Welfare services: lead with impact

Delivering better outcomes for citizens now and post-pandemic in the UK.
Contents

Creating welfare services for the long run  
Taking the pulse of the citizen  
Departments under strain  
Priority 01  Become more responsive  
Priority 02  Become more accessible  
Priority 03  Embrace new technologies with human ingenuity  
Conclusion: Towards a brighter future for citizens—and departments
Creating welfare services for the long run

Never have welfare service providers had a more vital role to play in people’s lives. Even before COVID-19 hit, the need for government assistance was rising steadily in many countries, spurred by trends such as ageing populations.

But the pandemic—and the measures to contain it—intensiﬁed the strains on the elderly and other vulnerable groups, especially the unemployed: in the first half of 2020, nearly 600 million full-time jobs were lost worldwide.

Welfare service providers have been on the front line of the crisis, deploying critical services and handling an explosion in workload. But while their response has been extraordinary, the pandemic has exposed entrenched vulnerabilities in their organisational structures, delivery models and systems.

What’s clear is that legacy ways of working and delivering services won’t stand up to future demands—and that these must be reinvented to meet society’s changing needs and expectations.
Taking the pulse of the citizen

As these challenges play out, what do the ultimate end-users—citizens themselves—think of the welfare services they’re currently receiving?

Between July and September 2020 we surveyed more than 7,000 people who’d received a welfare service within the past two years – 1,000 of whom were in the UK – and 600 executives currently leading employment support, public pension and child welfare organisations – 70 of which were UK based.

All of the respondents came from ten countries—Australia, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Singapore, the UK and the US.
What did we find?

Inevitably, citizens’ perceptions varied from country to country.

But whether the role of welfare service providers’ centres on formulating public policy, implementing it, or both, they face rising challenges—in helping get people back to work, keeping them safe, and providing other types of vital support. For example, 18% of UK citizens expect to use more welfare services in the future.

45% of citizens globally and in the UK believe they face a high risk of contracting COVID-19 at work...

56% now shoulder significant caregiving responsibilities at home, which rises slightly to 57% in the UK.

But the need for more government support has not translated into more positive views of government: some 31% of respondents rated their trust in government as low today, compared with just 23% before the pandemic. In the UK this increase is even more concerning, with low levels of trust rising from 29% to 46%.

And the best ways for welfare services providers to rebuild citizens’ trust? Shorter waiting-times and better communication around eligibility for services.
Departments under strain

Not surprisingly, welfare service providers are feeling the strain. Most executives said the need to do things like create new digital offerings, handle soaring demand for digital services and respond quickly to policy changes pose big challenges for their organisations.

Worryingly, only 50% of executives in the UK rated their own organisation as highly prepared for current and future challenges, down from 66% pre-pandemic. This is particularly concerning since 84% of UK executives and 71% of UK citizens agree or strongly agree that welfare services will look very different in the years ahead.*

As organisations rethink how—and what—they offer citizens, three priorities stand out.
Priority 01

Become more responsive

Welfare providers today face higher demand for their services, new technical hurdles, such as social distancing rules, and rising expectations among citizens over service quality. All of these developments make it harder to deliver services quickly and effectively—yet this will be ever more vital in dealing with crises to come.

Singapore sets the pace.

That said, some of the more digitally advanced countries—notably Singapore—have made great strides. Some 80% of the Singaporean citizens we surveyed said they’d received a service in a new way since the onset of the pandemic, such as switching to virtual delivery—immediately available, personalised, available through new digital channels, or bundled—compared to just 57% in the UK.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service Type</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>Singapore</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Virtual Services</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Digital Channels</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalised Services</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Digitally advanced countries
Canada

In March 2020, Accenture helped the Canadian Government launch a new unemployment benefit—
the Canada Emergency Response Benefit—providing financial support to Canadians impacted by COVID-19.
In just four days, Accenture set up a call centre for a team of 2,600 Canada-based agents, produced over 25 dual-language process documents and delivered 1,400 hours of training to enable remote handling of calls. Throughout April, as millions of Canadians applied for financial relief, the agents were successfully managing more than 40,000 calls a day—a while providing a better, faster service to citizens.

USA

Agencies are also teaming up in new and more productive ways with ecosystem partners. In the US, the Oklahoma Department of Human Services is collaborating with Eckerd Kids, a non-profit, to alert social workers to high-risk scenarios.

To do this, the agency has implemented machine-learning software that monitors welfare data and sends alerts proactively to workers. During a three-year pilot in Tampa, Florida, the same software helped reduce child deaths from family abuse to zero.
Germany
A further way agencies are becoming more responsive to citizens is by providing services that are more personalised and adaptable. Germany’s Federal Ministry of Labour is developing an end-to-end service anchored by a website tailored for individual users, for example by offering different services depending on their specific needs and demographics. The aim is to connect every citizen to the service or information they need within just three clicks.6

Norway
Meanwhile, in Norway, the Labour and Welfare Administration has developed a personalised pensions service. The website brings together pensions data from various sources to present a cohesive view of the individual citizen’s retirement savings, while also enabling scenario modelling and providing investment suggestions. Having made life easier for Norway’s pensioners for several years, the service now receives some 884,000 visits annually.7 The same number of visits per head in the US would equate to 51.4 million a year.

Norway’s personalised pension service receives 884,000 visits per year.7
Anticipating demand
The world’s most effective welfare providers go beyond responding to citizens’ needs with new and more tailored services. They also anticipate demand, and “bundle” their offerings to ensure the right combination of services is easily accessible to the right citizen at the right moment. Once again, this is an area where Singapore’s agencies excel.

Parents there can now use a single smartphone app—developed by the country’s Early Childhood and Development Agency—to register a child’s birth, find and choose schools and access health records. The ultimate goal? To create a single app for Singaporeans to use for all their government interactions.8

Looking across the efforts by leading welfare services providers worldwide to be more responsive, a clear theme emerges: those in the vanguard have the biggest impact on their citizens’ lives by delivering services in a frictionless way, and meeting citizens’ needs with personalised experiences wherever and whenever they require. But despite pockets of excellence such as those we’ve highlighted, most welfare services providers across the world are not yet making the most of the powerful tools available to them.

Tellingly, only 16% of the executives we surveyed in the UK said their organisations have deployed new services on a large scale during the pandemic. So most still have much further to go.
Our research indicates clearly that improving accessibility and transparency helps to build trust and belief in the leadership and support offered by government.

But an equally important message is that making services more relevant will do little good if citizens are not aware of the choices open to them: 92% of UK respondents said they lack sufficient guidance on what services they’re eligible for. Long waiting-times are another problem, with over one-third of UK citizens—37%—saying these are their biggest obstacles to receiving a high-quality service. And 41% added that reducing waiting-times would be the best way to increase their trust in government.
Improving communication
An often-undervalued benefit of deploying digital technologies is the opportunity to improve communication with citizens.

Crucially, this is also a key way to make welfare services more accessible. Early in the pandemic, the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC)—which manages unemployment benefits for America’s second most populous state—saw the number of calls to its hotline surge from 20,000 to 200,000 a day. How to handle this tenfold increase? The agency partnered with Accenture to create “Larry”, an artificial intelligence-powered Q&A agent on TWC’s website. In its first week, Larry interacted with 168,000 visitors and answered nearly 500,000 questions. The upshot: more Texans received vital support, as America’s unemployment rate soared to its highest since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Reaching out across society
As well as smart technologies, making welfare services more accessible can also involve broader forms of public outreach.

During 2020, Accenture worked with the Government of India’s Digital India Corporation to create the “myGov Saathi” chatbot. myGov Saathi now provides reliable information about the coronavirus to 1.3 billion citizens across the country. myGov Saathi can handle queries from 300,000 users per day and 20,000 concurrent users per minute, bridging the information gap between the Indian Government and citizens.

myGov Saathi also provides a convenient and powerful channel for communicating accurate information to safeguard lives—especially given the prominent but unwitting role played by young, asymptomatic people in spreading COVID-19.

Even as vaccines roll-out and social-distancing rules relax, citizens will be seeking to access more services virtually going forward.

Accenture’s Virtual Visits Solution is another way that governments are making services more accessible while increasing trust through safe, on-demand delivery. The completely virtual solution allows for self-service booking of appointments, sharing of documents and information, and follow-up interactions to maintain ongoing engagement between citizen and service provider.
As we’ve highlighted, delivering improvements in both responsiveness and accessibility is vital for welfare service providers to impact lives and livelihoods.

But each of these goals brings its own challenges—and government departments need to devote effort and investment inside their organisation for citizens to see results on the outside. Particularly important in keeping pace with citizens’ needs is embedding an organisational mindset that supports the development of new ideas and the adoption of new technologies.
Seizing opportunities generated by change

A case in point is the switch to remote working that many welfare service providers made almost overnight. While this sudden migration posed fresh challenges, especially initially, our research confirms that it has also created new opportunities.

For example, as Figure 2 shows 50% of UK executives told us that working virtually has improved their employees’ productivity—against 20% reporting no change and 29% reporting a decline. And a positive balance of executives said remote working has improved their employees’ communication, collaboration and innovation. However, it must be noted that employee morale remains a key challenge to address.

A majority or positive balance of executives said remote working has improved employee innovation, collaboration, communication and productivity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Increased</th>
<th>No change</th>
<th>Decreased</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ability to innovate</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective communication</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee productivity</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information security risk</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team collaboration</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee morale</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecosystem collaboration</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team collaboration</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information security risk</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to innovate</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective communication</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee productivity</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Remote work is creating opportunities in the UK
Creating opportunities

To make the most of the resulting opportunities, government departments need the ability to develop and implement or adapt to new policies quickly and smoothly.

Unfortunately, only 23% of the UK executives we surveyed strongly agreed that their organisations have the agility to pivot swiftly as conditions change. This needs to be addressed: there’s no doubt that combining an agile mindset with the right technologies can enable teams to deliver better outcomes and experiences for citizens.

Only 23% of UK executives strongly agree that their organisations can pivot swiftly.

Indonesia

There was a great example of adapting to new policies at pace in Indonesia in 2020, centred on the Government’s support for impoverished households. In all too many countries, social safety nets are not funded or structured sufficiently well to handle the kind of sharp rise in need triggered by the pandemic. In early 2020, Indonesia’s national government tackled this problem head-on.

How? By working in partnership with the World Bank and local community groups, it applied advanced analytics to quickly identify and help 12 million newly-impoverished households that would not otherwise have received timely support.9
Sharing ideas and data

These are the kinds of benefits that flow from an agile mindset. And being agile can also mean being ready to borrow good ideas from other organisations.

Before the pandemic, Accenture launched a joint research project with the Australian National University’s (ANU) Centre for Social Research and Methods (CSRM). The shared goal was to extend CSRM’s microsimulation policy modelling platform with leading-edge desktop visualisation tools to fast-track the evaluation of new policy options.

The result of the project?
Policymakers now have a powerful desktop analytics platform to conduct real-world modelling and forecasting of the fiscal impacts of social policy decisions. Alongside the power of collaboration, our research also highlights the need for governments to base their assumptions about citizens’ preferences on evidence, not hearsay. Take data privacy. Contrary to what many might expect, 70% of the UK citizens we surveyed said this is a relatively low concern. And 83% would be open to sharing their data with government departments in exchange for better services.
However, to succeed in increasing data-sharing between citizens and governments, departments must take greater precautions:

69% of UK executives said cybersecurity risks to their organisations have escalated since the start of the pandemic.

This is reflected in real-world attacks. For example, the US Department of Health and Human Services experienced 132 data breaches between February and May 2020, a 50% increase over 2019.¹

And as well as improving security, organisations must also be sure to share data in line with data protection regulations and explain clearly to citizens what they intend to do with it.

69% of UK executives said cybersecurity risks to their organisations have escalated since the start of the pandemic.


50% increase over 2019.¹
Tech investments postponed
Benefits delayed for citizens and employees.

While an agile mindset is vital to offer citizens more relevant and accessible services, something else is also essential: investment in new technologies. UK welfare service providers appear to be ahead of other countries in investing in virtual working solutions and flexible infrastructure like cloud. However, many still appear to be postponing investment in these and other technologies—even as employees see the benefits of the investments made to date. Our research figures tell the story.

43% of UK executives said their departments have not yet invested in virtual work solutions.

47% haven’t invested in “modular and flexible infrastructure”, such as cloud.

66% haven’t invested in big data and analytics.

69% haven’t invested in artificial intelligence.
Governments—whether local, national, or supranational—that make the necessary technology investments now will generate big rewards faster for their citizens.

The European Union has got the message: in October 2020 it committed up to €10 billion over the next seven years to develop European-based cloud computing capacity, to strengthen the continent’s public and private sectors.11

The European Union has committed €10B over the next seven years to develop European-based cloud.
Alongside its other impacts, COVID-19 has dramatically underlined the crucial role of government welfare services in supporting countries’ most vulnerable citizens. It has also demonstrated the need for more effective delivery of these services.

Technology is clearly part of the solution. But an equally important enabler is embracing new organisational mindsets and ways of working. Those that commit today to meeting both imperatives will open the way to a brighter future for their citizens—and for themselves.
Contact any of our authors or contributors to talk about how these ideas can be applied to your human services, employment, welfare or pensions agency.

Authors
Rainer Binder
Meghan Yurchisin

Contributors
Jo Knibbs
Gaurav Gujral
Bjørn Tore Holte

Rainer Binder
Managing Director
Public Service,
Social Services Lead

Meghan Yurchisin
Senior Principal
Public Service,
Accenture Research Lead

Welfare services: lead with impact
About Accenture

Accenture is a global professional services company with leading capabilities in digital, cloud and security. Combining unmatched experience and specialized skills across more than 40 industries, we offer Strategy and Consulting, Interactive, Technology and Operations services—all powered by the world’s largest network of Advanced Technology and Intelligent Operations centers. Our 514,000 people deliver on the promise of technology and human ingenuity every day, serving clients in more than 120 countries. We embrace the power of change to create value and shared success for our clients, people, shareholders, partners and communities. Visit us at www.accenture.com

References

1 In this report, "social services agencies" are government agencies that distribute unemployment benefits, pensions, and disability benefits, as well as those that provide family-support and other welfare services.


11 https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-pledges-e10-billion-to-power-up-industrial-cloud-sector

Disclaimer: This content is provided for general information purposes and is not intended to be used in place of consultation with our professional advisors.

This document makes descriptive reference to trademarks that may be owned by others. The use of such trademarks herein is not an assertion of ownership of such trademarks by Accenture and is not intended to represent or imply the existence of an association between Accenture and the lawful owners of such trademarks.

Copyright © 2021 Accenture. All rights reserved.

Accenture and its logo are registered trademarks of Accenture.