**Public Sector Future podcast**

**Episode 17: Carol Homden, Coram -- Innovation in children’s social care**

**Olivia Neal [host]**

**Carol Homden, [guest]**

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Hello and welcome to Public Sector Future. This is a show for anyone who cares about using digital approaches in the public sector to deliver better outcomes. I’m your host, Olivia Neal, and together we explore stories from around the world, where public servants have been successful at delivering change. We meet the people behind the stories. We hear their firsthand experiences and their lessons learned. Throughout the series we discuss technology and trends, as well as the culture aspects of how to make change happen.

I’m joined today by Dr. Carol Homden. Carol is the chief executive of Coram, a group of specialist children’s charities based in the UK, reaching 2.5 million children, families and professionals every year. As well as being chief executive of Coram, Carol was chair of the UK’s National Autistic Society for 10 years, and she’s now chair of Diabetes UK. She was awarded a CBE in 2013 for her contribution to services for children and families.

We’re going to talk today about how her organizations are leading an effort to work with providers of services which support vulnerable children and young people, as well as with private sector experts, to come up with, test and scale new solutions to the biggest challenges using technology and digital approaches.

Carol, welcome to the show.

**CAROL HOMDEN:** Well, thank you, Olivia, lovely to be here.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Let’s start by just learning a bit more about the organization of Coram. Could you tell us a bit about what is Coram’s role? And how long has the organization been operating for?

**CAROL HOMDEN:** Well, Coram is the world’s oldest children’s charity. So, we have been serving children since 1739, so 283 years. So, our role as the first children’s charity is continuing as a pioneer of new approaches, and indeed, of best practice approaches in the support of vulnerable children and young people.

So, we started as the Foundling Hospital, providing the first-ever residential and educational support for children abandoned on the streets. Sometimes it feels like we are still engaged in the same tasks, but of course, things have improved immeasurably for children in developed nations. But unfortunately, for many children worldwide, they still experienced the toxic trio of poverty, and violence, hunger, and abuse.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So, as an organization, you’ve got almost 300 years of experience in working directly with children and with young people, and then with the other organizations that have grown over time to support them. And so, I’m really interested by the work that you have led through Coram on the Innovation Incubator, and I wondered if you could tell us a little bit about the problem that you’re trying to help to find answers to here? And how did you know this was a problem?

**CAROL HOMDEN:** Well, there’s a lot involved in that question, that first of all, fundamentally, children still experience what you might shorthand as a postcode lottery, so their future is still determined by where they live and who they live with and the accidents of birth, as well as of course, any particular challenges or characteristics that they may have themselves. And the outcomes for children can be remarkably different no matter where it is that they live. That is true in the UK, but it is of course true, absolutely, worldwide.

And that’s not good enough. We are a very, very long way as a society from securing a future of all our children on the basis of equality and justice.

So, in one sense, that’s the big macro problem that Coram exists, in our small way and as a convener within the sector to try to address.

But within that, if we look locally, to the systems that we all belong to, how do we make it better? We cannot continue—in the face of new risks as well as the old challenges—to keep on doing things the same.

So, the Innovation Incubator was created, to find ways in which those with the appetite for change could actually galvanize change and find new solutions to these problems. So, we knew this was a problem for our statutory authorities here in the UK by conducting a survey, in fact, the first ever survey on the subject of how you innovate? Are you innovating? Do you understand what you need to do? And respondents from all kinds of different organizations came back and said it’s really difficult to change, and the incubator is a way of marshalling the skills of different sectors—and across boundaries to come together to identify the problems that we specifically think exist and are malleable to change, and to find ways of doing it.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And so, when these service providers came back and said to you, "Look, it’s really difficult for us to change," were there some common themes in terms of why it’s so difficult, what those blockers are for them?

**CAROL HOMDEN:** Well, yes, there were, and that’s what’s been so fascinating and gave us the encouragement really to do this. One is that the sheer volume of ongoing work means that it is very difficult for staff who are engaged in all of that activity, to have the bandwidth and also to see things differently. The second problem is how do you take the risk of that? How do you take the risk if you’re in one particular organization of trying to do something different? Is that your mandate?

It was also recognizing that innovation occurs at multiple levels, so it’s really important to have a culture of improvement so that there is innovation in everyday operations, and also sectorally, you know, shall we have new services, can we innovate with them? But if you’re looking to achieve really fundamental shifts, radical innovation, then you need different types of skills, and you need to share the risk of that. And that’s why we have been so proud to work with our private sector partners, Microsoft, EY and PA, in partnership with our founding local authorities to do just that.

**OLIVAL NEAL:** So you conducted the survey to get a greater understanding of what were the barriers to change in your partner organizations, and you found that there was a real need and that these organizations don’t have the capacity and space to really start to operate differently. What did you do in response to that? How did you go about setting up this incubator?

**CAROL HOMDEN:** We first of all, of course, started with that analysis and also working with partners to say, what are the biggest challenges, not just the barriers, but which challenges do we collectively think that we need to pay our attention to and that we think we might be able to change with the help of technology, with the help of new approaches?

Systemic poverty, for example, is not one that the Innovation Incubator can innovate about. That requires, you know, pan-governmental decision making, but thinking about adolescent mental health, thinking about placement sufficiency and the particular challenges of the time around young people’s risk-taking behavior. These are things where we felt we could come together.

So, the first thing is to have what I would describe as a "coalition of the willing," those who

feel that they would like to try to pool their skills and their attitudes together with others behind common problems, because you need to create an environment in which people can feel confident to try things, and providing that support network to leaders and managers, it helps to develop that cultural capacity for change.

So, that’s been our theory of change and the way we’re at an early stage of doing so. For everyone, there is a benefit in creating a leadership community for innovation and – and entrepreneurship and creating a greater capacity within the network of organizations that support children.

**OLIVIA NEAL: Y**ou mentioned placement sufficiency. Could you tell us a little bit about what do you mean by that?

**CAROL HOMDEN:** Yes, when we have children who need to be in the care of the state that they need to have alternative support we, of course, need to place them in that different type of support, and most particularly we are looking at children needing foster care or needing residential provision, and we don’t have enough facilities. We don’t have enough facilities that can support children with complex needs, and we don’t have enough foster careers so that children have the choice of a family that they might need, and that’s creating a great pressure valve where children are not so much matched as have we got a vacancy tonight? And that is not what anyone wants for our children. They need to have the right family, at the right time, in the right place, or the right type of specialist provision.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** I think that really brings home how tangible and important and impactful these challenges are. Is that one of the areas that, through the incubator, you’re looking for new ideas and new ways of working on?

**CAROL HOMDEN:** Yes. Some of these are service innovations. Some of them are process and system innovations. So, can we do it better? Can we remove duplication? Can we make sure that the data sharing process, and so on, is facilitated? Can we manage our records better, our access to records? And we’re looking at, therefore, change at a number of different levels. But at each case, we’re talking about, can we create things that can be delivered?

So, there is a sort of healthy dose of pragmatism to this? Can we produce a system enhancement that others could benefit from, could we generate a new product that could rapidly be rolled out? Or can we produce a tangible result from the pilot which simply results in that particular place being better than it was before?

**OLIVIA NEAL:** It really sounds like these challenges and these solutions, hopefully, are so replicable across all of the local authorities that you’re working with, that there must be very similar issues and very similar blockers happening again and again.

**CAROL HOMDEN:** Well, there are, and I think it’s the cycle that we’re trying to disrupt, in a way. There are a myriad of different systems out there, so people are locked into old IT systems that were designed for something else, and so on. And so, some of that can be about creating some kind of overlay or change of process. Most specifically, are the changes in leadership and how you actually can create a culture that empowers the people within your system and service to be constantly hungry for the opportunities that change might bring, and not frightened by it.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** I think that not being frightened by these opportunities is something that we see again and again, across public sector. It’s something that – where people haven’t had the – the space to get to know new opportunities. It’s so much easier to think much more about the risk of change than the risk of status quo, and I think that’s a real fine balancing act that leaders in all sorts of areas are really trying to come to terms with.

And so, the Innovation Incubator is a fairly new initiative, I think, for Coram. Is there anything that over the last year of taking forward this approach that you’ve been particularly proud of seeing move forward or excited to see?

**CAROL HOMDEN:** Well, I think I’ve been excited by the fact of it because I’ve been excited by the fact that our ideas that was this charitable body, this world’s oldest could catalyze a new type of conversation, and that partners from local authorities of all different characters and partners from the private sector would come together to facilitate this new type of conversation.

Now, that’s the prerequisite of anything else, so I’m really proud that we have achieved that and generated momentum. It is really about galvanizing the capacity for change. I think we now approach a kind of moment for a further development and change, and we’re looking now at a program of work around "the art of the possible," so having actually examined as well, what are the barriers, actually saying, "Well, what accentuates the possible?"

**OLIVIA NEAL:** I’m interested as well in, as you’ve been talking about what types of areas the incubator’s addressing and what types of things need to happen with your partners to move this forward, I think you’ve talked about the role of leadership, the role of community and bringing people together to come up with ideas for solutions that can be tested, but also to give people that support network as they’re going through this journey. And then you’ve also touched on technology and the importance of being able to look at existing processes and how data is shared, and what opportunities there might be to use those types of technologies to make improvements that will affect people’s lives.

And I wondered if you could just talk a little bit more about what you see as the role of technology or digital approaches in this type of incubator, because I think it’s fascinating that, as you say, this new approach, this catalyst for these conversations, is coming from an organization that is almost 300 years old, But it’s interesting that you reached out and you are partnering with people like Microsoft who bring a different skillset, so I wonder if there’s anything particularly there on technology and digital approaches that you see as important in these types of conversations?

**CAROL HOMDEN:** Yes, well, again, you open up a number of different avenues there for exploration. I am particularly proud that Coram is the world’s oldest charity and did in fact, in 2015, win the Digital Service of the Year Award for the public sector in the UK, which was for the development of a new front door for adopters. I think with technology goes what I would describe as a consumer focus, a real focus on how are people actually approaching the system, whether they are professional users, or families or children that are needing support? I think it’s partly that freshness of view around the user focus is as important as the technical infrastructure.

In fact, I’m interested often that the technology—for those of you who are really technologists, which I am absolutely not—is not that complicated. It’s actually about how you align the benefits of the system behind a process to the user journey. And that’s why we’ve brought different people together.

There’s a lot of anxiety in those of us who are close to vulnerable children’s issues. One of them is confidentiality of record, so we have this kind of disjuncture because we have a virtual world in which, in some ways, we’re—all of us—sharing data all the time, but there is a great deal of anxiety about what that kind of technological platform means when you’re talking about very vulnerable children. And that anxiety is – no doubt, has at its heart a very important principle, but is also getting in the way of making sure that we are sharing data appropriately and responsibly, precisely in order to provide better services. Young people live their life in a virtual world, and if we are to support them in their futures, we have to support them in living in the world they occupy, not the one that we once occupied, and that is a huge challenge for the adult world, if you like, and parents, in relation to the children of tomorrow.

We also know that living life in public, in the way that social media enables you to do, requires different skills than we perhaps were able to help our children develop, so there’s a lot of different nuances to this, and I’m very interested also when I hear from colleagues at Microsoft, and have done some wonderful work with Coram around workshops with children and young people, and the skills that they need for the future, and that message, actually, which is that it’s the social and relational aspects of life as important in technological businesses and in technology as they are actually in our daily lives.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Absolutely. And I think one of the interesting things that I think that you may have done through the incubator, as well, is that with these new opportunities, and these are new skills that maybe people who have been working in the sector for a number of decades just won’t have been exposed to before. Is there anything that you’ve done or that Coram have done to help build the skills of social care leaders to understand technology more so you can have those conversations in a more informed way?

**CAROL HOMDEN:** Yes, exactly, and you put your finger on something. You don’t start with training to be a social worker in order to become a developer or a coder. You know, that’s not what we’re talking about, but we are talking about a fluency and confidence with systems use. There’s probably a lot more work that can be done around that, but what we have focused on was a very good workshop at senior level with colleagues from Microsoft, supporting us to address these issues of data sharing and GDPR, because leaders need to be comfortable and confident that they have captured what is important to appreciate and also that they don’t need to reinvent all the wheels.

I am very interested in the fact that, in the United Kingdom, we have 152 local authorities, and they’re all dealing with data under the same legal and regulatory framework, so we don’t surely actually need 152 answers, do we?

It’s that kind of interpretative vagary, as it were, or duplication that can stultify change, so we have focused on that in a very practical way. We’re looking to program a project, at the moment, thinking about the kinds of innovations that we might be able to, in practice, affect the systems that we have around access to children’s records. Do they really need to struggle with the ways in which the data is made available to them? It was written for a different purpose, and then when they see it, it’s either very heavily redacted or full of jargon and can be un-illuminating to the child that’s been waiting a long, long time to try and find the answers to their own past. Surely, we can do that better together.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And so, for the incubator, you’ve got a year or so under your belt of moving this forward. What are your plans for next steps? Where do you hope to take this as we look forward maybe another 12 months?

**CAROL HOMDEN:** We hope that we will be able to take three different levels, really, take the project activity, so the actual pilots, into formation and begin to have results emerging from the incubator. Secondly, to welcome new members into the incubator where they feel that they are aligned wanting to join with us on this journey and to bring their skills and perspectives to the problem analysis.

I very much hope all our partners are going to remain with us, but there will be probably a few more spaces to welcome others to come, and at the senior level, it remains about that key thing about the leadership of innovation capacity, and I suspect that we will be looking more at those issues of leadership and workforce that you and I have just touched upon, but you will have to wait to see the findings from the Art of the Possible Review that is coming up soon.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And if people want to look out for that report and learn more, and learn more about the work that you’ve already done, they can go to the Coram website to do that?

**CAROL HOMDEN:** Yes, they can, and we have a dedicated team in what we call **Coram-i,** which stands for "insight and innovation.” And the team there will be absolutely delighted to share the findings and the membership information for the Coram Innovation Incubator for the next stage of our workshops and laboratories.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Fantastic. Well, we’ll make sure that we share all of those links along with the information for this show. If somebody listening to this in a different country, working in the area of social care or providing services for children and young people, if they’ve heard you talking and they’re inspired by what you’ve said, how would you advise them to get started if they were thinking *I want to try and set up my own Innovation Incubator*? What would be the best first steps?

**CAROL HOMDEN:** The best first step would be to contact Coram and Coram International would be delighted to help you because that’s one of the things that we do is work with colleagues to replicate that learning, but actually looking at what the ingredients are that they actually would need? Well, you do need some inspiration. You do need to set about it and believe that you can affect change.

So, no matter what it is, you need an entrepreneur. So, assuming that the person calling is the entrepreneur, I would say, go out there and find a partner. Go out there and find the unusual suspects and see if they will come to help you and identify, first, what area is it that you think that, together, you would be able to make the biggest difference. Bringing together complementary skills and values is fundamental in identifying the common goal. We exist for one thing at Coram. We exist to create better chances for children, and we will help you if that’s what you want to do.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** That’s so very practical. Thank you. In these conversations on this podcast, we look for examples of great work happening in and with public service organizations around the world. Is there anything that you’ve seen being done, either within the UK or in some of your international work that you found inspiring, and you would like to share with other people?

**CAROL HOMDEN:** Can I tell you about one innovation which I just think is the most fantastic thing? Which is just such fun, which is that Coram holds the longest continuing archive of care, so our archive is not the largest that there is, but it is the longest and most continuing. We are currently digitizing a substantial part of our historical archive and the poignant stories of the children taken into care in the 18th and 19th centuries.

We’ve got written records of scratchy, illegible writing from the 19th century. And as these documents are being scanned, we are privileged to be part of the Zooniverse platform. We have more than a thousand volunteers helping to transcribe our historic records, as we speak. Now, what a fantastic innovation that is, that you have people participating from all across the globe, in that common interest in heritage and giving their time to support this children’s charity to bring its records, its history to the widest public domain.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Well, that is fantastic. Thank you for sharing that. That’s really interesting.

**CAROL HOMDEN:** So, a very different end of the spectrum

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Yeah.

**CAROL HOMDEN:** But you know, a mass participation platform, extremely effectively operated and we are delighted to be able to benefit from that.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Fantastic. I hadn’t heard of that. I’ll check it out.

**CAROL HOMDEN:** Check it out. You can sign up and become a volunteer transcriber.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Well, is there anything that I haven’t asked you that you would like to share?

**CAROL HOMDEN:** Can I be a bit naughty and quote Barack Obama?

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Absolutely.

**CAROL HOMDEN:** In my closing remark, I would simply say, "We are the people we’ve been waiting for," so change occurs because we make it change, we make it happen, and every person, in every organization, at every time, has the potential to innovate. It just doesn’t feel like that, and that’s what we need to address, that restlessness for change, which does not of course mean that I’m advocating anarchy and ignoring all rules. I’m just saying that if you can see something that could be done better, you are the person to make it better.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** That’s a wonderful note to end on. Fantastic.

**CAROL HOMDEN:** And thank you very much for the opportunity.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Thank you to our guests, **Dr. Carol Homden**, and thank you to you for joining me today on Public Sector Future. Our goal is for you to learn something new and to be inspired to think differently about your journey. If you enjoy today’s episode and want to help other people find it, please share, rate and review the show. It really does help people discover new shows like this one. Check out our show page to links to all of what we discussed today. And visit us at wwps.microsoft.com. Please do reach out send us your questions and your feedback. You can find me on Twitter @LivNeal or on LinkedIn, or you can email us at ask-ps@microsoft.com. Thank you and see you next time.

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