



INSTITUTE OF  
PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION  
AUSTRALIA

02 6154 9800  
PO Box 4349 Kingston ACT 2604  
admin@act.ipaa.org.au  
www.act.ipaa.org.au

ABN 24 656 727 375

# TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

## WORK WITH PURPOSE | A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

**DAVE STEWART**  
DIRECTOR-GENERAL  
DEPARTMENT OF THE PREMIER AND CABINET  
QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT

Hosted by DR GORDON DE BROUWER PSM, IPAA National President

20 AUGUST 2020

Enquiries should be directed to Drew Baker on 0414 477 417 or to [drew.baker@act.ipaa.org.au](mailto:drew.baker@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. Thank you 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. Today, another interview from our Work with Purpose - A National Perspective series hosted by Dr Gordon de Brouwer.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Hello to everyone listening and welcome to Work with Purpose, a podcast about Australia's Public Services. I'm Gordon de Brouwer, and I'm the IPAA National President. We've had a lot of interest in the programme on Work with Purpose, and we've been speaking with leaders from around the country, and I'm really delighted today to be speaking with Dave Stewart who's the Director-General of the Queensland Department of the Premier and Cabinet. Dave's got a long history, long experience in public administration, certainly both, of course, in Queensland, but also in New South Wales and the United Kingdom. And I'm really delighted to be speaking with you today, Dave.

DAVE STEWART: Thanks, Gordon. It's great to be online.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Thanks. So why don't we start with how you saw with... We're going to talk about the COVID pandemic, how you saw the pandemic emerging and how did it trigger and what did you see at the start?

DAVE STEWART: Well, it's really interesting. I think we all came back from leave at Christmas time in early January and, certainly, our Chief Health Officer was very concerned about what she was seeing in China, in particular. So, I think it was that very early on in January and, in fact, the Queensland disaster management arrangements really swung into action at that stage. We started understanding the dimensions of the pandemic or what was playing out. And then, for us, we started to understand particularly when travellers came from Wuhan into Melbourne and then travelled up into Queensland. So, we instigated our public health response in early, sorry, in late January. So, we saw that emerging and we certainly whipped into gear very quickly.

GORDON DE BROUWER: So can I ask you, around those sorts of plans, they're good guides, but how closely do you follow those scripts or are they just kind of a sense of what some of the issues are, and how did you use that sort of pandemic script?

DAVE STEWART: I think, Gordon, one of the things, unfortunately, Queensland's been very well rehearsed at natural disasters. We were certainly confronting the bushfire situation late in 2019, and certainly into the early parts of 2020. Usually in the sort of summertime, we get our cyclones. So, I guess our state disaster arrangements are very well practised and very well trialled, and I think what we saw very quickly was how important when we started seeing the situation in Wuhan. What we usually do is we have an agency, in this case, Health was the

strike agency, and then supported very quickly with all the rest of the whole of government response.

So the pandemic plans, Queensland had a pandemic plan we certainly recognise, and we brought that off the shelf and we then started operationalizing and, quite frankly, it was a very good plan. Obviously, as this pandemic has rolled out and time has moved on, then we've had to adjust and move very quickly. I guess in the last... watching Melbourne very closely at the moment is how important aged-care facilities are. One of the things we do is we go back and test our plans, develop new plans, and then implement. So it's a bit of an iterative process.

**GORDON DE BROUWER:** Yeah. So you mentioned Queensland sadly has lots of natural disasters. So, it means that you're more attuned to that. You talk a little bit about either what that means for relationships, say, across the service, also, for how proactive you are in thinking when something happens, how quickly you've got to respond, or think about what the series of steps are.

**DAVE STEWART:** Well, again, Gordon, the Queensland disaster management arrangements are very structured. So, as I said, we'd come out of the bushfire season, heading into the cyclone season, and as soon as we saw this, the premier called the Queensland State Disaster Management Committee together. It started meeting very regularly, and I think we had actually had our first meeting of the Queensland Disaster Management Committee in, again, I think it was on the 30th of January in relation to the pandemic. And I guess what we saw was it escalating. And so the Premier moved very quickly to create a Cabinet Committee, which was the Queensland Disaster Cabinet Committee. Basically, that committee is a very collegiate committee. It's chaired by the Premier. It has all of the key Ministers around the table, all the key Directors' Generals, the Police Commissioner, but importantly, the State Disaster Controller who happens to be our Deputy Police Commissioner.

So we had all the agencies around. We had local government at the table. We had key stakeholders at the table. So it was something that worked very well. It's worked very well for us in practise. And it's certainly something that we've continued to work. And I guess, we are a collegiate group, particularly, in a disaster and this was no different, really.

**GORDON DE BROUWER:** Yeah. I'd like to take the conversation into three areas. One's talking about how service delivery to the Queensland public changed or how you use technology or other ways to ensure continuity of service. Then we'll talk about elements of how the Public Service itself worked and the changes in practises, and then come back and reflect on some of the relationships, including with ministers in the federation. But can we start with service delivery? How's Queensland gone about maintaining continuity and quality service delivery to the Queensland public?

**DAVE STEWART:** I guess, service delivery, in many respects, has changed fundamentally with COVID. So, yes, we still deliver our policing services. We deliver our frontline services through emergency response. We still deliver all of our ag services. We deliver our Transport and Main Roads customer services. You name it, those services are still there, but the way people interact with us has changed. So, we always had a strong digital presence, but we always maintained front of counter services as well. And I think what we've seen during COVID is that people have moved more to the digital presence. And the other thing we've done is that we've

actually pushed service delivery out. So, instead of waiting for Queensland citizens to come to us, we've tended to push those services out to Queensland citizens to make sure they're aware of what's happening. But, certainly, under COVID there's been a lot of adjustment in service delivery.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Can you give some examples of how you've pushed out service delivery? What are some practical examples of that?

DAVE STEWART: Yeah. Transport and Main Roads around licencing. So, we've really streamlined our licencing process. We've really gone and made sure that people can understand that they can renew licences online. They can access the plethora of information. Don't get me wrong, there have been some challenges. And, again, if I look at Transport and Main Roads, we had to suspend driver licencing testing. So, there're things we've done. But now that we're doing quite well in our response to the pandemic, we've been able to re-introduce those services as we've been able to lift restrictions. I guess, the most fundamental, and it's as much to do with the Commonwealth, is in the way health delivery services happened. eHealth has been, I think, one of the most amazing phenomena that we've seen. And I think the conversion of people wanting to go and see a GP or a health professional and willing to do that online, has made a fundamental change.

I think the other area, just really quickly, is around hospitalities. So, as you know, with liquor licencing and how we regulate, a lot of those businesses have had to go online, do take away services early on. But we also made sure that we can merge all of the things that they would do as a restaurant, so they could sell alcohol with that food, as an example.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Right. Two distinctive features of Queensland are it's probably more regional state, so it's a much more decentralised, regions matter everywhere, but they really are hugely important. So any reflections around regional service delivery, but also reflections on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement and service delivery for that community?

DAVE STEWART: Gordon, I'll start with the latter because I think early on our indigenous communities, which we have a very strong relationship with, again, just as an example, every week, the Deputy Premier or the Premier would meet with every Mayor from indigenous communities and generally online, obviously, but we were very minded of how vulnerable those communities were and how we had to respond very differently to our Indigenous and Torres Strait communities. So we, again, looked very carefully at what we had to do. In fact, we implemented protocols where we really restricted the number of people who went into community, but we made sure that we had that digital presence or that presence where people could actually get what we need.

Resupply was really critical at that time, early on in the pandemic, and we made sure we doubled our efforts around resupply, health workers. So we really restricted those people physically going into communities, but we then gave the communities alternate channels to deal with what they needed in a public health sense. But you're right. Queensland is such a decentralised state. We've very much had a very different customer response to what happens in the southeast corner to what happens up the seaboard, but certainly in outback and regional Queensland.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yeah, you're right. In thinking about some of these changes and what you say is that they've been remodelled especially, say, in telehealth or other things, how do you go about thinking about locking these changes in? So, if the public has an expectation that they can get these services delivered differently and delivered well, how do you go about making sure that consciously you're locking these things in rather than just by accident or losing it?

DAVE STEWART: Well, I think we've seen adaptation happen so rapidly. I guess the pace we were following in changing our services to different platforms or different modes was basically how our customers were responding to us, but that's changed so rapidly. I think our customers now very clearly expect those services to be delivered in a different way. And, quite frankly, we've adapted the Public Service. So, a whole pile of things we used to do, we no longer do, and we've focused our attention on new service delivery modes and channels.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Well, that's a good way of shifting to the way the Public Service or the QPS works. Talk about some of those changes around and then what you did differently and how that succeeded.

DAVE STEWART: Well, I think, again, in time of disaster, we work very well together. We're very collegiate and, basically, we break down all the departmental barriers. And I think what we've seen now is a fundamental shift in the way we deploy public servants. So we've created a really good process where we've deployed people to where the need is the greatest. So, as I said, early on, Health was so important to us. We deployed people into the health department and into the hospital and health network to really support the COVID response. We deployed people into our state disaster organisations to support those frontline service delivery areas. So, we have adapted as organisations and we've learned how we can move and have greater mobility within the sector. And we're seeing that as, in Queensland, as restrictions have lifted, we're seeing a decentralisation of the service, people moving into parts of the region as opposed to travelling to the CBD or travelling to, I guess, the more higher population areas. So, we're just seeing that service being delivered differently.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Can you talk a bit about and maybe some practical examples of those work hubs and how they operate and what they do?

DAVE STEWART: So I'll give two examples. One is, again, early on, we recognised how important contact tracing would be in managing a pandemic outcome, and, again, we've seen that across the states in recent times. The Premier actually assigned a task to the Attorney-General. Basically, as I said, the Health Minister was a lead response, our Deputy Premier, but the Premier said, "Right. Contact tracing, Attorney-General, I want you as an accountable minister to develop a team and work directly with Health to really build that capacity." And so, what we've done with the Public Service is we've deployed people to become and train them to become contact tracers, so important in managing the pandemic. The Premier said to the now Treasurer, "Manufacturing and the delivery of PPE is something that's vital. I want you to be accountable for modelling what PPE requirements

are going to be needed, but then going and identifying new manufacturing opportunities onshore." So we had a team that did that.

Our communities group, again, the Premier said, "Well, we're going to have a lot of people in isolation, a lot of elderly people in isolation. I want to create what's called the Care Army. I want you to have community recovery people who come from across the sector, ringing those people in isolation or in-home care so we have that support network." So, those people have someone they could talk to every day and we can deliver on what their requirements are—food, health services, but more importantly, talking to them about their mental health and having that point of contact.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yeah. So that's how the Public Service talks with the public. You got any sort of also on sort of working from home, those sorts of things, how it talks to itself or the different bits of the service talking and using technology?

DAVE STEWART: Yeah, it's interesting. It's a bit like today we've all become experts at Teams or Zoom, which, again, I think leaders needed to adapt. We always said we had a flexible workforce. We really do now have a flexible workforce. We've brought back 50% of the Public Service back to our offices but we still rotate our teams so they can still work from home. We don't have the structure, people used to, I guess, the old Public Services as a nine to five culture or the seven to whatever, we now have very broad bandwidths that people can work to deliver... What they have to do their work programmes. But it's really required managers to really start managing, and leaders to actually provide the opportunity for managers to direct their teams in a very different way. So we've been able to say, "Here's your work programme," and then being able to check in. So, it's just a very different face to... It's different from the face to face context.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yeah. One of the things I've heard about from Queensland is, again, on the regional side, it's meant that the contact and the engagement between, say, Brisbane public servants in Brisbane, and then in the regions is much more equal. It's not like everything's centred in Brisbane. It's actually technology empowers the regions in that... So they're face to face on the Zoom, like a Brisbane face is, so is a regional face.

DAVE STEWART: Absolutely. Look, it has been good. I'm always fascinated by the adoption. So people are adapted and adopted working from home very quickly. A lot of that was from necessity in the early days, but it's interesting to see how those practises have been sustained and I think service delivery is as good as it has been.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Can I ask you, you mentioned mental health earlier, and it's really part of that responsibility of managers and teams and looking after the health, how's that gone in Queensland? Because I think most people would say mental health in all workplaces is a more serious difficulty now than it was before. How have you gone about addressing or thinking about those issues?

DAVE STEWART: I think the key thing is people's connectiveness to others. And, when you lose that face to face contact in a physical environment, I think it's as equally important to make sure you have a communication pathway when you're in a digital or on a

virtual forum. So one of the things we have continued to do, I communicate with my department every day. I send out a note telling them what's happened, but I know my deputy directors keep running their town halls. They do all of those interactions, and I know teams do that. They virtually meet as a team, if not a couple of times a day, at least once a day.

And I think we've also emphasised our human service support that we have. We've always had that, but I think it's really that ongoing connection, making sure people know that they're not alone. I think some people have a propensity to... If they're working from home, they love it. They lockdown and do what they need to do, but it's important that we keep communicating and it's a two-way street.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yeah. Yeah. Maybe we'll just talk to that third area now around relationships, and so probably talk a little bit about relationships with ministers and then with the community and business and then in the federation, but maybe you're happy to start with how's the pandemic changed the relationship or interaction between public servants and ministers or has it?

DAVE STEWART: I don't think it's changed too dramatically, quite frankly. I think again, in that Queensland disaster management structure, the collaboration between ministers and the Public Service is very strong. I think, again, we do our very best work and it's great seeing ministers around that QDMCC, the Queensland Disaster Management Cabinet table, and how they interact with the public sector. The other thing the Premier's been very insistent and very good at doing is running scenario workshops. So early on, we ran a big scenario around what was coming over, that we could see this cloud coming over the horizon. We wanted to be prepared, and I was just amazed at the ideas and the thought process. We ran a pandemic with a cyclone and then the great thinking that was happening there.

So, I've seen that relationship strengthen. I've seen Premiers run the Cabinet virtually, initially, and we've been able to change our whole parliamentary processes as well. In fact, parliament's sitting as we speak and in a very different format. So, those relationships are strong. I think what's changed dramatically is the relationships in the federation, the invention of National Cabinet. We had our 25th National Cabinet meeting last Friday. That forum has been outstanding. You've been involved in many COAG meetings, as I have. I have never seen so much achieved in so little time. Some of the chestnuts.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yeah. So how do you, again, how do you maintain that? These are difficult questions, Dave.

DAVE STEWART: I know. I think it's interesting. As you know, Peter Conran's working at the moment with the Commonwealth looking at how we... What the shape of National Cabinet will be, I guess, in a peacetime, as opposed to a pandemic time. I think the challenge will always be what we have with the pandemic is we have a common purpose. We have a common goal as a federation. I think the challenge will be maintaining that, particularly, when we start looking at policy areas that are quite complex. But I think the goodwill's there. I think the leadership's there. The Prime Minister with the Premiers and the Chief Ministers, there is no question that everyone wants to do things differently. And I think this is our time to fundamentally shift from pandemic wartime to a National Cabinet in peacetime that really achieves great outcomes and reform, regulatory reform.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yeah, it's the political will that's always been this central piece of everything that's done.

DAVE STEWART: It's the political will.

GORDON DE BROUWER: One, have you got any reflections around just the nature of the federation and my sense is, as a long time Canberra person, that things had been shifted more and more to Canberra, and that was the appetite of Canberra? What this has shown is that when it comes to public health, and safety, education, and health, and enforcement, that's really the states are sovereign.

DAVE STEWART: Yeah, absolutely.

GORDON DE BROUWER: And there's been a sense of sovereignty of state and territory jurisdictions, and that's changed. That's changed the view around how the federation should go. You had any reflections on that, is that...

DAVE STEWART: It's interesting, Gordon. I think early on there was this view that we had to have a single song sheet that people followed the rules very closely. But I think what we've tried to do is have nationally consistent rules, but the way the states have implemented those rules has changed and the subtlety of things like border closures, or particular restrictions, or the way these things have happened. Quite frankly, I think that's been successful. States have made decisions on the best basis of the health advice but in the best interests of their own economies. We've seen what's happened in Victoria. We've sent resources to Victoria, not only health resources but also policy and community recovery resources. And I think this whole resource sharing has been really key for a common interest, but I think states definitely have done things. We've managed our border issues. That focus has been on how we manage the pandemic within our state. So, look, I think we have the balance right. I think we aim for national consistency. We aim for watching the AHPPC advice, but states are sovereign and they do what they need to do.

GORDON DE BROUWER: How do you manage within that some of the risks, say, to supply chains that lots of economic activity spreads across states, and if you have to close down particular areas for a health issue, then it can have disproportionate impacts on some of that supplier security of supply and maybe unintended consequences? How do you think about those things as a public servant?

DAVE STEWART: I think that, again, the National Cabinet processes and our first secretaries' meetings or our senior officers' meetings, we understand, again, the importance of... And supply chain is a great thing, so freight movement by heavy vehicle. So initially, states were doing different things, and then there was a very strong view, look, we need to be consistent in that approach and having these, I guess, codes of practise developed that actually manages freight movement. So, the freighters only have to have a single permit. The driver has to be tested every seven days. So we've got that consistency. We got that consistency in the maritime space, particularly with shipping and bulk shipping. I put cruise ships to one side. We've had that same issue with the... Of quarantining people flying in from outside the country. Another example was, early on, was this whole notion of residential tenancies and commercial tenancies. So, everyone identified an issue, hibernation of business. We needed to manage that tenancy issue, and we developed the national code. So, I think where there's a common purpose, everyone comes

together to come up with a framework. How that framework's implemented is sometimes different.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yeah. Can I ask you on the relationships side, how you've seen sort of government interact with, say, communities or with business, that sort of relationship that... Many of the solutions, or finding a way through this found iteratively with others. Have you've got any examples or how you've seen that work in practise?

DAVE STEWART: Again, what we've done in Queensland is we set up very quickly what we called an alliance. So, within my department, we have a task force, which is basically focused on... Their focus now is on economic recovery and it's part of the recovery process, our unite and recover. But one of the key things we identified is making sure that we brought our key stakeholders along so the premier created an alliance. So we've met... I can't remember how many times now, certainly many times, and there's subgroups of the alliance, but the peak industry bodies, whether it's the social services sector, or the chambers of commerce, or those peak industries and, look, that's worked well. We've been able to listen and hear from them. And that's certainly been a key input into our roadmap and the various restriction easing stages of our roadmap, and in sometimes where we've had to reintroduce restrictions, like we did with the border, so you can imagine that would have had a significant impact on tourism. They were part of the decision-making process and they understood the reasons. So I think that external stakeholder collaboration has been very good and has worked well.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yeah, I guess we're coming to an end. Can I ask you for some personal reflections on... In a sense what you've discovered about yourself or what you've learned about yourself in this process?

DAVE STEWART: I think one of the key things is your ability to... I use the word pivot, your ability to adapt. I think that's been fundamental. I couldn't imagine where we were in January, where I am today in August, and the fundamental changes that we've done to our business, the fundamental changes we've seen in our community. I think being nimble and being able to change and adapt quickly has been something that's important. Again, I think one of the great things of being a leader, at this stage, is the relationships that you've had and the relationships you've developed across the board. It's certainly been a very, very, very busy time, but it's good to be in the leadership role and advising the premier and ministers and working as a team. I'm immensely proud of the Queensland Public Service. They've done outstanding work. The other thing I must admit is the power of my own personal team. My office team have just been outstanding and I take my hat off to them. They've done remarkable work.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Let's see, probably a little bit around resilience on that and how have you been able to be resilient? I mean, some of it's just the adrenaline and the imperative of dealing with an issue, but how do you find your resilience? How do you bolster that?

DAVE STEWART: I think having a great team around you is so important and we work... It is so collegiate. It's the most collegiate I've ever... I thought my team was very collegiate. It's the best I've ever seen. People really roll their sleeves up and get on with it. Look, we talk to each other, we talk about the things that aren't going

so well, whether they're our own personal interactions, but we certainly talk about the successes we've had, and we work off that.

As I said, I think you've got to maintain a really good balance. You've got to look at what you're trying to achieve. It's often hard to stay connected with your family when you're working tremendous hours. But I think when you see what we've achieved as a state, I'm immensely proud and happy to be part of that process, only one person in a cog of many.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yeah. Well, thank you very much, Dave, for your time. That's very much appreciated. Thank you also for your service to your state and to the nation. So thank you very much, Dave.

DAVE STEWART: Thanks, Gordon.

DAVID PEMBROKE: And there you have it, another great conversation hosted by Dr Gordon de Brouwer, Work with Purpose - A National Perspective. Work with Purpose is part of the GovComms podcast network, and if you do want to check out that GovComms podcast, please type it into your favourite podcast browser, and it is sure to come up. If you do happen to come across our social media promotion for Work with Purpose, please pass it along and share it because it will help it to be found, and if you do have enough time to give us a generous rating, probably a five-star review, that would be appreciated as well because that will help us to be discovered.

Thanks again to our good friends at IPAA and to the Australian Public Service Commission for their ongoing support, and thanks to you, the audience, for coming back once again. That's it for now. We'll be back at the same time next week, but for the moment, it's bye for now.