

Commissioner's afterword

Reimagining

I am incredibly proud of the inspiring things our people have done over the difficult year that was 2020. I feel immensely privileged to have a role in driving the NSW public sector towards facilitating world class collaboration between organisations, leaders and employees across the sector.

The past year tested everyone, and I have been amazed by the adaptability of the sector and its people. The bushfire crisis, closely followed by widespread flooding and the once-in-a-century COVID-19 pandemic, changed the way we live and work. While some things will revert to the way they were before the pandemic, other changes will no doubt remain.

As a sector, we were well placed to meet the challenges, both in an absolute sense but also relative to the rest of the globe, thanks to our investments in our people, processes and technology. For example, the fact that our flexible working strategy was in place meant we could move quickly. The speed with which we were able to implement telehealth and online teaching, and move large parts of the judicial service and corrective services online, was testament to our people and their desire to help the people of NSW. While we didn't always get it right the first time, we learnt quickly and adapted – a hallmark of being world class.

Being flexible and adaptable

The year of crises helped us question assumptions about where and when we can work. It showed that even working flexibly, the sector can maintain service quality, customer satisfaction and productivity, and improve employee engagement. I hope this new flexible way of working becomes embedded and informs a new workforce norm. We will transition to a hybrid way of working that will fuse the best parts of site and/or office work with the best bits of flexible working.

What is the balance going to look like? How will we find the right balance between business needs and people needs in a continually uncertain environment? Taking action based on the best data will be crucial. We will keep experimenting with new ways of working and rapidly roll out pilot initiatives to provide us with the evidence we need to make informed decisions.

We will continue to seek the views of our people, through the annual People Matter Employee Survey and increased use of intermittent pulse surveys that help gauge employee views and experience in real time. Continually building on and learning from the feedback provided by the Customer Satisfaction Measurement Survey will be crucial for building this hybrid model, so that we better serve the needs of our customers and continue to look after the health and wellbeing of our people.

The NSW public sectors is conducting pilots to learn what we can achieve and roll out at scale across the sector, to support a new hybrid way of working. One example is the adjusted flex-time pilot implemented for the NSW Public Service at the height of COVID-19 restrictions. It has shown what increased flexibility can achieve, with elevated employee engagement and job satisfaction. It can be used for all office-based NSW public sector employees.

Focusing on outcomes and trusting our people

We need to think about which workforce practices we want to see more of as we move into a post-pandemic world. Our people managers have proven they can connect with their staff effectively, even when they can't meet in person. Our People Matter survey scores for people managers rose over this tough time. We have seen managers and their staff having genuine and effective conversations about wellbeing and performance.

In addition to our people feeling that their immediate managers provide good support, we have seen an improvement in the People Matter survey scores for our senior managers, albeit from a lower base. Senior managers stepped up their communication to help remote workers and those on the front line feel a shared sense of mission and understanding of their agency's goals. However, amid a rapidly changing work environment, staff felt that senior managers' management of change was similar to that in 2019. Even though the overall score in 2020 was not high, this stability shows we are improving in this area.

I want these leadership practices of strong, clear and effective communication, coupled with well-managed change, to become embedded within all public sector agencies. Senior leaders can't be everywhere at once, nor should they be expected to be. They need to manage change well, set clear direction, and work with people managers to lead the workforce and deliver for our customers.

As the sector cements its approach to outcomes-based budgeting, we should also consider outcomes-based management more generally. By focusing on outcomes rather than presenteeism, at a time when 60.0% of our people were not physically together in the office, we continued to deliver for the people of NSW. When people do return to the office, we need to maintain this outcomes-based approach to leadership, with clear and straightforward performance agreements aligned with business outcomes to help employees do their best work. This new way of working has empowered managers to trust their employees to get the job done. This positive culture needs to continue.

Working together to build capability

One of the remarkable stories of 2020 was the ability of our sector to work together, with extensive collaboration between agencies and other levels of government. We were able to move people into roles quickly to support pressing societal needs. Compelling examples include the swift creation and expansion of SEOC, the embedding of Resilience NSW as the sector's lead disaster recovery agency, and the rapid scaling up of contact tracers from across the sector. I would like to see even more mobility in our sector. At present, mobility is still very reactive, with pressing needs leading to mobilisation. However, to really unleash the potential of workforce mobility, we need to overlay this reactive mobility with deft workforce planning so that we can respond even faster and, in some circumstances, pre-empt what's needed.

Learning and development can also help to bolster the resilience and adaptability of our workforce, as exemplified by the rapidly developed NSW Department of Education digital teacher training resource. As the biggest employer in NSW and Australia, the NSW public sector has a responsibility to upskill people to meet the demands of the workforce of the future.

Career pathways are more complicated than ever, and our people will come and go from our sector as their lives change. We want people to take the skills they gain working for the NSW public sector into the wider workforce and community. Not only does upskilling our staff benefit the sector and employees, but society also benefits when these skills are shared across the economy. Increased employee mobility within a strategic workforce planning framework is a key way to achieve this upskilling.

Shaping positive and inclusive workplace cultures

Every workplace in the sector should be positive and healthy. As the Public Service Commissioner, bullying continues to concern me. Bullying is not just a problem for leaders to solve – it's a problem for everyone to solve. We need to work together to make everyone feel safe and welcome at their workplace, wherever that may be. While most of our workforce is made up of wonderful people doing amazing work, everyone is responsible for creating and maintaining positive workplace cultures with zero negative behaviours.

A sector that is mentally healthy and building on new hybrid and flexible ways of working is best placed to support an even more diverse workforce. A diverse workforce leads to stronger business outcomes and allows us to better serve an increasingly diverse community. This then creates a cycle in which an increasingly diverse community chooses to bring its talent to the sector. Ensuring that our hiring practices are world class will help us achieve this goal.

I want the sector's approach to inclusion and diversity to be more integrated than it's ever been. Our decisions should be viewed through an inclusion and diversity lens, which will be my legacy to the sector. I'm certain we will meet our aim of doubling the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior leaders by 2025. I am also confident that with a little more effort, we will achieve our target of having equal representation of men and women in senior leadership roles.

We are still lagging in some areas, particularly in our representation of people with disability. We know that people with disability face additional hurdles when applying for roles within the NSW public sector. I want the sector to work on removing those hurdles so that everyone who wants a job with us has an equal chance of getting it. Improving recruitment outcomes for people with disability is important as meaningful employment drives social inclusion for people with disability.

Equally important is creating a safe and supportive workplace where people with disability feel able to share their disability information and get what they need to do their job to the fullest. The People Matter survey and external surveys, such as wider surveys run by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, provide data that show a significant undercount of people with disability within the NSW public sector. These external estimates indicate that many of our people may have disability and have not shared that with us. This may be because they do not feel the need to, or they may be concerned about doing so. In either case, I want the NSW public sector to become a place where people with disability feel safe to tell us about their disability and are supported in accessible environments and inclusive cultures.

Emphasising digital

A world class public sector needs world class technology, and each year we are improving in this area. Several initiatives are underway to help us meet this Premier's Priority. I'm thrilled by the progress of the Digital Restart Fund in helping agencies improve their digital capabilities and use digital tools to better serve their customers and improve productivity. This learning will only accelerate and will help agencies to do more with the same number of people.

The digital design standards developed by Digital NSW within the Department of Customer Service seek to align digital design across the sector. This is revolutionary and will ensure that in the future, our customers, the people of NSW and our workforce will experience a consistent and easy-to-use digital interface.

Internally, the sector is aligning the human resource information systems of six clusters. This will ensure a consistent employee experience of Human Resource functions, reducing red tape and stress for our people, while also giving our people managers and senior leaders access to more timely and integrated data. It will also assist decision making and support future efforts to integrate mobility into our strategic workforce planning.

The future of our workforce is exciting. The lessons learnt from a difficult year will not be forgotten. We will build upon them to ensure that the hardships we have all suffered have been worthwhile, and that we can move forward to create real and positive changes in the way we all work. We need to lock in the new ways of working for the longer term.

Our people deserve the best workplace in the world. By ensuring we have a positive, productive and healthy workplace – supported by the best leaders, processes and digital tools – our people and the wider community of NSW will thrive.