

Alex Swift (Interviewer)

Welcome. I'm here with Ian Bancroft and Anne-Louise Clark. Do you want to start by explaining who you are and what your roles are or in your case Anne-Louise were, when the pandemic started?

Anne-Louise Clark

My name is Anne Louise Clark and I'm currently the Executive Director for Communication and Change at Audit Wales. Have been in post since February. Prior to that I was the Chief Officer Commercial at Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council and the last year that I was with Blaenau Gwent was the year of COVID. So, my role during that experience was to work as part of the corporate leadership team there shaping our response as a local authority to the situation and also pivoting some of the services that I was responsible for to align them more closely to the response to the COVID pandemic.

Ian Bancroft

And I'm Ian Bancroft, Chief Executive at Wrexham County Borough Council. I've been in post for nearly three years now, and at the time of the pandemic, I was about 18 months into post and leading an organisation through dealing with an emergency, but also leading an organisation through a period of change that we'd already started and also addressing a number of issues that were already in play in terms of improving services and changing culture. So, tension around the pandemic was both continuing that journey. Setting a frame but also dealing with an emergency at the same time.

Alex Swift (Interviewer)

OK, thank you both. With that experience in mind, what do you think the role of leaders should be during a situation like a pandemic?

Ian Bancroft

My perspective, I guess is firstly, visibility is really important and obviously in this pandemic visibility wasn't as easy because clearly face to face, given the requirements and restrictions wasn't as easy to do. So, I think, you know, adapting leadership in a digital sense to still be visible is important and we did that through using zoom sessions with large numbers of staff and podcasts and also video casts in terms of trying to keep communicating with staff. I think the second thing is about trying to help set a frame for the situation you're in. It isn't about trying to plaster or bandage the situation in terms of

saying we have all the solutions. Clearly with such a complex issue like the COVID pandemic, I think it's about helping people understand where we are at a particular point in time, the journey we've taken to get there, and what we're going to be doing as next steps to try and address that, and I think alongside that the other thing I would probably put into the equation would be honesty so that there's an honesty about how we're addressing the situation, the level of challenge, and also an honesty that helps bring people with you in terms of it's not a challenge as a leader that you're addressing, either individually or as a leadership team. It's a collective challenge across all employees, all councillors actually and the public in terms of trying to address this sort of situation.

Anne-Louise Clark

Adding to that I think the only thing I would add is to kind of provide a degree of assurance that whilst we don't know all the answers and we haven't got all the bits of detail that we need, we are working well with what we currently do have and that, you know we're dealing with things as they come, so to kind of provide a degree of assurance while being honest about the scenario that we're leading in. I think the other thing for me as well is about using the system that we're part of so not trying to do everything as one organisation or replicate or duplicate what others are doing, and particularly for me, the lesson was around that community leadership, both the formal community leadership around the elected representatives, but actually the wealth of informal community leadership that exists within our areas and really understanding and working with that so kind of leading from within the system and across the system.

Alex Swift (interviewer)

I think there's some really interesting points, especially the one about being honest about what you don't know as well as about what you do know. Is that something you think translates in wider, bigger forms of leadership?

Anne-Louise Clark

Yeah, I think it definitely does. If anything, the really important lessons that we're learning is that we are all part of an overall kind of public sector family and it's about how do we utilize that opportunity? How we quickly got to sharing information, perhaps in a way that we weren't used to doing historically. Some of those barriers to sharing information, whilst probably initially uncomfortable for folk we did find that the information sharing was quite rapid, given that we were in the emergency and we were looking at data very forensically or on a very regular basis. So, I think that openness and honesty came through in some of the data sharing.

Ian Bancroft

Absolutely, and I think the key about this is you can't just create honesty overnight and expect people to respond to it, because that...so, I think we, as an organisation working for about 18 months and the two things that we've been really working on were about having honest conversations because there have been some instances in the organisation previously where frontline staff knew about issues. Weren't feeling confident enough to talk about those through the organisation, and as a result we had some big issues within the organisation and that were picked up from a regulatory point of view. So, I think our big thing has been about creating a culture of honest conversations where everybody, if they identify an issue or think they have an ability to contribute, can provide that sort of input. We also have done a lot externally in terms of we established a civic leadership group with all chief execs. All of our senior partners in the public, private and voluntary and social sectors, so that ability to have relationships at a senior level across all three sectors, I think is really critical. It meant that when the pandemic hit we have the networks and the culture to be able to have honest conversations quickly and then work together to address issues. What the pandemic really did, I think in some of the things that Anne Louise was describing is really quicken up. It acted as a catalyst for us strengthening our relationships with the voluntary sector, because in essence the voluntary sector has such a greater reach into communities along with our counsellors and community councils that that network of being able to provide greater resilience to communities because there were more people supporting them. We clearly as a local authority have real key support in social services, don't we? But in some of that, softer neighbour support or that support around helping with shopping or helping If somebody is isolating it comes generally from within communities, counsellors, community councils, voluntary organisations. We actually involved our voluntary organisation leads in our emergency planning group and that was a real stride forward I think about us opening up and the voluntary sector feeling that they were being welcomed into something that traditionally is seen as quite a bureaucratic emergency planning approach.

Alex Swift (Interviewer)

You mentioned community leadership. How did you balance, during the pandemic, supporting your staff with letting them take charge of their work?

Ian Bancroft

On one hand, in an emergency, the traditional approach is direction and giving people clear instruction and having traditional emergency hierarchies that are very much sort of

emergency service led to an approach where this was a pandemic, where it wasn't a fire. It wasn't a flood, and it has a very longer recovery phase and also it has a much greater set of people involved in terms of it being a public health emergency. So, I think it's absolutely critical in this type of emergency that that balance is right. So, I think for us to manage the directional elements we met three times a week as a senior leadership team with the honesty, with an assessment of what the situation was and then setting out a framework of explaining what the situation was to others and some key actions that had to be taken.

So, for example, we had outbreaks at Rowan Foods in terms of a food production factory and there was a very clear piece of work that we had to do because the spread actually wasn't within the factory. It was in the local community. So, the clear instructions there were that we needed to take some action to support the local community to understand the situation. Clearly then the balance was around enabling staff and communities to do that work. They then figured out the best way of those communications happening, the right networks at a community level and also the company interacted with that community to improve the relationship with unions as well so that the messaging on the shop floor was also similar to what was being given out at a community level. So, I think it's about creating a frame and an environment in an emergency situation like this, being very clear about the actions that have to be undertaken, but not necessarily creating the solutions to those because the people on the ground know best the solutions to achieve that. So really important, particularly in this type of emergency. So, I think from my perspective, we need more thinking nationally about how everybody can fit into what is a much wider public health emergency that as well as needing direction also needs the ability for people to play their role.

Anne-Louise Clark

I think that's really good insight there. I think the point that it went on for so long was...actually through different phases we needed to call on different skills and different people within those phases because it was, you know, having been on the emergency planning training, there certainly wasn't any inclusion in that on what to do in a pandemic. You know you were almost into recovery phase before the incident had finished, whereas this was like an incident that rolled on and on. I think the other interesting thing for me is thinking about our organisation as a community. Just as we saw in the in the wider community people stepping in and doing things differently, I think we have that as an organization as well. So, people were suddenly working alongside and very closely with

people who they wouldn't normally have had contact with. People were parachuted into different roles and alongside colleagues and also working in a very different way. And that seemed to galvanise a degree of energy in the organisation, and bizarrely like an optimism, as people saw things differently and coming together.

One really lovely one that I've got is that we set up as most local authorities did a kind of locality response to make sure that people had a route through to the voluntary sector if they weren't necessarily part of that currently or, you know they knew which pharmacy would deliver medication. And then we drove people in from across the whole organisation to create this new service and I know that the relationships that were formed through doing that will be to the benefit of the organization longer term because people have got a shared history and a shared experience. And the camaraderie I think. So, it's like, you know, I know it's been awful, but I think some of the barriers assumed or real have been dismantled a little bit by people working in a different way.

Alex Swift (Interviewer)

I think that's a really interesting point about seeing the organisation as a community, because with something like a pandemic you have these outstanding challenges. You obviously have the biggest outstanding challenge of the pandemic itself, but you also have all these other challenges. You know, the mental health effects, the economic effects.

Anne-Louise Clark

Yes, I mean, it was a very emotional time for people because often people are not directly impacted by the emergency themselves. Their sort of supporting people, whereas actually we were all experiencing this in a variety of different ways. People were directly impacted through illness. They were impacted in in our communities, very close communities so people knew other folk who were stricken and the family members, so it was palpable that it was a really lived experience as well as a kind of work scenario. So, we did think very carefully about how we could support staff around wellbeing. So, there was an investment in terms of thinking about the messaging that we were giving, the support that we were giving to staff and allowing people to be emotional within the situation. And you know, kind of recognising those emotions. Having moments where we were feeling overwhelmed and being able to chat to each other about what that feeling was like. So, I think it's really potentially brought out more into the open and a more comfortable conversation that we are all human beings, and we bring human emotions and human perspectives to work. We don't kind of put on a jacket and become something

completely different, and I also think I don't know what you think Ian that kind of seeing people in their own homes through this type of exchange, also makes people seem more human than when we're all kind of in our work clothes, and, you know we haven't got a dog barking in the background or something. Suddenly we are seeing people in their true environment as it were, and that feels like sometimes that breaks down the barriers as well.

Ian Bancroft

I think that's a really good point Anne-Louise. Because in essence, we all bring our home and emotional baggage to work, don't we? And it's harder in a working environment sometimes to start those conversations, but when you're looking at somebody in their room and I've often thought, should I fuzzi my screen on Microsoft Teams or put a background in on zoom? I actually thought no, it does just give a way in, in terms of a conversation that's helpful to make personal connections, and I think it's those personal connections that are really important because COVID for everybody has been so isolating that reconnecting, I think is one of the really important things in what we do, and I talked earlier about values we've been establishing in the organisation really for the last 18 months.

Two things we talked about the very beginning of the pandemic were tolerance and then expectation so that we encouraged everybody to be really tolerant of everybody else because everybody loses it at times during that sort of an emergency emotionally, because of the pressures they're under either at home or at work. So, it really was a case of just saying everybody we need to be really tolerant with everybody else and listen and have time to talk with people. But then secondly, It was about if we do that with our staff and with communities and with everybody, we also ought to have high expectations then for how they support others in their public service role. So, it's that balance. It's that right and responsibility type approach that if we give tolerance then we ought to have high expectations about how we serve. I think the other thing that we played a major emphasis on was storytelling. Because in essence, peoples stories are really important. They're a way of understanding the journey that everybody is going through. All our leadership team meetings have a personal story at the beginning from everybody in terms of where they are now, in terms of what they're dealing with how their family is and what they're going through and issues that they want to share. So actually, in our leadership teams probably we spend 15 to 20 minutes reconnecting before we get into dealing with the leadership, management issues. We had all staff zooms with five and 600 staff about

three times over the last 12 months, and that connecting through stories and me sharing my personal story to show that I'm a human going through exactly the same issues as they are in terms of getting up at 6:00 in the morning to try and cope with the day. Having an 83 and an 81-year-old mum and dad who I'm really concerned about, having a 16 and a 14-year-old child who are really struggling in terms of their learning, I think just really helped us all feel we were in this together.

In some ways the pandemic has been a leveller hasn't it in terms of it treats everybody the same. Actually, in terms of no matter where you are in the organisation or what you do or which part that you're in, in terms of the voluntary sector, the private sector, the public sector, so I think that storytelling has been really important and our health approach has been very strong, particularly around time to talk. Mental health, access to counselling, as well. We obviously lost staff and senior staff during the pandemic and that has a real emotional effect on people. And again, it's just making sure that there are the more formal tools in those situations to enable people to cope as well.

Alex Swift (Interviewer)

We've looked at many of the immediate challenges you faced. To sort of combine the next two questions, how did you overcome them?

Ian Bancroft

I think we're still coping with those challenges and facing them. This is a complex issue that is going to be with us a long time in terms of recovery, So, just understanding where we are on the journey is really critical and where we are between responding to an emergency and recovering from an emergency because we've gone through phases of doing one and then recovering and then going back into response. We actually brought staff back into the offices for a brief period, a third maximum, in September last year at the point where there was a slight recovery before we went into the second wave. It was really helpful for those staff that were struggling with mental health issues, but we were having to constantly describe 'this is where we are on the journey' and then when we had to respond again why people were going back to working from home and my metaphor I think in this analogy would be...and we also faced a flooding emergency at the same time as we were dealing with a COVID emergency and a bomb scare at the factory which is producing the vaccine.

So, you know, four Seasons in one day. It was three emergencies in one day, literally that we were dealing with, but my metaphor for that particularly with the flooding is I've got a particular walk I do along the river and one day the view I get on the riverbend is just

being able to look back from where I've come from. The next day, after the storm, its cleared all the growth on the riverbank and I can now see downstream on the other side of the bend to where I'm heading, and I think that's really important that timing is everything. If you understand the journey you're on and the timing points, there are times we can see ahead to recovery when maybe the day before we couldn't because of the response and the pressures we were still under, and I think that's also one of the ways of dealing with the ongoing challenges and trying to cope is just thinking about when are the right times to recover? when are the right times to respond? When are the right times to be able to undertake certain initiatives? It might be, as we said with the voluntary sector, it's a real catalyst to be able to do greater work as a result of the need to be really close to community representatives, so I think timing is a really important as a way of understanding and addressing challenges.

Anne-Louise Clark

Definitely I love your analogy about the upstream, downstream kind of perspective. Rather a shame that all the stuff was washed away but hopefully it's all grown back now, which will be amazing. And so, the question about challenges...it was almost like my recollection was you couldn't kind of get into your mind what the enormity of the challenges that were coming, you could only kind of deal with almost time bound things that you could concentrate on and do something about. You know, rather than kind of spinning too far ahead into the into the great unknown and the 'what if' situation. So, I think for me because this situation kind of took me completely away from all the lovely plans and strategies that we'd been working on, for a moment it was like into really kind of what we're going to do today. What can we do today? What can we achieve today so that we're not paralyzed by the enormity that's facing us. But also taking an opportunity to look back and kind of say 'look what we have done'. You know we've got this enormity ahead of us but look how far we've come. And I think one of the things for me is a kind of increased confidence that actually we can do stuff and we can make things happen very quickly when we need to. And when the kind of like the things are all in the right place. So, despite the fact that it's absolutely exhausting, I do think if we look back at what people have achieved collectively, we should take great pride in that.

Alex Swift (Interviewer)

It's also about temporality as well, isn't it? It can become very easy to become fixated on the bigger picture and on all the challenges we still face. And yeah, we all have moments where we feel overwhelmed by the bigger picture, and you know, I think the example you

gave Ian about the offices resonated with me because going back in in September and then that coming to a sudden end, you know, speaking as a person who's on the autistic spectrum, I need that sort of stability and having that stability just wrenched away again was quite an emotional moment. And I'm going back to the office now I have been for the past few weeks, and it's also a case of having that certainty, but realizing that certainty doesn't last forever, because if the pandemic has taught us one thing it's that things aren't stable, and there's a whole bunch of challenges which can come and knock away your expectations. But I think realizing the temporality of the situation you're in, and that mantra of 'this won't last forever', is a really powerful one.

Ian Bancroft

I was just going to come back in and reflect on that. I think it leads nicely Alex, into some summing up bits because for me I think they are some of the things we should be changing in the way we work, moving forward. That ability to adapt quickly and to know we have the confidence to change quite quickly, even as big organisations. I think it's also about picking up along the line Anne-Louise said, it's about thanking people. We've been much better at thanking people almost on a daily basis because there are just so many positive things that you see people do. And I think that thanking of people brings a real commitment. And also, you know, makes people feel valued. We know that, but in these situations it's even more important. I think the other thing, and maybe this is an area that I would reflect on as being something I need to be better at is forgiving in terms of particularly forgiving myself. I think if we're not good as leaders at forgiving ourselves at not always meeting our own expectations, we'll find it difficult to forgive others and understand others. So, I think there has to be that sort of tolerance, not just with others, but with yourself given the pressures you face. And I think that's a really important personal learning for me about, getting that right. I think in terms of you know we were talking about dynamic strategy and culture. In essence for me then, culture is strategy because what culture does is sets those values, those ways of working that allow you then in a situation like an emergency, to be able to take strategic decisions. Without those, you can't even set a strategic frame. And yes, you need to craft a strategic frame and then you need to underpin that with good governance and performance. But ultimately, if the culture is not there in the first place when you face a situation like a pandemic you haven't got a chance of crafting a strategy in that situation or actually getting people's commitment to buying in.

Anne-Louise Clark

Yeah, I couldn't agree more with that and I love the fact that we're talking about culture over strategy or as a prerequisite of good strategy and good strategic kind of decision making because I think that is really important and I love the word temporality. I think that's something I need to adopt because you know it is easy to get into a bit of an all or nothing kind of frame of mind, and actually that's probably one of the things that's like least helpful for us and really interesting at the moment. You know, as we're considering what the impact of some of the removal of restrictions is, it's almost like we're having to do it the other way around this time, so you know, we've kind of created quite strong habits over the last 6 to 18 months that we're about to then go hang on a minute, does everybody want to go back to how it was? I don't know. I don't know what I feel about it. So once again, you're in that kind of almost temporary state of trying to predict how you'll feel and how you'll respond when actually probably it's just best to just try to be comfortable in this position that you're in and have the confidence that you'll work it out as we saw through the pandemic. I also totally get where Ian's coming from around forgiveness. I'm sure there are many late evenings kind of cogitating on decisions made. Were they the right ones or the wrong ones? But at some point, sometimes it's about making a decision but also being prepared to accept that we were working with what we knew at that time.

Alex Swift (Interviewer)

What changes to the way we work and behave would you like to see carry into the future?

Ian Bancroft

So, if I kick off on this one, I think the ability to be speedier, so I've talked about slowing down in an emergency. I think the opposite comes in terms of quickening up pace when we get back into normal situation, so we can respond much quicker to what communities are facing, and you know act more in real time. I think secondly, we talked about honesty and truth and those conversations continuing that the culture continues really to dominate strategy 'cause it's partly the reliance on strategy that slows down our ability to do things. So, I think that shift is also really, really critical and I think that integrated way of working between you know voluntary sector, public sector, private sector, continuing that we don't all go back into our little offices and rooms and work in an isolated way. The fact we've been isolated because of COVID means we've made better connections. We need to continue that focus on the connections and networks because actually those things make us really human, don't they? Our ability to connect with others. It's a bit like intuition, I

think. And the more we connect, the richer we are and the more we learn from others as well.

Anne-Louise Clark

Yeah, it's a bit of building on that for me. Absolutely all of those things. Speedier is good. I think kind of focusing on the right stuff. I think there's something for me about focusing our energy on the right things and I think I'm taking that personally and professionally. You know some of the stuff that I would have got minded about - really, is that important? Similarly, at work really. Is this the thing that's going to make the biggest difference? So, I think there's something about you know about ability to focus on the right things and not get distracted by stuff that's actually not that important. There's also something for me that I'd really like to see becoming part of organisational cultures which is for us to focus more on what we've got in common than what makes us different. And I always find that if we spot things that people have got in common, they're more likely to work nicely and productively and beneficially together, then if we automatically think we're coming at things from completely different angles. So, I think that there is something about whether that's in that honest conversation space about, actually we've got a hell of a lot in common, and you know, the pandemic was one of those things that actually, it did affect different people in different ways, but actually it was a common experience.

And then without the risk of sounding like motherhood and apple pie, I do hope that people will treat each other with kindness as part of our organisational community and communities, but you know that that there is a kind of greater exploration or expression of respect within workplaces and people are kinder to each other. We've seen that happening and it's clearly important to all of us, so why sometimes in organisations does it feel like that that is missing? So, that kind of brings us around full circle to the importance of culture and that we're all part of making a culture great. Similarly, we can all be part of making it not the thing that we want it to be. It's not something that sits in the domain of a couple of people at the top of the organisation. They potentially are creating some of the key symbols of that, but culture is a kind of job for everybody.

Ian Bancroft

I was just going to reflect on one of the things that you said, 'cause it really hit home with me about the ability to tell stories allows us to make connections. And while it's brilliant that we have diversity, without connection we actually have division and that importance to connect around a shared identity is really critical and it brings us back to the fact that we live in Wales. You know we have a real strong identity and strong facets to our culture

that really connect us, no matter who we are in Wales and it's something we really need to use as a positive asset moving forward. In terms of that shared identity and the fact that that helps us connect people together no matter where they come from and what they do.

Anne-Louise Clark

Yeah, that's really interesting. One we had, this is a little bit of a side-line, but a good example of that. We had a new sofa delivered yesterday from Wales and the guys who arrived, I live in England, were a bit grumpy with us about the size of the door that it had to fit through until they spotted the Welsh flag that hangs outside our house because my husband's Welsh. They couldn't do enough for us once they had identified that. So that commonality and that identity is incredibly strong and so incredibly important.

Ian Bancroft

It is interesting but me describing some of that helps look at the truth in different ways. England, Wales, when they played at rugby this year, the Welsh fans would have said the referee made some brilliant decisions. The English fans would say, well, actually they changed the game. The Welsh fans will have said no. So, I think, you know, just understanding the way we view situations comes from who we are and how we're made and also helps others understand them and tolerate more. Because if they understand our identity and our background it isn't an issue for the way we develop our opinions because they understand what makes us and who we are. And I think again, we're getting into quite philosophical territory, but it's that area of actually we need to be quite hard about that philosophy and that culture. It's not soft. It's actually, these things are really important. And actually, if we do them and we spend time focused on doing them over a number of years, they have a radical impact in the way that people work together positively and that makes our ways of tackling pandemics and recovering from them so much stronger. So, I think it's easy to downplay these soft things when actually they are so powerful when they're focused on in a strategic and effective way.

Alex Swift (Interviewer)

To finish off with a very broad question and answer this however you like, what have you learned about yourselves and your work?

Anne-Louise Clark

I've learned that I'm probably more resilient than I imagined I was, and that actually I'm OK in an emergency. I can do this emergency stuff. Wouldn't want to do it too much.

Wouldn't want three in a day, so I think I've learned a lot more about how to utilize my skills. But in a very different context, and for me that's quite a growth thing. You know, I feel like I've grown as a as an individual and as a as a person in the workplace in a way that I can't kind of give a label to. But I think I'm probably more rounded and probably a little bit more empathetic as a result of having been in the position that I've been during this particular time.

Ian Bancroft

So, a couple of things that I'd connect together. I think in terms of what I would probably reflect on, and they partly come again from the story of who I am. I think I'm half an arts person, half a sports person having done PE and English and having grown up really working in what they call the leisure industry. In leisure, you're working unsociable hours, so actually you're doing a job that probably is part of you. I played sports and I love reading, but then I was also working in that area, so it was very difficult to divorce my work from my social and play time and relaxation time and I think some of the learning during the pandemic has been actually where life is a lot more like that now.

Because in essence we talked about people sharing their personal stories at work to help them cope. And we've also talked about the fact that, you know, it never was a nine to five job, but during a pandemic it literally is. You do it when you need to do it. So, I think for me it's been quite interesting. 'cause that's where I started in my career and I've always come back full circle. So, realizing work and personal are intermeshed for me. The second thing I would focus on and learn is, and this relates for everybody. I think that when you're dealing with this level of intensity and if you're working in a way that measures the personal and professional, you need proper breaks where you literally stop. Don't look at anything in terms of work. Get away from the situation and clear your head totally. And I think we prior to the pandemic were living in a world where it's actually quite difficult to put things down and come back to them because of that feeling of guilt about losing the story of something or losing the understanding, I think for me, it's really emphasized the importance of having a break. A fresh start and a beginning that you can use to pace yourself. So, I think the two things really and personal work being much more meshed in a modern society where we're dealing with these types of issues. And secondly if that happens, the importance of breaking that meshing at various times so that you can just get away from it and you know be with the ones that you love and understand where they are in their lives.

