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TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

Work with Purpose

EPISODE #52

THE IMPACT ON INFRASTRUCTURE

Hosted by Michael Sanese, Senior Manager, PwC and IPAA ACT Future
Leaders Committee Member

TRANSCRIPT

David Pembroke:

Hello, everyone, and welcome once again to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian public service. My name's David Pembroke, but I won't be your host for today's episode of Work with Purpose. That honour goes to Michael Sanese, who is not only a senior manager in consulting at PricewaterhouseCoopers, but he is also, importantly, a member of the IPAA ACT Future Leaders Committee. He is in conversation today with Alison Playford from the ACT Government and Dr Rachel Bacon who is a Deputy Secretary at the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications. The conversation today is about COVID, but it's the impact of COVID on infrastructure and indeed the role of cross jurisdictional cooperation. It's a great conversation and please enjoy it. And it starts with Michael Sanese.

Michael Sanese:

Hello, everyone. Welcome to Work with Purpose. My name is Michael Sanese and I'm a senior manager at PwC in our workforce and change consulting practice and member of IPAA ACT's Future Leaders Committee and I'll be your host today. I begin today's podcast by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we're meeting today, the Ngunnawal people and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging, and acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region.

Michael Sanese:

Today's conversation explores how COVID has impacted planning on long-term infrastructure projects and what our transport and cities will look like in the future as a direct or indirect result of that. We'll also talk about collaborating across jurisdictions, including looking at some of the challenges and successes. Today's guests are Alison Playford, Director General of Transport Canberra and City Services, or the TCCS and Dr Rachel Bacon, Deputy Secretary for the Regional and Territories Group at the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications.

Michael Sanese:

Alison Playford has over 30 years public sector experience in both the Commonwealth and ACT Government. Alison moved to the ACT Government first as Deputy Director General, then as Director General at the ACT Justice and Community Safety Directorate, JACS. She commenced her role as Director General of Transport Canberra and City Services in May 2019, where she's involved in delivering essential services Canberrans rely on each day. She's held positions in the Commonwealth Department of Finance, the Department of Prime Minister in Cabinet and the Attorney-General's Department.

Michael Sanese:

Prior to her role at Infrastructure, Rachel Bacon, worked in the Department of Environment and Energy, running the Policy Analysis and Implementation Division. And as Deputy Chief Executive Officer with the Northern Territory government's Department of the Chief Minister. Rachel previously led a number of task forces based in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, working to deliver whole of government priorities in areas such as environment regulation reform and Australia's engagement with Asia. Alison and Rachel, welcome to Work with Purpose.

Michael Sanese:

I'm going to kick off with an opening question. We've all been through a number of changes over the last few years and very keen to hear your perspective from a policy and planning perspective and how we're moving

forward in this new world. Alison, I'd like to start with yourself. What are some of the challenges for planning long-term infrastructure projects in the COVID environment?

Alison Playford:

Thanks, Michael. I think one of the things from the last couple of years is uncertainty and having to grapple with uncertainty and look to trends. Clearly, the way society operates has changed. We have seen an uptake of people using active travel. We've seen a downturn in use of public transport. We've seen people change their work styles and habits. Predicting which of those things will stick and which of them will revert back is something that's always a challenge for planners. But I think where the ACT is taking things is really consistent with our transport strategy which was released last year around looking at, I guess, long-term expecting our city to continue to grow, to continue to face issues of congestion. So looking at how we can facilitate a recovery and return to public transport and how we can enhance our investment in active travel to actually capitalise and leverage off some of the things that have happened during COVID.

Alison Playford:

I guess the other thing I'd just add is one of the other challenges is just the global market that we're delivering infrastructure projects in. We saw some very welcome investments from the Commonwealth government last year in a range of infrastructure projects and also by state and territory governments as well. And that has led to record levels of infrastructure developments across Australia. That's been fantastic for the economy and keeping the economy going during this period of COVID, but we are now facing challenges in terms of market and supply chain issues where we rely on a lot of products, et cetera and specialists as well, from overseas and other jurisdictions.

Michael Sanese:

Yeah, that might be a really good segue to Rachel. What about yourself, the challenges with long-term planning? We've seen government investing in these long-term infrastructure projects. Have you got any insights around the challenges for planning in this environment?

Rachel Bacon:

Yeah, and it's a really good point, Michael. Just building on what Alison said, I think when COVID hit, we slipped into a bit of an abyss of the unknown really. Everyone was talking about the U curve, but no one knew how deep that U would get and how wide the bottom of the U curve was before we'd start coming out the other side of the pandemic. One of the challenges that we faced not so much with the amazing work that Alison and her colleagues in other states and territories did around emergency stimulus and that kind of really emergency response, one of the things that was a big unknown for us both in the regional space and also with my hat, running with the city's division in my group as well was, what are the medium to longer term trends here? What impacts is COVID and the impacts of responses to COVID around lockdowns and restrictions, what impacts are they going to have in the... sorry, in the medium to longer term.

Rachel Bacon:

And because it's a really unknown area, one of the challenges, I think, when it comes to planning post your stimulus and emergency response phase is, what's your data? Having not had a global pandemic for 100 years, a lot's changed in 100 years, how do we actually plan for the unknown in terms of what impact COVID and the responses to COVID are going to have in six months, 12 months, five years, 10 years time? We actually did a really rapid, but very comprehensive piece of data analysis where we looked at a whole range of data sources to figure out what are the trends that we think are going to flow from COVID in the medium term and then which of those trends might be sticky? In other words, out of all of the things that we're seeing at the moment that's happening in the data that we can get hold of quickly, what are the trends that might be a blip, because

as soon as lockdowns ease or we get to a certain level of vaccination in the population, some things might revert to as they were pre-pandemic. And I think we're seeing a little bit of that in some of the tenancy rates and occupancy rates in CBD office buildings, depending on whether there's lockdowns or not in different cities.

Rachel Bacon:

But are there longer run trends that are sticky? For example, we've seen greater movement of population from the cities to regions, so 43,000 net population shift from capital cities to the regions compared to the previous year. Some of the other trends that we think might be stickier are working from home, for example and that flexibility in work that there's a lot of commentary about at the moment. So some of those trends and trying to get as much data as we could actually to then factor that into policy consideration and policy making over the next six to 12 months to support an economic recovery in the medium to longer term post COVID, it was really that data piece that we felt we had to do some quick work on so that we actually had at least some reference point where we're making policy in such an unknown, once-in-a-century environment.

Michael Sanese:

Yeah, I think that the data piece is really important. I think the census, I'm sure we're all eagerly awaiting the updates to the census mid-next year and I'm sure that will validate some of those. Alison, you spoke a little bit around the strategy around transport. How did the strategy come to life and was that strategy updated in light of our COVID environment? And what role did data play in that?

Alison Playford:

Well, the strategy actually was something we'd been working on well before COVID hit, but it was really timely to focus attention and, really, it fits with a number of other strategies that the ACT government has around planning, around climate change. They're probably the two key ones, but looking at how we can see things holistically. But we did look at what was happening in terms of road usage, public transport, patronage, et cetera. But we were trying to look to the long term, this is a long term strategy, and looking to, again, what Rachel talked about, what we think will happen to Canberra's population longer term. And some of the things that we have planned in terms of key infrastructure projects which really are supportive of public transport and improving active travel and access and a little bit more focus on, I guess, the placemaking.

Alison Playford:

When Rachel talks about regional, she means something very different to when I talk about regional in an ACT sense, which is very local. But Canberra has always, to an extent, focused on that placemaking and different town and group centres in different districts. Thinking about our transport needs at a really local level as well as a holistic ACT level has been really key to the transport strategy, which really fit in well with, I guess, COVID and what we saw with people changing their work and their shopping and other habits and very much more focused on their local and regional areas.

Alison Playford:

We think there will be some long-term trends, so that's really guiding, I guess, our investment decisions going forward. But as I said, it's also guided by our longer term planning strategy and climate change strategies, et cetera, which do point to moving people back onto public transport. So underneath our transport strategy, we have actually developed a COVID recovery plan. We started to implement it towards the end of last year and into this new year. Got a little bit off track for a little while, but we'll be dusting that off again and looking at how we can attract people back to public transport in particular and providing, I guess, confidence about the safety of that as a mode of travel. Because we think that is really key to what the future needs to be in the ACT where not like the big cities of Sydney and Melbourne, we don't have the existing congestion issues to the same extent, but we do certainly already have pinch points, and with major infrastructure planned in the

centre of our city in coming years, we really want to give options for people in terms of how they travel around.

Michael Sanese:

Yeah, that's really interesting how you've had to pivot with the recovery plan a couple of times. What does recovery look like for ACT transport services?

Alison Playford:

As I've talked about before, the first thing, really, is instilling that consumer confidence in the service. There's a range of things that we implemented during COVID around cleaning schedules, around social distancing, around providing check-in facilities on all of our buses. Our 467 buses, each have a unique check-in code around mask wearing instructions, around cashless service. And so providing that confidence and safety. It's been interesting, we're only a couple of weeks out of lockdown in the ACT, we are seeing a student-led resurgence back on to public transport, which does speak to, I think, broader public confidence that parents have. It will be interesting to see, it's very early days in terms of data on that at the moment. But really, the key to our strategy is around building that confidence, but also providing a lot more information to, I guess, non-public transport users across the ACT around what services we do have available and how it can be, I guess, attractive alternative for them to do what they need to do. That's probably the other really key thing.

Alison Playford:

And we're very conscious of that, as I said before. We've got some really major infrastructure developments happening right in the centre of our city with the raising of London Circuit and the next state of our light rail over the next, I guess, five few periods, as well as a range of private developments that will be happening in the middle of the city. So we are anticipating some congestion issues in the city and our transport recovery strategy for COVID actually has an eye to looking at how we can mitigate some of the impacts for Canberrans while some of that really key long-term infrastructure that we talked about in the first question actually gets delivered.

Michael Sanese:

Yeah. Rachel, I guess we are hearing from the local view around congestion and transport and where the future investment is at a local level. What about from a national perspective, how are we seeing any changes to planning approaches or considerations with those population trends?

Rachel Bacon:

Yeah, it's a good question and probably one a bit more for my infrastructure and transport colleagues who would be spending more time thinking about those issues. But from my perspective from that regional cities perspective, part of it is about, how do we back in some of the trends that we've been seeing nationally? So, those trends around more people moving to the regions, less people moving from regions to cities and also a greater proportion of families moving to regions as well, which you can kind of get if you've got families stuck in an apartment or a house with not much backyard during lockdowns. You can understand why there might be a bit of desire to move either to places like Canberra where there's a bit more space or to regional areas.

Rachel Bacon:

One of the things that government's really keen to do in this space is actually back in the trends that we're seeing in those population shifts, which have been really exacerbated by COVID. They were to some extent there before COVID, but have really been, I think, fast-tracked or intensified by COVID. One of the questions is, well, how does infrastructure keep pace? If you are getting more people shifting to regional areas, which is a good thing for a range of reasons, including, I think, from a national resilience perspective and also from an

economic growth perspective in regional Australia, what do you need to keep pace with those trends? I think we've seen quite a lot of commentary from people in the regions, from stakeholders in the media, around housing constraints, for example, in regional areas, as well as some skills constraints. From a national perspective, I think we're looking at how we can back in states and territory governments to keep pace with the demands when it comes to infrastructure planning.

Rachel Bacon:

Some of the things that we're talking about in a couple of our city deals, for example, is how do we support state and local governments to keep pace with things like the housing planning pipelines, for example? You've got some kind of architecture in the Commonwealth, for example, in the housing space with loan facilities and things like that. So I think in part it's, how do we keep pace with changing demand and population shifts? I mean, Alison's point about focusing on Canberra and that's the remit, particularly, I get it with the public transport system. That broader regional picture of Canberra is a really integral part of a broader region that stretches to the Snowies and then down to Eden and that part of New South Wales where there's really good cooperation, I think, that I've observed between ACT and New South Wales governments thinking about the Canberra region and Canberra as a really important service hub within that region.

Rachel Bacon:

So from the Commonwealth perspective in that regionalization space, it's how can we work better and align effort better with state and territory colleagues, with local government colleagues in the other states and make sure that if it is aligned so that we can keep pace with changing demographics and changing trends in terms of economic growth and make sure that planning efforts are aligned to that.

Alison Playford:

Yeah, Michael, can I... Oh, sorry. I'm just going to jump in there with Rachel's observations around Canberra as a region. I really think COVID made it really clear how much Canberra and the ACT actually has seamless borders with New South Wales. Much of our key important, critical, essential workforces are actually located in New South Wales. We're probably the key health hub for that south east corner of New South Wales. So I guess the opportunities to collaborate with New South Wales in particular, but with other states and territories as well, has never been stronger as we facilitate. And so, I guess the standard models of federation haven't worked so well for COVID, which hasn't really respected those borders. And so there's a constant conversation around how we can facilitate thinking about things on a more regional basis.

Alison Playford:

And for much of our infrastructure projects, actually, some of the key projects in New South Wales, some of the duplications and stuff, which will actually make it easier for some of our key workforces, are really important to us and we're very supportive of the Commonwealth investment in some of those things because of the impacts for people who work in the ACT. But similarly for New South Wales, I think in particular our whole system is seen very much and operates and the funding models operate in terms of a regional basis. And that's something that increasingly in this infrastructure area, it's important to look at things in a regional way. Waste infrastructure is a really good example of that, where Canberra as a mid-sized city, actually, we have the functions of local government and much of the waste infrastructure is actually delivered at our local government area. And so we're very much, I guess, less talking to our counterparts in the big cities and we're talking to regional councils. Our minister has a regular meeting with regional counsellors around what the waste strategy for our region should be and infrastructure needs into the future. Because it's a slightly different topic to what we're talking about today but a growing wicked problem. Thank you.

Michael Sanese:

Yeah, I know. You'd speak to those different levels of government and the need for a lot of different ways to collaborate across jurisdictions. You also spoke about keeping pace. So over the last 12 months, we've changed ways of working and we're adapting to the immediacy of what the data's telling us. How did you keep pace in such an ambiguous and complex arrangement and particularly when you're collaborating across jurisdictions even more? What worked well? I might pick Alison.

Alison Playford:

I think what worked well is right from really early on, we already had established forums for communications across jurisdictions. But both at a ministerial level and also at officials level, there was a range of, I guess, sub-forums where it was really useful to share information and particularly for a small jurisdiction like the ACT to leverage off the learnings of bigger jurisdictions and some of the jurisdictions that were going through things that we could foresee we might well need to deal with those challenges. So a good example would be in public transport, some of the pivots that were made in New South Wales and Victoria that we could see were very easy for us having been part of those working groups in relation to transport, et cetera, to be able to say, "Okay, well, we should do one, two, three, four. This has obviously worked, this hasn't." I think there was great cooperation.

Alison Playford:

And also at ministerial level, we didn't just meet twice a year as we normally do. We held teleconferences, it felt like at least every couple of weeks and probably was that at some points during this period. So really good sharing, I guess, at officials level in particular about what we were facing and the uncertainty we were facing and what the options were. And also looking even more broadly at internationally and what was happening and learnings there. So some of our advocacy organisations, et cetera, are tapped into international organisations and there were some really great opportunities for that. The UITP transport network was a really good example where they were able to facilitate some really great conversations at a global level on what was being experienced and what options were. But the public transport space is one example.

Rachel Bacon:

And just to build on that, Michael, as well what Allison's saying, we found and particularly so back in March, 2020 when I think it was very big unknown and we were seeing what was happening overseas and some pretty scary reports coming in from what was happening in some countries when we were fairway off from having a vaccine for the pandemic. We started asking that question pretty early on back in March, what impact is this actually having out in the regions? Because we were experiencing what we were experiencing. For me that was in Canberra. For my state and territory colleagues, it was more likely to be in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide, et cetera. We all collectively felt we actually needed to get a handle on what was going on in the regions, because our sense was that this was going to be impacting different regions quite differently.

Rachel Bacon:

For example and our data bought this out, but Cairns was hit really early and really hard when the Chinese tourism market was switched off. So when we closed international borders, the mainstay of the local economy in Cairns around international tourism just crashed. One of the things we found also is that when China lockdown, you had lobster crayfish fisheries around the bottom of South Australia really impacted because they couldn't actually ship their product to China, the big New Year's celebrations is when they shift a lot of their product with just-in-time supply chains. So we said with our state and territory colleagues, "We actually need a handle on what's going on because can look different in different places. If we actually want to respond with emergency support, we need to know what kind of support that needs to be and how we target it."

Rachel Bacon:

And so it was actually one of the things I'm proudest of in my career, probably, the way that I run a deputy senior officials and we co-chair and support a deputy senior officials group of the regional guys across all of the different states and territories. We basically set up a data project where all of our data experts did in about six weeks what I think would ordinarily probably have taken about nine months to do, but we really pushed it and fast-tracked it and threw some resource at it. We worked across jurisdictions to pull data. And out of that, we ended up with a really useful data tool that plotted which regions at the essay four levels. So reasonably granular below the state level, what impact was COVID having in different regional areas. And it was off the back of that that we were able to respectively take what we'd worked on together and actually look at how to work that into policy responses.

Rachel Bacon:

And that kind of then, for us at Commonwealth level, fed into a pretty substantial regional budget package in the October, 2020 budget. So that was a really interesting example of collaborating between all of the jurisdictions, because we were all in the same difficult spot, all worrying about the same thing, but we all had different resources to bring to bear to help collectively solve a problem of trying to figure out what's happening. Yeah. So I think that was a really good example of some of that cross jurisdictional collaboration that we worked in a different way. We wouldn't have ordinarily done that if we'd just been in a BAU world

Michael Sanese:

And talk to that place based policy making. And it sounds to me that COVID has fundamentally shifted the way that we approach some of these challenges. How much do you think of that will stick and be changed the way that we do this into the future? And do you think it will help make more livable cities and towns? Rachel, I'll start with you.

Rachel Bacon:

I'm happy to have the first crack at that Alison, if you like, it's kind of what I talk about with my team and ministers every day. I actually don't think COVID has changed fundamentally the way that we do place-based. I mean, I would say that there are three elements of place-based approaches. One is that you have the three levels of government working together. So you just kind of trying to align effort across different levels of government. The second is listening to an understanding what the priorities are in a particular community. So trying to get a sense of what the community thinks about their priorities in a particular region. The other one I think is, for the Commonwealth, this can be particularly helpful when we do this well is actually joining up across the Commonwealth. Because we're quite a large beast in the Commonwealth.

Rachel Bacon:

And it's actually about what leaders do you need to draw from across all the different portfolios in the Commonwealth government to have those again, working in a way that is coordinated and strategically directed effort as you're also joining up across three levels of government? So I think good place-based approaches will have some combination of those three features, whether we're in a COVID crisis or a COVID rebuild or a BAU scenario. The other thing that I don't think changes whether you have COVID or not, is that different regions need different things and a one-size-fits-all approach often will be the most efficient, but won't always be the most effective in terms of generating outcomes. And I would not advocate using a place-based approach all the time by any means, because it is much more resource intensive to do it that way.

Rachel Bacon:

There's a real... I think often there's an efficiency, effectiveness trade off and sometimes it's just far more efficient to take a more national or a more state or territory-based approach to something, but where a place-based approach is warranted because that's the outcome that you need. It's about, I think, tailoring responses

and understanding a place more deeply and tailoring different responses to the needs and challenges in a particular place. Yeah. So I think the fundamentals of place-based approaches stay the same, the way we deployed them in the COVID scenario look quite different, but I'm sure Alison probably has some examples of that as well.

Alison Playford:

Thanks. And I was actually going to echo much of what Rachel said. I think the fundamentals of place-based and placemaking actually are the same and during COVID, we applied them in a similar way and it really is... And it's something we've done in the ACT for a long time, very strong community engagement and understanding what your community needs and trying to respond to that. And I agree with Rachel, sometimes there is that trade off between efficiency and effectiveness and there was times during COVID where it was really important that things were looked at a national level. One thing I'd give a shout out to the Commonwealth for was their leadership in terms of freight policy and developing the freight strategy because really early on, I think with the great toilet paper wars of March, 2020, people quickly realised that supply chains were something that we really needed to crack and make sure that they could be kept going.

Alison Playford:

And that freight-based strategy was mostly a land-based strategy, but it also actually really started in terms of the ports and the getting international shipping still delivering supplies to Australia was probably the first fundamental place. And there was great goodwill between all the jurisdictions because stuff was landing somewhere, but actually was required right across Australia. So there are points where that leadership from the Commonwealth to help facilitate states and territories in both the port strategy and the freight strategy was really critical, I think during that COVID period and cuts across much of the other work we were doing, which was much more local and looking at the needs of individual communities. And even within Canberra, we were looking at differentiated policy responses in different places and how the pandemic impacted on different regions at different times and where we required different parts of our emergency response, be it testing or vaccinations or whatever in terms of different groups within our community as well.

Michael Sanese:

Yeah. No, it's really interesting to hear. And you also spoke about the supply and demand complexities within the ambiguous environment, where do you see planning around supply and demand within ambiguity moving forward, Alison?

Alison Playford:

It's an interesting question. I think we're going to have a little bit of wait and see, but again, keep monitoring the data. But I think we just apply many of the principles we've been applying to good policy making in my 30 years as a public servant, which is really trying to understand, what is the problem you're trying to solve? What are the issues? What are people saying? And what's the best way to resolve something? And just be a bit flexible. I think another thing that COVID has taught us is that we can really accelerate change and there's some remarkable examples of what we were able to achieve and innovate just the way we moved our workforces to working seamlessly with video technology like we're using today, was just a great example of what we can do. I am hopeful that we'll remember some of those lessons of what we actually have achieved and be able to apply them in the future as we face more challenges.

Rachel Bacon:

And just to add to what Allison's saying there, the only other thing I'd add is not only what we've achieved, but also how we've achieved it. So I think often in the Commonwealth state space and including with local government in the ACT, you both, but the more opportunities we have to really pull together and work

together as public services across different jurisdictions, it really deepens relationships and it also demonstrates that you can get stuff done when you are working closely. We aren't always able to do that. Sometimes our political environments in which our ministers work are more or less conducive to that. But I think the more lift examples we have of when we worked with these jurisdictions and all pulled together, it was a much better result than what we could have achieved on our own. I think the more examples we have of that, then the more we're incentivized to find those opportunities where we have those windows of opportunity to work in that way. And from my perspective, all of the outcomes that I'm achieving for my ministers can only be achieved if we're working as collaboratively as we can with colleagues across jurisdictions.

Michael Sanese:

Yeah.

Alison Playford:

And look, and I can think of some examples of where we're trying to apply that in policy spaces we're facing now, the movement of our public transport vehicles to zero emissions is something that most of the jurisdictions in Australia are doing. So a small territory like the ACT can really leverage off learnings from bigger jurisdictions in that. And those relationships are really important to have those shared understandings as we face difficult policy transitions.

Michael Sanese:

Yeah. The lessons learned component, I think it's really important for many of the things that we've achieved over the last 12, 18 months to be really embedded into the way that we work. How do you go about capturing those lessons learned with your teams and ensuring they do carry across? And are there any specific examples around how you are making that decision to bring that forward? Rachel?

Rachel Bacon:

Yeah. We actually did a project on it. So I'm mentoring and supervising one of our Sir Roland Wilson scholars at the moment who's based at ANU doing a PhD and his topic is public policy making. He did a really interesting bit of qualitative research, lots of interviews with areas that were particularly at the coalface from our department in the response to COVID and the lockdowns. And so we've really tried to capture, what did we do differently? Why did we do it and how do we share it? And then pump that out to the rest of the organisation. But I have to say, it is difficult because the pools and the pushes that you have in an emergency context change quite significantly when you're not in the emergency anymore and pulls and pushes start to reemerge.

Rachel Bacon:

So I do think, just thinking about how do we retain some of the lessons learned, but I do think we've got a real boost in terms of risk and how we think about risk and think about risk in an environmental context in terms of an operating environment and also thinking about flexible work and where we're based and why we're set up the way we're set up and should we think differently about that? So we do have some ongoing conversations that are useful once to keep having post COVID.

Michael Sanese:

Yeah. Sounds like there'll be some interesting insights around that PhD output. Alison, anything from your perspective?

Alison Playford:

Yeah. Look, the ACT Government is also looking at what we can capture in terms of the way we've operated. And we have a range of projects that are emanating out of our central area and chief minister's department, particularly around the flexible work and what our workforce would look like. We had started to move in the ACT public service to activity-based working prior to COVID and very much thinking about how we can expand that across the whole of our office portfolio as a way to actually foster collaboration, but also capture some of the things that actually... Retaining some of the options around flexible-based work will make us a better employer of choice. We always have to compete with the Commonwealth public service and the ACT public service for jobs. So it's part of that employee retention and attraction strategy, is one thing.

Alison Playford:

And I guess, yeah, from the technology point of view, I think we all realise that there is some real efficiencies in having a lot more meetings, particularly across jurisdictions in a virtual form and with video, et cetera, I don't think it'll ever replace sometimes getting together. I always say the dinners are the most important parts of those ministerial meeting where you can actually talk more informally and video doesn't lend itself to that. But I think we'll be much more efficient in the way we communicate and communicate much more often with our colleagues as we've learned to embrace technology a lot better.

Michael Sanese:

Yeah. There's lots of things for us to reflect on in both a policy perspective in the way that we are working within an organisation. I might get you to do some self-reflection. What is something that you learn about yourself in leading others over the last year? So, Rachel?

Rachel Bacon:

Yeah. It was interesting because I was finding, particularly this last lockdown, that I was getting, as well as completely exhausted, feeling a bit irritated by the end of a day of back-to-back Zoom meetings and Teams meetings. And I was kind of reflecting on why is that? And one of my personal reflections, which I think is a useful insight for me around my leadership style and how I naturally work is that because I'm so used to connecting with people. I get a lot of emotional energy out of just the connections that I have day-to-day. So in meetings with my teams or meetings with my colleagues or my ministers and minister's offices and walking out of those engagements with more emotional energy. And I was finding flicking from Zoom meeting to Zoom meeting. And while on those meetings, trying to flick across multiple screens to keeping up with agendas and papers and whatever, that I was putting emotional energy and not quite being able to read people and not getting a lot back.

Rachel Bacon:

So while I agree with Allison that the technology gives you a lot of efficiencies, there's a lot of good things about it, I think it is hard to lead people in a purely remote environment. I think there's no replacement for that human contact and engagement that you can get when you're actually in the same space as people. So I think whatever flexibility we seek to retain going forward, thinking about different people need different types of engagement and how do we lead teams in highly flexible ways but remembering and recognising that a lot of us do get that emotional energy from the face-to-face engagement that we have when we can be in the same space.

Alison Playford:

Yeah. And again, just to get rolling, Rachel, a real lesson for me, which I already knew, but was just reinforced is the importance of visible leadership. So of my 2,000 employees, actually over half of them were essential workers working, my 800 bus drivers, the people who cleaned the local shops, et cetera, are working all the time. And I made a real effort to get out last year and visit them in their workplaces and got really great

feedback. And so it's something I'll take with me going forward, that importance of visible leadership and trying to prioritise time for that real engagement with your staff.

Rachel Bacon:

The other thing we did that Alison's point reminded me, we also try to inject just a little bit of fun as well because we had a lot of our staff who were just doing it tough, both almost full-time schooling as well as a really busy full-time job, as well as just dealing with being in lockdown, which a lot of colleagues, particularly in New South Wales' Victoria, ACT have experienced. So just remembering to inject a bit of fun with the virtual Leonardo to lockdown competitions and stuff like that. It is amazing how creative people can be in their own home in the space of just half an hour with what they have around them and with an avocado. So I think that the human element and also just remembering to inject a bit of humour sometimes into difficult situations.

Michael Sanese:

Yeah. I think nothing can compare that connection that we do need as individuals and employees. And I agree, Rachel, there was the need to connect on that human level. And a lot of the HR research over the years talks to the need for people to have that purpose, but also the connection with their colleagues to really have that psychological safety and to be able to deliver what they need to everyday. So that's been a really, really insightful conversation. So thank you for your candid comments. And it's been really interesting to hear the flexibility that your organisations and you, as leaders were able to apply over the last 12 years to deliver some really incredible outcomes.

Michael Sanese:

So I'd like to say, thank you, Alison and Rachel, for joining us today. We have learned a lot about the important work you and your staff do to keep our cities and infrastructure growing and improving the time and engagement through external environments and the services you offer has been limited. So that does bring us to the end of today's Work with Purpose. Thank you to our listeners for joining us. And I'll say goodbye for now. Hope you have a good afternoon.

David Pembroke:

So there you have it, a very big thanks to Michael Sanese, Alison Playford and Dr Rachel Bacon. To you, the audience, thank you for coming back once again and tuning in to Work with Purpose, we really do appreciate your ongoing support for the program. Work with Purpose is part of the GovComms Podcast Network. And if you would like to check out the GovComms Podcast, type that name into your favourite podcast browser and it is sure to come up. It covers all of the latest information about government communications, not only here in Australia, but around the world.

David Pembroke:

And if you do happen to come across our social media promotion for Work with Purpose, please, a share, a like, or indeed, a review really helps the program to be discovered. And if you do have the time for that, we would much appreciate that. Thanks also to our friends and colleagues here at IPAA and indeed, the Australian Public Service Commission of their ongoing support in putting the program together.

David Pembroke:

And if you haven't, as yet had the chance to listen to the IPAA APSC Integrity Series, please make sure that you do. It's hosted by Rina Bruinsma of the APSC and features a who's who of the Australian public sector, having important conversations about the critical importance of ethics and integrity in being an Australian public servants. A big thanks as well to the team at contentgroup, for helping to put the program together and a

particular thanks to Annabelle Fife and Ben Curry. My name's David Pembroke. We'll be back at the same time in two weeks, but for the moment, it's by for now.

Voiceover:

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