

TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE EPISODE 33

Simon Duggan

Deputy Secretary
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Patrick Hetherington

First Assistant Commissioner
Australian Public Service Commission

Teresa McMichael (Co-host)

Senior Adviser, Policy Projects and Taskforce Office
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Chevelle Grey (Co-host)

Assistant Director, Policy & Portfolio Strategy Branch
Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment

Introduction by DAVID PEMBROKE, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, contentgroup

15 February 2021

Enquiries should be directed to Caroline Walsh on 0413 139 427 or at caroline.walsh@act.ipaa.org.au

Delivered in a partnership between IPAA ACT and contentgroup

contentgroup

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Hello, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to Work with Purpose. A podcast about the Australian Public Service. My name's David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. I begin today's podcast by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we meet today, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to their Elders past, present, and future, and acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region.

Now, you will remember at the end of last year we surveyed you, the audience, about where you would like us to take your Work with Purpose podcast and one of the key points that was raised was the desire to hear from a variety of voices. Now of course I didn't take that personally, but I did think it was a great idea. The APS is such a vast enterprise with so many talented people, it just makes perfect sense, and I was only reminded of it again today of just how fortunate Australia is to have a public service of the quality that we do. I was in a meeting, and seriously marveled at the intelligence and commitment of my APS colleagues.

So anyway, part of the plan in the coming weeks, months and years will be for us to feature many of you and the important work that you are doing.

Today's episode is about the APS managing high-priority, cross cutting policy and deliver issues through taskforces and how the APS has developed the mobility framework to help meet the ever-evolving needs of government and Australian citizens. Both of these issues are an important part of the APS reform agenda.

So the discussion today explores the benefits of the new online taskforce toolkit which provide practical tips on how to design and deliver an effective APS taskforce and how agencies can use mobility strategically.

Today we'll hear from APS staff members who have been in the trenches making taskforces and mobility work. The online taskforce toolkit has just been released and can be accessed on the APSC website. While the APS Mobility Framework will be made available shortly.

It's a great conversation and I know you will get a lot from it. So please enjoy the conversation about taskforces and mobility.

CHEVELLE GREY:

Hello, and welcome to the Work with Purpose podcast coming to you from the IPAA studio in Barton. My name is Chevelle Grey, and I'm an Assistant Director in the Policy and Portfolio Strategy Branch at the Department of Agriculture, Water, and the Environment, having just recently moved across from the Policy Projects and Taskforce Office at the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

CHEVELLE GREY:

Joining me today to talk all things taskforces and APS mobility, Simon Duggan, Deputy Secretary Economy, Industry, and G20 Sherpa at PM&C, Pat Hetherington, First Assistant Commissioner at the APSC, and my wonderful former colleague, Teresa McMichael, Senior Advisor in the Policy Projects and taskforce Office at PM&C.

- CHEVELLE GREY: So, it's well-established in the world of public administration that the problems facing society today are pretty complex and cross cutting, and I think my panel members would agree. And they require different ways of working to address them. One of the ways the APS has responded to those issues over the past few years is through setting up taskforces, which are often new teams formed with people from different areas for a short period of time to work collaboratively and develop a solution to some of these complex problems. Staff mobility is there for a really big part of that kind of approach, and we saw that definitely last year with the movement of thousands of staff deployed across the APS to taskforces in response to COVID-19.
- CHEVELLE GREY: So even though taskforces and staff mobility are proving to be effective ways of responding to demand and tackling these complex problems, to date, there hasn't been much structure, guidance, or resources in place to make those processes easier. Two new initiatives from PM&C, and the APSC, a toolkit for taskforces and the APS Mobility Framework set to change this, and we're here to learn more about them today. So I'm going to hand over to Teresa to get the discussion started.
- TERESA McMICHAEL: Thanks, Chevelle. So to kick things off, I really just wanted to start off hearing a bit about your own taskforce experiences, sort of what types of taskforces have you worked on and what sorts of issues were they set up to address? So Simon, we might start with you.
- SIMON DUGGAN: Yeah. Great. Thank you. And thank you for inviting me to participate. I think it's a really interesting topic. So my experience with taskforces, I had the opportunity to lead one, going back six or seven years ago now, where I got a call from my Secretary, I was actually boarding a plane on an international trip to Paris, and he said, "Guess what you're doing when you get back?" And he said, "You've got to run a taskforce. You're going to have three months. I'm going to give you the objective, but you're going to be the one who sets your resourcing, and you're going to set your inputs, and I'm going to hold you accountable for delivery." I went, "Great." Knew nothing about the topic.
- SIMON DUGGAN: So I came back from overseas and hit the ground running. And I just thoroughly enjoyed the experience. So a topic I knew nothing about, ability to bring together a team of experts from across different parts of government, different corporate expertise, meshed with our policy expertise, and three months, single mission, single purpose, working with a diverse range of experts, I just found incredibly invigorating and a lot of good fun. So that was my sort of taskforce experience personally. And since then, in my current job, I've had the opportunity to oversee a number of taskforces. I've got three at the moment, I've had two that have just completed. So I've become pretty equipped to helping set them up, and setting them on a good path, and helping them to succeed. So, a bit of experience to draw on.
- TERESA McMICHAEL: Great. Thanks, Simon. How about you, Pat? What sort of taskforces have you worked on or led?

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: I suppose my most recent experience working on a taskforce has been in the context of COVID-19 about sort of January or February last year when the COO Committee was meeting and talking about what they might do for the public sector in response to COVID. I wasn't there, and I was volunteered to lead a taskforce looking at the critical functions of government. And so my boss came back and said, "Hey, I've volunteered you to lead this taskforce." And I was sort of a bit excited about it, frankly, being excited at the prospect of working with colleagues across the service on something that was critically important. Also a little bit nervous because I understood how important it was, I understood exactly what we're trying to get after, and just how short a time we had to resolve some of those things.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: So we pulled together a taskforce of Band 2s predominantly across the service from all different agencies and did some pretty fast, short burn work on what is it that you keep going? What are those critical things that we've got to do in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic? Found it enormously rewarding, just a fantastic experience to work on something that you could genuinely connect with the people that we're here to serve, and to build relationships that I sort of previously hadn't had with colleagues across the service. So didn't know anything about the topic, a bit like Simon, but was thrust in there and able to get my head around it pretty quickly, and I think at the end of it we produced some pretty high quality work.

TERESA McMICHAEL: Yeah, great. Sounds fantastic. Really interesting and important work there. And how about you, Chevelle? Can you tell us a little bit about some of the taskforces you've been involved with?

CHEVELLE GREY: Yeah, sure. So I think I can definitely echo Simon and Pat's sentiments around the work of taskforces being so invigorating. That was definitely the case for the two that I've worked on. So the first was the National Waste and Recycling Taskforce, which was set up in the Department of Environment at the time, reported through to Simon, as I'm sure he well remembers. And that was a cross-agency taskforce set up to implement COAG's commitment to ban the export of certain types of recyclable waste, and to come up with a whole of government strategy to build Australia's recycling capability. So it was a topic area that I didn't know anything about, much like Pat and Simon mentioned as well, but it was really great to just get in there, learn on the ground, and contribute to something that was really meaningful and something that'll make a difference to how Australia thinks about waste and recycling for generations to come.

CHEVELLE GREY: I then also worked on a COVID-19 related taskforce as well. So came back from waste back to PM&C and worked on PM&C's internal COVID-19 Taskforce. So we were responsible for bringing together the health and economic considerations for easing COVID-19 restrictions, and advising National Cabinet. So we came up with the three-step plan that ended up guiding Australia through the process of easing those restrictions.

TERESA McMICHAEL: Fantastic. So, looking back, I'd like to get your views on what you think, what everyone thinks taskforces are good for, why set up a taskforce? Why not just have a regular BAU team tackle an issue as a project? So any thoughts on that, Pat?

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: Sure, happy to go first. I think there's a couple of things that taskforces are really good for. The first is pretty obvious, bringing together diverse ways of thinking about different problems, people with different skill sets, different backgrounds, taskforces are only made stronger by that diversity of thought. So that's the first and probably the most obvious thing.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: The other thing that I've found taskforces really useful for is building consensus. So often with these complex policy issues, complex problems that we're trying to solve, the hardest part is actually getting people to agree to the solution that's proposed. The very construct of a taskforce, when you bring people in from different agencies, right from the start helps to build that consensus. So you have people on board before the final product is produced and then when you produce it, the pathway is so much easier to having it agreed.

TERESA McMICHAEL: Yeah, absolutely. Simon, anything to add on that?

SIMON DUGGAN: Just agree with Pat, and I guess the additional thing, which I think we've all just reflected on is that singular mission and focus that can really drive great team outcomes. One of the things, try as we might to collaborate well across the service, and I think there's some great examples of where we do that, bringing a team together under that one mission just drives such great outcomes. And sometimes we do them virtually and that has some advantages as well. What has a disadvantage though sometimes is just the network effects of getting great expertise together in the same room around a shared problem.

SIMON DUGGAN: So I think taskforces have the capacity, particularly used well on things, again, that are sort of cut across the service. One of the things that I think we need to be careful to do is ensure that with taskforces that they're not substituting for if you like capability within a particular department, I think that's always a risk and a worry, but I think if they're lifting out and they're thinking more in a collaborative space about how to bring together different parts of the service, and sometimes external expertise as well, it gives us a more flexible model to bring that in.

TERESA McMICHAEL: Yeah. Great. Thanks, Simon. And Chevelle, any reflections on the sort of key advantages of taskforces?

CHEVELLE GREY: Yeah. I definitely agree with everything that Pat and Simon have raised. It's those cross-cutting issues that really require an equally cross-cutting response. And as Pat said, the consensus of having all of the different perspectives in the room, it's just a really efficient model. Taskforces often operate in a really constrained timeframe on high priority issues, and it's just really efficient to have all the key players there working together collaboratively on an issue as opposed to spread out with their regular focus, as well as trying to direct some attention to this high priority work. So it's a really efficient and effective way of getting things done.

CHEVELLE GREY: The other thing I'd add is that because they're such fast paced and dynamic environments, they can be really good opportunities for exploring new ways of doing things and new ways of working. And that can be new policy ideas as well as new processes and capability development thoughts as well. So it's just an environment where a lot of innovation can happen, and I think that comes from that collaboration as well.

TERESA McMICHAEL: Thanks. And what about on the flip side of that? Are there any times when taskforces are not the best mechanism, or where they might be a bit less effective? Simon, you mentioned that taskforces are great when they're used well on things. So can you think of times when they're not used well on things?

SIMON DUGGAN: Yeah. So issues that are sort of important, often it's become a bit of a go-to to think, "Well, is this sufficiently important that we should set up a taskforce and allocated dedicated team to breaking it down?" We go through a bit of a process of thinking through whether or not the taskforce model is the best approach. And one of the things, as I sort of touched on earlier, that we think about is, "Is this something that, if you like, is an existing function within an existing department?" And so, "Is what we're hearing from government actually a reaction to the need to bolster the capability, or the capacity within that existing department?" If that's the case, then we will, in a sense, we'll try and do that as distinct from lifting it out of the department, creating a taskforce.

SIMON DUGGAN: Because taskforces can come with... There are some challenges and some potential costs. And in particular, I mean, firstly, you're drawing the experts out of their area. So really important when you set up a taskforce, to make sure those links back into their departments, and maintained, and they're strong. But the second thing is implementation of taskforce outcomes is really important, and so for us in PM&C for example, we're really conscious that at the end of the taskforce, getting the work, or the outcomes, of the taskforce well integrated into the line department that then needs to deliver the outcomes, is really important.

SIMON DUGGAN: So again, I wouldn't lift something out of a line department without thinking very carefully about what we need to do in terms of the cost at the other end, in terms of embedding it, because once you take something out, senior leadership in the department has less visibility and perhaps less ownership of the issue, you've taken it out of, I guess, the core responsibilities of the line area that may be responsible ultimately for implementing, so their sort of lack of engagement with the policy design means that their capacity to implement is reduced. So I think there are some real considerations that you need to bring to bear before you pull the trigger and decide a taskforce is the way to take forward this particular issue.

TERESA McMICHAEL: Yeah, definitely. That's something that we certainly heard during our consultations with stakeholders when we developed the Taskforce Toolkit. In terms of that implementation side of things, do you have any tips or suggestions on how you can get those line areas to implement and embed the policy after the taskforce is wrapped up?

SIMON DUGGAN: Yeah. I mean, it starts with really strong engagement at senior levels of those who will ultimately be, I guess, responsible for implementation. So the taskforce working, even for example, if it's physically located in PM&C, working very closely with the senior leadership of the department that will become the implementers all the way through. So they're on the journey, but also to the extent that those, again, who will be responsible for implementation are part of the taskforce and therefore are able to help you design the policy or the program response to the challenge that you're facing, that absolutely helps with the post taskforce implementation

TERESA McMICHAEL: Pat, any reflections on where taskforces might not be as effective?

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: I think Simon's actually covered probably most of the points that I would make. I mean, no small amount of effort goes into pulling together a taskforce, you are dragging often quite senior people out of their line jobs, and so you do need to be very deliberate about the sorts of issues you go after. And I think it's been said well, it's those cross-cutting issues. I think where deep domain expertise is required on a particular problem, they don't necessarily lend themselves to that taskforce methodology.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: Going to the implementation side of things, nobody likes having a solution thrust upon them after all the work has been done, so I couldn't support more the comments here around getting people engaged early. Particularly if an agency is going to be the implementing agency, having them on from the start, critically important to the success. The policy piece, the solution piece is in some ways the easy part, sometimes all the problems come to bear in the implementation side of the house. And so I think that early engagements important.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: Certainly the authorising environment, who is supporting this, who is pushing this from a senior leader perspective really does add a lot of weight to the success or not of the outcomes of a taskforce's work. But certainly where there is an agency that has primacy on a particular issue, sometimes it's not appropriate to pull people together and start solving problems that they can solve. It might be a matter of just bolstering that workforce in some way to help push through something that they've been unable to get through.

TERESA McMICHAEL: Thank you. And Chevelle, anything to add on what Simon or Pat have said?

CHEVELLE GREY: Yeah, I completely agree with everything that's been said so far. The only thing I would add is, and it's kind of what Simon mentioned in his opening remarks about the taskforce experience, what makes them really effective is that sole, singular purpose, and that focus, and uniting around that. So that I definitely think is one of the things that really drives taskforces and what makes them work. So scoping out what problem it is that the taskforce is solving, and also the trade-offs with doing a taskforces versus just doing a project in house, explore it fully, exploring that side of things before committing to the taskforce, I think is really important.

CHEVELLE GREY: If you go ahead with the taskforce and it kind of carries on for much longer than it needs to, or it loses that drive and that singularity of focus, then essentially you've kind of taken a bit of a gamble and it hasn't really paid off at the end of the day. So doing that scoping and early work to really nail down the purpose of the taskforce, and getting everyone united around that is what's going to make it the most effective.

TERESA McMICHAEL: Thanks. So my next question, I just want to know, looking back to the first time you worked on your taskforces. So six to seven years ago, Simon, and last year, when you got the call, Pat, when you were told the first time that you needed to lead a taskforce, how did you know what to do? So what information or guidance did you have to help you with the next steps?

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: Happy to talk first on that, if you like. So I mean that focus, we've talked about the singularity of focus a little bit here, that was pretty clear in terms of what was the taskforce, I was leading, trying to achieve. So I didn't have any concerns. This is going to sound silly, but the most difficult thing for me in leading a taskforce was actually the administrative side of things. So there's an awful lot to be said for good administration. All of the kind of project management side of things, how do you harness the diverse skills of the team, et cetera? Pretty well-practised that leading going into the taskforce, and certainly all of my colleagues who were on that taskforce were equally well practised in some of those things.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: But how do you set it up? How do you get it to run effectively? How do you make the most of technology? We were playing around with GovTeams trying to figure out, "How do we get this thing to work for all of us? How do we collaborate properly virtually?" All of those things were terribly challenging. And again, it sounds silly, but they're the things that slow down the work, they're the things that get in the way. Proper record keeping also vitally important. Having somebody who can do some of this administration identified early in from the start, I think is pretty important.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: Where we got to with obviously the response to COVID was audited by the ANAO, and if we hadn't had some of those record keeping practises in place, then I think we would have had a worse result in the context of the audit, but we were able to demonstrate the work that we did. But that didn't come together quickly, that was something we were trying to do on the fly. And I think, so for me, get it set up right administratively, get the right people in who have that diverse set of skills from the outset, and it goes a lot more smoothly.

TERESA McMICHAEL: Great. And Simon?

- SIMON DUGGAN: So I just echo that. I mean, I think the project management side of taskforces is absolutely essential. I guess the only thing I'd supplement that with was, I spent a lot of time in the first week after returning from overseas, when I was leading the taskforce, first of all, meeting with all the key stakeholders to understand what their objectives were for the taskforce outcomes, and understanding from their point of view what the pinch points were, and any sense that they had in terms of, I guess, the direct contributions and lines of work that we would need to contemplate as part of the taskforce work so that in parallel we're doing the project management on the substantive side of the problem that we were asked to solve, those two things were coming together early on.
- SIMON DUGGAN: And the other thing I did was suspended my initial thoughts about, "I think I know where this one's going to lead." It's always easy to sort of think that the solution when you start at the outset. So I've made myself the discipline of actually going to those stakeholders with just very open questions and saying, "Here's what I understand the task I've been set with. What are your perspectives? What are your objectives from this?" And so by the end of that first week, I had all those perspectives, and was able to craft really great terms of reference, which circulating that, all the key stakeholders were able to go, "Yep. You've nailed it. Let's proceed on that basis."
- TERESA McMICHAEL: Great. And Chevelle, how do Simon and Pat's experiences as senior leaders setting up new taskforces compare with yours working as an APS6 or an EL1?
- CHEVELLE GREY: Yeah, definitely. I think Pat and Simon have demonstrated what we would call best practice, in terms of setting up taskforces. Engaging with all the key stakeholders early in using those inputs to shape the terms of reference and what the taskforce will be delivering. And Pat mentioned the importance of getting all your administrative support in place, that is hugely important.
- CHEVELLE GREY: I think from my experiences, Teresa, as you know, working in the Policy Projects and Taskforce Office, we work in an agile and dynamic way, moving from project to project. So really the taskforce environment isn't all that dissimilar from what we would say is our BAU, but there's definitely a huge amount of challenges with a taskforce, just in that it is for most other people, it's so different from BAU. In a regular role, your sections, and branches, and divisions are pretty well-defined and everyone knows what their role is. With a taskforce, you've got to come up with all of that from scratch, and you've also got to deliver something to the Minister by the end of the week.
- CHEVELLE GREY: So when push comes to shove, often getting the deliverables done comes first, and then working out the team structures, who's doing what, what the roles and responsibilities are, project management, that all gets pushed to the side, but eventually there comes a really pressing need to get all that in place as well to make it effective. So luckily we were able to bring some of that to the taskforces that I worked on, but if I hadn't had that prior experience I think I would have definitely been quite lost going into a taskforce for the first time, for sure.

- CHEVELLE GREY: So to that point, Teresa, about being lost, really if I hadn't known, hadn't had the experience and background that I had, I think that was a really key part of the project that you and I have worked on to develop this Taskforce Toolkit, was the fact that there isn't any consistent guidance, or a rule book, or tips and tools for setting up a taskforce, even though we've heard that they can be really, really effective, there is often a bit of inertia and a bit of pain at the beginning, so to speak, to really get them off the ground. And it's just, I think, because there aren't any resources and guidance in place. So can you tell us about how the Taskforce Toolkit is set to change all of that, and how it all came about?
- TERESA McMICHAEL: Yeah, sure. Thanks, Chevelle. So, yes, as you said, it came about due to this sort of lack of support and guidance available out there, even though taskforce are commonplace across the APS. And it's something I witnessed myself several times over the last few months since working on this project, when I receive calls from people about three new taskforces saying, "I've just been told I need to setup a taskforce, what do I do? What advice can you give?"
- TERESA McMICHAEL: So the Policy Projects and Taskforce Office was commissioned by the COO Committee toward the end of last year to develop a practical online toolkit for taskforces. And the other sort of impetus for this was the government's commitment to develop best practice guidance on problem solving and dynamic ways of working across agencies, which is one of its responses to one of the recommendations in the APS Review.
- TERESA McMICHAEL: So we developed the Toolkit, it provides user centred guidance at every stage of the taskforce lifecycle, from scoping and set up, to operations, to wind down. And we developed it based on the insights of hundreds of people across the APS. We conducted interviews, and workshops, and focus groups, and a survey with APS up to Dep Secs and consulted over 700 staff who've worked on forces. And based on those insights, we created the Toolkit. It's based around seven key topics, things like scope, and governance, and staffing, et cetera. And each topic has tips for success, and common problems, and handy resources such as checklists and templates and things like that.
- CHEVELLE GREY: Great. So who do you think the Toolkit is for? Who should go out and use it?
- TERESA McMICHAEL: So we designed the Toolkit to be used by staff at all levels. Although some of the resources are probably more relevant for staff at certain levels. So for example, we created a taskforce on a page, which we designed with busy SES in mind. The thinking behind that was, "If you've only got time to look at one thing in this whole Toolkit, what should it be?" So we created a... The taskforce on a page has our top tips for success at every stage of the taskforce lifecycle.
- TERESA McMICHAEL: And then that links to all of the topic pages, which have some more detail on what to do at all of those different stages, and we probably designed that with EL2s to Band 1s in mind, and then you can link to all of the resources such as the checklist, and the templates, and there are example governance structures, and example terms of reference, et cetera, which are probably more for APS and EL staff.

- TERESA McMICHAEL: The other thing I would like to mention is the lessons learned repository. So that was something that several stakeholders suggested, noting the value of learning from the experiences of others, and there was a real desire to have a way to share those experiences. So we created the repository where taskforces could upload their learnings, things like what worked well, what didn't work well and why, and then share it on there for the benefit of others. So there's actually nothing on there yet, but I really hope and encourage taskforce leaders to start contributing and using that resource.
- CHEVELLE GREY: Absolutely, thanks, Teresa. And if we want leaders to go and start taking a look at those resources, contributing to the lessons learned, and for anyone that's just interested in checking out those resources, whether you're working on a taskforce or looking to work in a more dynamic way in your BAU work, where can listeners find the Toolkit?
- TERESA McMICHAEL: So the Toolkit is on the APSC website, and I'm sure the kind folk here at IPAA will put that on the website. So even though PM&C developed the Toolkit, we all agreed that the best home for it was with the APSC given the commission's role in building capability across the APS, and the synergies that the Toolkit has with the new APS Mobility Framework. So I just wanted to say thank you to APSC for building and hosting the site for us.
- CHEVELLE GREY: So, as we've talked about with the Taskforce Toolkit project that TERESA and I worked on, one of the key things is staff mobility, getting the right people on board early, being able to move people around, and bring all the key players in to be part of the taskforce is something that'll really set it up for success from the outset. And so I think that leads us quite well, Pat, into what the APS Mobility Framework is set out to do. So can you tell us in a nutshell what it's all about?
- PATRICK HETHERINGTON: Sure. So we've been doing a bunch of work, and the taskforce pieces included in this, but we've been doing a bunch of work about, I guess, what are the use cases for mobility across the public sector? Where do we think it's appropriate? Where do we not think it's appropriate? We've had a discussion here already about sometimes mobility is not the answer to every problem, sometimes you actually want that deep expertise, and I think we need to be quite strategic about the way we think about mobility.
- PATRICK HETHERINGTON: So we've looked pretty deeply at three use cases, we've talked taskforces, so I'll move to a couple of others. The first is a surge reserve, and people may have heard of this before, it's been in the media a little bit, but how do we respond as a service to things like COVID-19, to bush fires, et cetera? In the context of COVID, we surged a couple of thousand people into Services Australia to support the JobSeeker program, basically making sure that Australians had food and money to buy food, water, shelter, all of those sorts of things, which strangely enough, in the context of a crisis, seems to be the most important thing.

- PATRICK HETHERINGTON: So when do you use this? How do we prepare ourselves for whatever that next crisis is? So we've done our power work around establishing a surge reserve. And I guess what we're looking at there is between three and 4,000 volunteers who are pre-volunteered to support our crisis for short periods of time. So up to eight weeks, the outset of a crisis, we could call on the surge reserve, generalist in nature, we could take large numbers of people and put them into those areas where we need to put them into support the government response to a crisis.
- PATRICK HETHERINGTON: Typically there were looking at, as I said, generalists, some resilience training, really to do some of that potentially administrative type work. So there's a bunch of work going into developing the frameworks around that, so we make sure that we can do that quickly and at scale. Part of the issue that we had with response to COVID was that was a time-consuming process. To find volunteers, to bring volunteers, to induct volunteers into agencies took longer than we would want it to take in the context of a crisis.
- PATRICK HETHERINGTON: So that's one element of it. I guess the second element of it, we've talked taskforces, the second element that I would go to is kind of professional development. So, if you think about the review of the public sector, it talked about mobility, it talked about building capability, those two things kind of inter mesh quite nicely.
- PATRICK HETHERINGTON: So targeted kind of capability, building of our people. People learn an awful lot when they get put into different environments, they get to learn different ways of doing things from others. And so, kind of identifying talent, identifying people who need development in a particular way, and identifying mobility opportunities for them, I think is another area that's critically important to mobility. There may be others, but sort of the surge reserve, the taskforce, and then this targeted kind of professional development opportunity are the three that we focused on. And so, the framework really covers those and how to best employ those things.
- CHEVELLE GREY: Yeah, that's really excellent. Can you tell us more about what the Framework will look like for managers that are on the ground that could be looking for ways to support their staff and to support greater mobility across the APS?
- PATRICK HETHERINGTON: Yeah, sure. So, I mean, first of all, it'll have all the information in a single place. Something that we've lacked in terms of mobility is a bit of cohesiveness of where do you go to find information? There'll be some really practical toolkits, checklist type things. You've seen that with the taskforce, there are checklists to really get people thinking about how to do this.

- PATRICK HETHERINGTON: But I think with the surge, there will be a raft of materials that people will be able to have access to. It will detail quite a bit in terms of responsibilities of Public Service Commission kind of coordinating the surge, the responsibilities of individuals who want to volunteer for the surge reserve, responsibility of agencies who have volunteers for the surge, and certainly the responsibilities of those agencies who might be a recipient of surge volunteers. So there'll be all that sort of information that will be available to people to help inform the decision to use mobility, and then to make it work effectively.
- CHEVELLE GREY: Great. And Simon, how do you see the Mobility Framework fitting in with the broader APS Reform Agenda?
- SIMON DUGGAN: Yep. I mean, first of all, the importance, I guess, of surging great public servants into areas of high priority during a crisis, really important from the point of view of what we're here to do, serving the Australian public. But I just think about enormous opportunity for the individuals involved. I mean the most fun I've had in my career has been when I've been pulled in to do something that's urgent, it's high priority, you got a short period of time, the relationships and the friendships I've developed through that have just been so much deeper than the usual work experience. So I think it's great for the departments, it's great for the individuals.
- SIMON DUGGAN: In terms of how it relates to, I guess, broader APS reform. I think this is part of the more general trend and push, and I think it's a very positive one towards people thinking about their careers as more of an APS career rather than a career within a particular sort of stovepipe of a portfolio. I think the experiences that you can get, and I'm fortunate, and you guys are fortunate too, have sort of seen multiple, different portfolios and I guess, government policy objectives. And what it does in terms of broadening your skillset, your horizons, and your capacity, what you're then able to bring to each new challenge that you confront, just brings enormous value to you as an individual, in terms of your own human capability, but also then what you take into your ability to support the government in supporting the Australian people. So I think that this mobility is just essential for the building overall human capability and the capability of the public service.
- PATRICK HETHERINGTON: If I can just add to that, there's a couple of really important points there. Part of the criticism of the public service has been this siloed approach to resolving problems, and making policy, and those sorts of things. I mean, countless times colleagues that I've worked with on taskforces, I've been able to reach out to break down those barriers very quickly when you need to resolve a problem quite quickly.
- PATRICK HETHERINGTON: So the point about colleagues that hopefully you'll have throughout your career, absolutely fantastic way to build those through mobility, whether it's through taskforces or through surge opportunities, I believe a lot of our junior APS staff who did get seconded into Services Australia will look back in time very fondly on that opportunity to build those networks across the system.

TERESA McMICHAEL: So we have a couple of questions posed by IPAA's Future Leader Committee. So the first one from Michael Sanese from PWC, which is, "What barriers and opportunities exist to the long term success of mobility across the APS, with respect to the variability in enterprise agreements, across departments?"

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: That's probably more one for me, I think, Simon.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: I'll take that one. Look, I hear this a lot as it happens. And I think, in my experience, and I have some, I was involved in mobilising people into Services Australia. Actually, people talk about that as a barrier a lot more than it really is. And we brought people from many, many different agencies into Services Australia as the example. Comcar drivers, people from tax, all over the place. And in practice, different enterprise agreements were not the barrier that people actually think they are. It is true that when you're looking at mobility between agencies, enterprise agreements are certainly part of somebody's consideration, but there's a lot more commonality in our enterprise agreements than you might think. Look at superannuation, look at leave entitlements, look at flexible work arrangements. Actually they're pretty common across most agencies. So I think people can overplay the impact that differing employment agreements have across the service.

TERESA McMICHAEL: Thanks, Pat. Simon, I'll direct this one to you. This is from Holly Noble from the Department of Finance. "What are the main lessons you learned from being part of a taskforce? Did it give you a different perspective when returning to your day job, or taking on a future role, and do you think that being part of a taskforce is an experience all future leaders would benefit from? And if so, how can they best put themselves forward?"

SIMON DUGGAN: Yeah. Great. So, I mean the key lesson I learned was the importance of getting the right people involved in the taskforce. I think if you're able to mobilise excellent people, then taskforces are run very smoothly. I've already touched on the importance of building relationships across the service, and Pat mentioned that taskforces are an excellent way of doing that.

SIMON DUGGAN: So I guess in terms of would I recommend people join taskforces? Absolutely. I mean, I'd sort of fondly reflect back on the first taskforce I was involved in and the work that we did, I mean, it was hard, in particular, I guess one thing I'd emphasise is, the first two weeks in the establishment of a taskforce, when often they're established because there's a really urgent, important issue that needs to be resolved, and there's an impatience to see progress, getting your terms of reference, getting the right people in the door, getting your project planning, starting to demonstrate products so starting to update people on your progress around those issues, if you can do that at the start of a taskforce, you can set yourself up for the life of the taskforce. So that two week's surge, it feels really hard, but incredibly important.

SIMON DUGGAN: So yeah, I think in terms of a career experience, both from the point of view of getting to know colleagues across different areas, but also just some of the important things you learn about how to bring together and integrate different perspectives towards an issue, I think just invaluable.

CHEVELLE GREY: So with the help of new resources, like the Taskforce Toolkit and the APS Mobility Framework, I think we can see taskforces and a more flexible APS as being part of our working future going forwards. And that will really, I think, set the APS up for a more dynamic and responsive public service. So I'd like to thank Simon, Pat, and Teresa for joining us today and being part of this excellent discussion. Thank you.

SIMON DUGGAN: Thank you very much.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: Thank you.

TERESA McMICHAEL: Thanks, Chevelle.

DAVID PEMBROKE: And a big thanks there to Chevelle Grey from the Policy & Portfolio Strategy Branch at the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment and thanks also to Teresa, Simon and Patrick for their contributions.

Ladies and gentlemen, Work with Purpose is a part of the GovComms network and thank as always to you for giving us some of your valuable time and attention once again. And please if you could share, rate or review our Work with Purpose program, that will help it to be found.

Thanks also again to our great partners here at IPAA and at the Australian Public Service Commission who have been so supportive in making Work with Purpose such a success.

My name's David Pembroke, thanks for joining me once again we'll be back at the same time in two weeks with the next edition of Work with Purpose but for the moment, it's bye for now.

SPEAKER 6: Work with Purpose is a production of contentgroup in partnership with the Institute of Public Administration Australia, and with the support of the Australian Public Service Commission.