbours and devote time to charitable initiatives – a revelation that makes Public Service Day on Thursday 23 June even more poignant."

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