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Transcript of Ask ET event – Wednesday 22 July 2020

Panel

- **[redacted]** (Compere)
- Leslie Evans (Permanent Secretary)
- Lesley Fraser (Director General, Organisational Development & Operations)
- Ken Thomson (DG Constitution and External Affairs)
- Barbara Allison (Director for Communications, Ministerial Support and Facilities)

Compere: Hello and welcome to the first ever Ask ET podcast. I'm **[redacted]**.

Today I'll be speaking to four members of the Scottish Government's senior team - the Permanent Secretary Leslie Evans, DG for Constitution and External Affairs Ken Thomson, DG for Organisational Development & Operations Lesley Fraser and the Director for Communications, Ministerial Support and Facilities, Barbara Allison.

As many of you know, Ask ET would normally be held as a live event, but due to the coronavirus pandemic we're piloting various formats for our staff events. I hope you enjoy this and will be really keen to get your feedback on the podcast afterwards.

I know that we've had a record number of questions through Slido, with almost 90 questions and more than 280 members of staff participating. We'll try to cover as many of these as we possibly can and we'll also be focusing on the questions that have received the most votes from staff.

But before we get started there's a question that I spotted in the list that I'd really like to kick off with today as a bit of an icebreaker. I'd like to ask all of the panel to think of what's kept you going during the lockdown? Has it been exercise, podcasts, Zumba? Permanent Secretary do you want to kick us off for this?

Permanent Secretary: Yes, well I wish I could say it was Zumba, but it wasn't actually, it hasn't been, not yet. I had a great conversation in the corridor, suitably socially distanced, with Professor Jason Leitch, star of stage and screen as you know, and the Chief Medical Officer as well. And we both agree - we all three of us agreed - the things that have really got us through have been regular exercise, regular food - sometimes a bit too much cake on my behalf but I'm sure that Jason wouldn't do that - and sleep. And actually with that formula I can keep going for quite a long time. I need an occasional injection of nature - getting outside - but other than that I can keep going for quite a long time.

Compere: That's a good formula. Barbara?

Barbara Allison: Like most people I have been locked down at home and I'm very fortunate to have a garden. I appreciate not everybody does have, so I found that just

fantastic to be able to get outside. And I do a regular weekly blog for my team and I've been telling them about my birds - I have hundreds of birds in the garden and I am now, I reckon, feeding them about two and a half kilos of bird feed a day - so they're very fat. My husband can't believe they can actually still take off. So I just love them, they're just so entertaining, so that's what's been keeping me going.

Compere: And I'm sure they'll love you after that. Lesley?

Lesley Fraser: I think my first answer has to be cinnamon buns. There's a local baker around the corner and they do an excellent cinnamon bun I've discovered. But yeah it's a good mixture of things - not as many birds as Barbara but a good bit of outdoor space and just taking a break away from the screen. I think the screen is a thing that I get a bit addicted to and I just need to walk away, so that's been keeping me going.

Compere: It can be so tiring can't it. Ken?

Ken Thomson: Like Barbara, and like Lesley, it's been getting outdoors for me, and also baking. I make bread and I eat rather too much of it! So the third thing for me has been riding my bike which was hard to start with when you could only go, what was it, was it two miles to start with? Yeah so it's been easier now that we can go a bit further so I enjoy getting out and burning off the extra calories.

Compere: So I'd like to kick us off with actually the top rated question from Slido which had 126 likes and it's around flexible working. The question reads: 'Will Scottish Government consider a four-day working week to aid covert recovery, to help manage health, caring responsibilities, well-being and economic recovery like leisure and tourism? I'm going to ask the Permanent Secretary to answer this question.

Permanent Secretary: Yeah a really good question actually. And of course we're quite fortunate in that we, like other organizations in Scotland, but I think we maybe lead the way here; we have a lot of flexibility already at our disposal, so people can choose the days they work. We do part-time but also job share jobs as opportunities, and you can also choose the time that you want to do, whether you do compressed hours or not, and often your location.

But nevertheless I think our experience over the past few weeks has given us lots of experience and evidence about what works in supporting people's best working habits - what makes them most productive, what makes them feel supportive, and what makes them feel they can get a work-life balance. So we will be looking, and Barbara will want to say something more about this later on I'm sure, at our work-life balance through the lens of what we have learnt from working from home - what works, what the systems and what our behaviours were as well.

So we've done some things differently as a result of having to for Covid. Can some of those be retained and embedded in the way that we work or are others of them things that are really only suitable to certain urgent and particular circumstances?

In addition, I've had regular contact - and I know Lesley Fraser has as well - with our civil service unions throughout this period. I had a meeting with them only last week and I know they will want to work with us about what the longer term changes to the

way we work might be and how we really are a 21st century civil service, learning both from working over the past few weeks and good practice from elsewhere. So I think there's lots of opportunities for us to develop our working behaviours and practices in the future.

Compere: Lots of learning points, thank you. So the next question is around location neutral rules and working practices and we've had a lot of questions around this topic. They were some of the most liked by staff. I'm going to ask Lesley to answer these two questions which were: 'Now that it has been shown that as an organization we can successfully work remotely, will consideration be given to advertising more posts as location neutral?' And that question had 110 likes.

The second question in this topic is 'Can you reassure us that offices will continue to be part of the norm for most of us most of the time?'

Lesley Fraser: More great questions [redacted]. It has really been remarkable. It is one of the things that I look back on with kind of a mixture of amazement and huge pride. You know, who would have known that this is the way that the organization could respond and that we could be working from home and serving ministers and serving the citizens of Scotland, whether that's our policy areas or delivery areas.

I know Social Security Scotland well and it's been extraordinary. So location neutral is close to my heart. I used to be the Director for Housing and Social Justice and in that area we've had a long-running location neutral policy. For me it's really about business need - what's the business here. What do ministers need, what do we need to do as civil servants in order to meet their requirements and serve the people of Scotland. And within those constraints then how can we best enable our colleagues to be able to deliver that service really effectively.

And there's no doubt about it in my mind, just as Leslie was saying, that what we've been able to do with digital working and remote working has given us a whole set of new possibilities and options. So as we work through just recovering from the shock that the organization has had and then beginning to think about our choices and options and where we want to be as an organization for the future, I think all of these options will be there. But that need to serve the citizen and the need to serve Ministers will remain at the core of what we do.

You asked actually a second question [redacted] didn't you which I've not answered yet?

Compere: It was just the sort of reassurance for staff that they will be able to return to the office, or that would be the norm for the foreseeable future.

Lesley Fraser: Yeah - lots of people are asking this question I know and really I think there isn't much reassurance in the short term there. So I think for our phase three and phase four as the First Minister has set out, then working away from the office and at home wherever we can is going to remain the norm. And I think even when we begin to return to the office we're going to find it's a very different experience if we're all two meters distance from each other. Maybe 25 percent of us could be back at any given time, so that's going to be very different.

But good colleagues actually in Barbara's area are already beginning to crunch through the choices and options. They're beginning to talk to Directorates about what local needs and local requirements would be so there will be more about this and we'll absolutely be looking for colleagues input about what's really worked and what actually is not helping about being away from the office because I know this is a really crucial area for people.

Compere: That's actually a really good link because one of the other questions that we've received is actually about returning to the office. With 71 likes the question of 'How long do you think it will be before most of us are back, if back, in the office if at all, and do you envisage a split between home and office working?' So I wonder on that Barbara if you mind answering that question?

Barbara Allison: So I think a couple things for me is I've just been listening to the First Minister at her 12:15 briefing and I'm sure a number of you listen to that as well and I think just you know I think that is going to be overriding, you know, the guidance we follow. We absolutely have to be seen to be following the Scottish Government's guidance and she was very clear that, and in fact I've got her notes here so if you bear with me I just think it's important because, she said:

"The UK Government's encouragement to those who can work from home to return to the workplace does not yet apply in Scotland. Working from home where that is feasible remains a default and preferred position and we expect employers to continue to support people to do that. Our position remains that non-essential offices should remain closed until we judge it is safe to make that significant change for Scotland."

So I think we absolutely need to be listening to what the First Minister's advice and guidance is to everybody across Scotland, but as Lesley said, we're doing a lot of work in preparation for people coming back. So looking at each, we've got about 70 buildings across Scotland, so looking at each of our buildings and looking at that footprint and thinking about what safe distancing would be is what would the capacity be for each building. So if I picked St Andrews House, if you think about the teams that are based in St Andrews House, looking at per directorate, what would each of the footprints per Directorate allow them to bring back on a safe staffing basis, a safe capacity basis, and then working with the Director saying well what does that mean for you.

I think the other thing we need to think about a lot is what are Ministers expectations, so what do Ministers need from us. So John Summers and the Ministerial team are speaking to Ministers and saying what's worked well for them through this period and what actually have they really missed. So I think a really good steer from them about what their expectations are going back. Now they fully understand what the constraints will be on the building but they also will know what their expectations are so we need to be very cognizant of that and then think about what a safe return can be.

I can't give you a date just now but we will be guided very much by our progress through the route map. I think people have been a bit concerned because we've had a bit of an increase in positive tests recently so I think would be very cognizant of just being very cautious about that but as soon as it's safe to do so we certainly will be

working towards that but even when we open as Lesley said the capacity is going to be hugely reduced so we need to think about what works best so I'm happy to come back later on a lot of the implications because there's going to be a lot of thought need to be given to how we support teams through that. That's going to be really crucial. I'm happy to come back on that later.

Compere: Thank you. Well a number of our colleagues are actually looking at this issue from a longer term perspective and posting questions really around has some of this been a good thing for us as an organisation when we're thinking about our global climate emergency so one of the questions that had 91 likes was actually around this topic of will working from home be the new normal. With a global climate emergency it doesn't really make sense anymore to commute into an office every day. Is that something that you would sort of support that statement - is this part of possibly a way forward for us as an organization?

Barbara Allison: I think it's a great point and I think if you'd asked me before all this happened whether we could perform really effectively working from home I would have really seriously doubted it frankly so I am you know amazed just how well we have done. I think it's worked well for some people, I think for other people they found it really hard and I think depending on particular circumstances so I don't think there's a one size fits all at all.

There's been some really interesting posts on Saltire this morning on the back of a working from home blog that one of the team have put on and a lot of people saying this has really worked really well for me and other people saying I can't wait to get back. So I think we really need to be very thoughtful about how it's working for individuals so there's some short-term work that I've mentioned that looks at capacity and how we might bring people back but there's a longer-term visioning piece of work going on that Jonathon Curry and [redacted] are leading on to support the executive team to think about what after SG2020 and what the world of work will look like and what our expectations are so I think that is going to be a really fascinating piece of work about what the world of work in the future will be and how do we support that in terms of our buildings, our IT, our HR processes etc.

So I think for people to get involved in that is going to be really crucial and help us shape what work looks like in the future. I think there's a fantastic opportunity just now and we need to learn from what's been good about this period but there's going to be some things that we need to also recognize is not great for people and how do we help support them through the next period.

Compere: I'm wondering if the Permanent Secretary and Ken would like to come in on this because one of the recurring themes that I spotted in the questioning is around that area of actual flexibility because I think most people realize the challenges that everyone's facing and some as you say are doing fantastically well at this time and enjoy not having to commute huge distances but others are finding it really difficult. That recurring theme of flexibility is coming up time and again through the questions so would you like to comment on that?

Permanent Secretary: I mean I think I said earlier I think flexibility is going to be increasingly important and it's something that people value you know it adds real value

to their way of life and the quality of their life and their families and that's very important.

I think one of the things that we need to bear in mind is the circumstances under which some people were working from home were not ideal so if you're working from home and you've got a two-year-old and a four-year-old and I can just about remember what it was like to have children that age, that's not easy by any means if you've also got real concerns about others health or caring responsibilities. That doesn't feel so good so I think what we would need to be thinking about is how does this experience that we've had from working from home translate into a more normal business environment by which I mean less of an emergency and where schools and other support systems are in some way or other providing some help and some support for individuals.

The second point I would make which I think is very important is how we ensure that we do this with an eye on our targets because we do have carbon reduction targets as Barbara is very well aware and also in terms of where we ensure that we're contributing to costs reduction as well so our estate - 70 buildings is very costly to run and there may be other benefits but I think the main issue is what works in the real business environment and how we ensure that we put flexibility, support but good business need at the core of what next happens in our our way of working in the civil service in Scotland.

Ken Thomson: [redacted] I'm remembering conversations with two of my directors and one of them who has maybe 250 staff or so and he took me through the groups of people that he saw in that staff group and just as Leslie said he mentioned particularly people who've got young children at home when schools were out and you know that was pretty tough for some people. Other people you know have other caring responsibilities or are themselves shielding because of health vulnerabilities but then other people again are spared the commute, they've got a bit more time in the day, they've got the ability to combine work and other things so it really has varied from person to person within those groups.

And then the other conversation I'm remembering was with Andy Beattie who's our Chief Parliamentary Council and at the time that lockdown began Andy and his team were engaged in drafting the first of our two emergency bills on Covid so that was working really fast. In fact Andy had all of his available drafters working on the same bill at the same time - 19 people and they all as Andy said to me they all just picked up their laptops and left Victoria Quay.

We didn't think about how we were going to do it but it worked so as Barbara said earlier we can do amazing things. I think we've really surprised ourselves at what it's possible to do and the challenge now is to extract the good from that and make sure that we make it possible for people to combine that in the best way. I think really important in that is going to be making sure that if we're preserving some of these flexibilities and the ability to work from home we make that possible for everybody so that in principle anybody can participate in any meeting from anywhere. That's what we have at the moment and it would be a shame to lose that I think.

Compere: I remember at the start the very early days of the pandemic and there was a terrific sense of team spirit and purpose at that time which it'd be great if we could keep a hold of.

Some of the questions have also started to touch upon well-being and several of the top 10 questions were around this topic. I wonder Lesley if you don't mind answering some of these questions. One of the questions was around will Scottish Government consider giving all colleagues a well-being day off such as other organizations are doing in recognition of recent efforts and as a chance for people to take a break. Maybe linked to that is around the fact that will some of the annual leave allowance be able to be carried over given the circumstances?

Lesley Fraser: Well-being has been a real light motif all the way through this pandemic just as we've been discussing. As you say you know for some people this has just been great and for others this has been a real struggle and I think for me when I think about what gives me good well-being it's that sense of control over my work and my work-life balance and I know for a number of colleagues just the sheer pace and weight of the work that we've been doing keeping people safe you know really literally at the heart of saving lives as has been an enormous strain on individuals personally and I'm hugely grateful to everybody who has contributed right the way across the organization.

So we're doing lots of practical things I think which will help with people's well-being so just in recognition of the need for key staff and key skills and key areas to lift the weight from some colleagues and we have got active external recruitment underway, I think just over 200 posts as we as we speak so I think that will be reassuring for colleagues to know that that is underway.

We've also increased the number of People Advice and Well-being Counsellors that we have available. I think most colleagues across the whole organisation know the name **[redacted]** - well I'm delighted to say that **[redacted]** is now one of a number of colleagues. There are four now in that team so people can reach out and get hold of that practical support where they need it and I would really encourage people to do that.

We're also very much encouraging people to take annual leave, to take time back in flexi as well. It's so important over the summer period that people do get that balance and that time and opportunity for time away so I can't see immediately, **[redacted]**, the prospect of us increasing annual leave allowances, nice though that would be. But I think the strong encouragement is to find ways and I know it's not easy but do find ways with your team to make sure that everybody's getting time off because that sense of getting control back for yourself I think is really important for me and I think it's important for lots of colleagues.

Compere: Yes it's hugely challenging because they talk about working from home but at times it can feel like you're living at your work you know does it's flipped what the reality is for a number of people.

We've touched a little bit about this but some of the other questions have been around resources and linked to well-being there's a number of questions around this. I'm going to ask Ken to answer the two top rated questions in this topic which is: What has been done to build resilience and capacity ahead of a potential second wave of Covid-19 potentially at the same time as the EU exit reaches peak workloads?

And a separate question to that is what can we stop doing to allow us to properly resource priority areas - for me to take a week of leave means a colleague working longer hours for those seven days? Linking in with our previous questions and the balance

Ken Thomson: So [redacted] two big questions there and I'll try and do justice to each of them separately. So first of all looking ahead to the possibility that in the winter we might get a second wave of the virus while also preparing for the end of the transition period on EU exit which is now only five and a half months away. So on Brexit we have been here before. I think I've actually lost count of the number of times that we've prepared for a no deal exit it's at least three and it might be four so we have a plan for that and we've been alongside doing the work on ensuring that we are ready for and implementing the measures that we have to take on Covid.

It's the same team in fact that coordinates the plan on Brexit so they've been pulling that plan out of the electronic shelf and people across the organization including possibly people listening to this have been contributing to updating that. So the good news is that we have a plan that we can refresh and the second bit of good news is that actually many of the issues are now quite familiar because they're not exactly the same but they have many similarities to the kinds of things that we've been facing with Covid.

In the early days of lockdown we were remembering that a minute ago it felt a bit as though we were sprinting and we fairly quickly realized that actually this was going to be a marathon and then we realized that actually you can't just go straight from a sprint into a marathon and expect to finish the 26 miles and you have to recover between your bouts of running.

So all that Lesley just said about the importance of taking leave and modelling that for other people is really important.

You know if we arrive at the end of the calendar year and Brexit with all of us in a state of exhausted hyper vigilance then you know that's not going to be the best outcome for Ministers or Scotland or us.

So it's really important that we pace ourselves through the work that we're doing.

We're now into phase three of our route map. So once we're into that it'll be a question of holding those measures in place making sure that we deal with local outbreaks as they happen, and beginning to think ahead, and again in the early days I was lucky if I was able to think, you know, an hour ahead never mind a day.

It feels a bit better than that now I can be thinking ahead to what's going to happen in a week, a month, six months and even beyond that.

You know we're less than a year away from Scottish Parliament elections and indeed we have to think about how would we do elections in a safe distance way and that thing is underway too.

So remembering that it's a marathon not a sprint remembering the need for recovery, whatever kind of running you're doing, and many people are still sprinting especially when there are local outbreaks in place. Those are the things that will help us.

I'll come on to resources and capacity and I'm going to talk generally about that but it's all also applicable to the challenge of the second peak if there is one and Brexit.

So if there was a golden age when resources and demands on us were perfectly in balance then I'm old enough that I could remember it and I'm here to tell you there never was such a time you know.

It's always going to be the case in our system that Ministers are going to be ambitious for Scotland and for what can be done with the powers that they have.

And they're always going to be looking to us to do the maximum possible within the resources that we have and what we're experiencing right now is not different from that, it's just more intense and there's a good thing about that which is that it's got our attention right on to that issue and Ministers attention right on to it and all of the people taking part in this podcast are in near daily conversations with their Ministers about priorities and the resources that we have and including discussions at the Cabinet Table that are coming up later this month.

So I've been speaking to my Ministers about this and really encouragingly I think Ministers do appreciate just how difficult it's been for many staff and they appreciate the quality of the support they've had and the agility that people have displayed and in agreeing priorities with my Ministers for our portfolios in the period ahead.

One of the priorities we've agreed is resilience and well-being of staff and ensuring that we preserve capacity and we put it on to the right things and for me, that there's never going to be one right answer that you know you can have a set of decisions and that fixes this problem.

It's not that kind of thing, it's a continuing ongoing conversation with Ministers about what's the thing that's right at the top of the list, what do we need to be thinking ahead for, where do we need to move the work of teams.

And that needs to be quite a granular conversation. It'll be different for each portfolio and I think that's what's happening now.

I think in the bigger picture if you look a bit ahead we've restarted recruitment where we'll probably by the end of the summer or a bit later, we'll be bringing several hundred new people into the organization.

You probably won't notice in the sense that it's not going to solve this problem. It's not that kind of problem, this is an ongoing challenge of making sure that we're doing the right things at the right way in the right time.

So I'm going to end with one practical example of this and then a thought and the practical example is of the kind of agility that we've shown I've got teams not just in Edinburgh and Glasgow and elsewhere in Scotland but in London, Beijing, Paris, Berlin, Brussels, Dublin, all over the place and I've got one team that is comprised of a director that I've borrowed from somebody else. And a team that's based in London

that runs our office in London which of course is closed at the moment and they've never actually met each other but they've been supporting the work on for the First Minister and across the organization on the route map.

That's the kind of agility that we've been able to display and of course if we get to the point where the office in London reopens then we'll need to have a conversation with Ministers about how we manage all of those demands against each other.

So that's the kind of granular conversation and the thought to leave you with on this is one that I've said many times and other people say it too and it is that we can do anything but not everything.

And the last three four months have demonstrated that in spades we've done things that even we didn't think we were capable of. But we know that we can't do everything and we have to be focused on the priorities and the challenges that we'll face in the next few months and make sure we're doing the right things next.

Compere: What you said there sort of reminded me there's fantastic examples of teams coming together, people that have never met. There's two of our colleagues met up recently, they've never met before.

I think they're in the testing team but they decided to meet up for a socially distanced beer in a bus stop. So it was fantastic examples of people wanting to meet with one another.

So I won't name them to shame them but it was a really good photo on twitter. Thank you for that.

So, I'd like to move on to our final topic which is around employment.

We've had a number of questions from staff and our policy and pay redundancies and retirement, people are asking questions such as can you confirm that the Scottish Government will meet its commitment to pay restoration and not return us to unfair pay restraint as part of some post-covid austerity program, which had 60 likes.

And will the Scottish Government's no compulsory redundancy policy that ended on 31 March be renewed.

So under these Permanent Secretary would you mind addressing these questions

Permanent Secretary: Surely and both of the items that you've mentioned are part of the Scottish Public Sector Pay Policy which of course are Ministerial decisions.

So Ministers will be taking those decisions in the context of a post-covid World in due course. So I couldn't pre-empt those. But they will be taking those decisions in the round for the public sector within Scotland and of course the civil service will be part of that.

I think the other point as well is that I think people have been thinking clearly about what they might want to do next. You know do I want to carry on working here, do I not? We don't have plans for a voluntary severance scheme, but we have run them in the past of course.

I think most interestingly and most importantly the Scottish Government is as a whole and Ministers are very focused on this and colleagues in Liz Ditchburn's family will be aware of this, we're very focused on one of the harms of post-covid which is the economy, and what we can do in policy terms of course to ensure that the economy has a resurgence and can come back into being, and combat and mitigate some of the real difficulties that we know are happening at the moment with people losing their jobs and so on, and that's our policy response.

I think we have a responsibility as well to be looking at where we can help people particularly young people with our employment opportunities and Ken and Lesley have both mentioned that we will be looking to recruit hundreds of people out in the next few weeks.

We will also be looking to see where we have current schemes that can be expanded or extended to ensure that we can go out to young graduates or people leaving school, our modern apprenticeships and our apprenticeship graduate schemes, graduate development schemes.

So on how can we expand those as we did in 2008 but on a bigger scale? I suspect just now how can we ensure that our schemes are really pivoting towards those young people who otherwise may have really challenging circumstances to find employment in what is going to be a difficult economic outlook for the next few years.

Comperre: On the issue of diversity we also had some questions regarding that. It would be great to get your thoughts on the two top questions related to diversity, both of which were in the top 10 with 47 likes each.

The first question is what action has been taken to improve diversity in senior roles. There is no Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic representation within the executive team.

And the second question is what is the organization doing to actively tackle institutionalized racism both internally and within society.

Permanent Secretary: Yeah, big questions we don't have long enough to be able to answer all of that, but first of all I'm so pleased that that question got lots of likes because it is something particularly close to my heart and something that we've been working at for quite a while but still have a huge amount to do.

So, in terms of the senior civil service which I think was the first question, we actually do have targets for minority ethnic representation within senior civil service and so far we are meeting them.

So we have a target of four percent of the senior civil service having minority ethnic representation within by 2020 and we've met that, and we have another stretch target to make that up to six percent by 2025.

And given the talent pipeline that we have within the Scottish Government I think we're on we're on target to meet that. But there's no room for complacency and we don't currently have a director who is minority ethnic.

We also have issues around people with disabilities as well in our representation in senior ranks on that score. So there is a lot to be done. Maybe I could just give a few

examples of what we're doing practically and more particularly, culturally to ensure that we are really stretching ourselves on this.

So first of all we are looking at our recruitment practices and as we've said before we are actually going externally to recruit which is our biggest chance to increase the diversity of our population of employees.

So we're looking at name blind sifts for senior recruitment. We're looking at improving how we market, reach out to schools, colleges and universities and who we employ in our searches, who have got good reputations for doing a more diverse producing a more diverse field.

We're looking at also ensuring that we have diverse panels and being pretty ruthless about that and also the training.

Interestingly enough, I am part of a recruitment process in Northern Ireland at the moment, and it is actually the law that you have to be trained before you take part in one of their recruitment practices which is quite interesting for a whole range of different reasons, but equally interesting.

We've also however got I think to upgrade and upskill ourselves in how we talk about race. So this is a really important part of a culture, about having an inclusive culture. So not just in terms of who we are and that we represent the communities in Scotland, but also how we do our work and the impact of our work so we've got some interesting support tools being brought in such as the equalities self-reflection guide which has been developed recently.

We're looking at how we test the impact of our policy and we've done this particularly over the past few weeks in Covid and have taken some external guidance and testing on how we're doing that but also looking at a race recruitment and retention plan. We're looking at how our own race network supports us and challenges us, holds our feet to the fire and they came to the executive team a few weeks back actually whilst we were already in lockdown and had a really good conversation but a pretty challenging conversation about what we're doing there in response to their ambitions - quite rightly.

And in response to other institutions and other organizations practices, so we've got a lot to do. I think it is an opportunity for us - we've got to still keep talking about it but it's got to be underpinned by some very clear targets and practice and it's one of the things that I want to see change before I leave this role that we have greater representation and a more secure talent pipeline to ensure that that isn't too fragile that it is actually part of who we are and who we serve.

Comper: It's a slight change in direction now to talk a little bit about civil service reform. We've had a couple of questions in around this and I wonder if - Lesley it'd be great to hear some of your thoughts on this - so the first question is: What does civil service reform mean to you? There's been a lot of talk about this at a UK government level in the media and at the Civil Service live event.

Lesley Fraser: It's a really, really important issue and I think it's been part of all of the conversation we've been having today. And because we're never going to be the same

after Covid as we are before. Of course, we had a program and have a program of reform in the Scottish government - our SG2020 program and we'd begun work across the organization to get people's views on what they've taken away from that work the changes they'd seen what had really worked of that, what changes they want to see for the future. So we're - as Barbara mentioned, Jonathan Currie and [redacted] are working now to think - well how can we pick that program up and make that work digitally when everybody's sitting at home, how can we re-engage everybody in that.

But I think I think for me, I can see that we're going to be a more digital organization, we must be a more diverse organization as well, we must better represent the people that we're that we're seeking to serve and really I guess my aspiration is that 21 years old as we are as an organization and having had you know the National Performance Framework now for 13, 14 years that really for the next five years the next period we're bringing all of that wisdom and insight, all of that understanding about how we work with our partners and really thinking how we can be an effective holistic organization that works with citizens and with businesses and with communities and across the country to ensure that we come out of Covid and create the future.

That's the organization and the society that we want to see. I really look forward to that, those conversations about the future of this organization as that begins to get underway - that should be really exciting.

Compere: So another interesting question that got a lot of attention from an interest from our colleagues - and I'm going to ask Ken to answer this one – is: how would you characterize the working relationship between Scottish Government and the UK government - how do you see this relationship developing over the next few years?

Ken Thomson: Well there's a question. I want to separate this into two dimensions and there's the professional and the political and I'll come to the political second but professionally I think the relationship is actually really good. It's patchy in terms of you know how quickly we can get Scottish interests registered by the UK government sometimes but generally speaking we have the same professional values as our counterparts in the UK government. We're all part of the same civil service.

Indeed I think it makes sense to think of that as a profession rather than a, you know, as one monolithic organization - it's not that anymore. Many decisions about pay and progression and training and development are taken, in our case, for the Scottish government and to meet the needs of this organization and supporting Scottish ministers. But the ways that we go about or business and the language that we speak and the way that we can, you know, get on the same wavelength with each other is generally very good. And the single thing that makes the biggest difference in my experience to the quality of that relationship is - to put it in an old-fashioned way - is old-fashioned shoe leather.

You know it's different in these days of zoom and web calls but it's the same thing - it's building personal professional relationships of trust and confidence that allow you to explore even when there are quite significant policy and political differences and find a way through that and I've been involved in exchanges - just earlier today with colleagues in the Welsh government, the Northern Ireland executive and the UK government that are marked by exactly that and indeed I've also been talking to my

counterpart in the office of the Taoiseach and the Irish government and it's again you know civil servants are civil servants, kind of all the way around the world, and we all do the same kind of job. So I think as a professional relationship it can be very good - it's not always everywhere but it can be really good.

And then on policy and politics I think we are seeing in Covid where many of the decisions are devolved rather than reserved we're seeing some divergence in approach. And that's a healthy natural good thing actually because it's one of the things that devolution it was intended to bring about was that decision making could respond to local circumstances. I think it's probably much more noticeable to people in both in Scotland and elsewhere that that's happening. I think we will see it again as Brexit becomes a reality. I mean we have left the European Union but in many ways the full impact of that will only become clear in the next five and a half months and then at the end of the calendar year, depending on whether there's a deal and what sort of deal that is and then looking a bit beyond that there are elections in Scotland in May of next year - who knows what that will bring in terms of the Scottish government and its political complexion - but I think we can anticipate that there will be a continuing debate about the powers and responsibilities of the Scottish government and how those are exercised. And that will involve us as professional civil servants but it will also involve - I'm sure - some high politics in the relationship between the Scottish Government and the UK Government.

So, as Lesley said a minute ago, that we're 21 years old as an organization - in this format of devolution there's probably never been a more fascinating time, whether it's Covid or Brexit or the prospect of an election to come, to be doing the work that we do and in all of that I'm sure that the relationships between us and our counterparts not just in London with the UK government but right around the system of devolved government across the UK will continue to be really important and a source of professional satisfaction and fulfilment for those that are involved in them.

Permanent Secretary: I agree with absolutely everything that that Ken has said and I think I would just add three points which are just a very a personal perspective on this.

I mean I think the first thing is from the off, I prioritized getting to know my perm sec colleagues around the table and individually when I took this post on and I've never regretted that. As Ken says, shoe leather and being down there in their faces and around the table - which they're very generous with their invitations to the devolved administrations and rightly so - indeed has always paid off and I know I can ring or text any of them and they will come back to me, you know, immediately and that is a massively important element and it has been absolutely worthwhile and it's still worthwhile.

That's going to change because personalities are changing - so there's I think it's five or six perm secs have left in the past six months and of course so Mark Sedwill is leaving as well who's been a great help to us in terms of articulating devolved administration and where the rubbing points are for the wider Whitehall machinery, so there will there will be change coming. But and we'll have to renew and refresh some of that peer support and investment in those relationships but it will still be important that we do that.

I suppose the point which Ken and I have talked about this often and will do in the future - the point that still feels a point of frustration is the lack of differentiation between the UK Government and the UK civil service which is not the same as the UK Government and UK governance with four administrations actually occupying the UK now - and with very vocal and different political aspirations. So that still feels like work in progress.

We need the peer support and respect to be able to navigate those choppy waters and we have that but I still think there's quite an educational process even 21 years on to what devolution really means and it is still evolving - it's not an end in itself so that job will never be finished I suspect.

Compere: So the last - one of the last topics – I would like to cover around employment is that of development. We've had quite a few questions on this and the impact that the pandemic could potentially have. Barbara, I'm going to ask you to answer the two questions which I think are fairly well linked the first one which received 22 likes was - how do you ensure you empower younger more junior staff to thrive and lift them up and recognize them? Do you have junior staff within your teams? And then the additional question to that was how will the executive team ensure that career progression for junior staff is not impacted too much by the coronavirus pandemic?

Barbara Allison: So good questions. I suppose I would be really disappointed if I thought this period was impacting on people's career progression because I think there are so many opportunities for people you know either to move into new roles or you know to keep learning. I suppose reflecting back, I think one of - prior to this - but one of the probably most demanding times in my career here was the run up to the independence referendum. And a number of teams work incredibly hard but it was a fantastic experience in terms of learning so I think I would be really keen that people are capturing their learning through this.

So I can't quite believe we know we've been you know living with us for four months and it feels like a bit of a blur so you know really, really keen that people take time out at the end of the week just to capture what they've done that week and how they've done it because you know I think the amount of fantastic examples that we're going to get for competency-based interviews in the future from this period will, everybody should have you know armfuls of them, because you know there must be so many really interesting varied experiences where people are working way beyond their normal experience - so really encourage people to learn and capture stuff.

Just now, I think you know the GDP scheme that Lesley mentioned for the graduates, sorry young apprentice scheme - there's lots of really good schemes, there's webinars online, so you know there's plenty I think of resource for - to help people.

I think managers have a key role to play, I think. Just because you don't see people face to face, people should still be keeping in touch so I think monthly conversations are really crucial you know. I think just really encouraging people not to look at this as being a period where because they're out of the office they're not learning. And actually I really think people will look back and go oh my goodness that was, you know, a difficult, challenging, demanding experience but hopefully people, you know, really learn from it as well.

Compere: Yeah i think it's something that civil service should be quite greatly proud of. I work across the NHS, university sector and the civil service and one thing that I've taken back to my other roles is that monthly conversation and actual purposeful development of junior staff which i think the nhs and university sector could learn a bit from. But don't tell my bosses in those institutions that.

So just before we wind up I wanted to ask you all some of your own personal reflections with dealing with what has been a challenging time for all of us. Someone's asked what have you found the most challenging and the most rewarding parts of the crisis. And we've timed it perfectly that I think we have time for everyone to answer this question so who wants to start. Permanent Secretary?

Permanent Secretary: I'm happy to start. So in terms of rewarding I think, just going back to the point about pride, actually seeing the organisation and individuals rise as one to the challenge has been extraordinary.

And I have only seen a micro version of what the organisation has produced, achieved, worked together on and it's been extraordinary. And I think actually others have recognized that as well. Other organisations, and I've kept in touch with a lot of external partners who have been incredibly impressed by how everybody they've had in contact within civil service. Whether that's people carrying on delivering their services or those who've pivoted and been repurposed within you know minutes, they've said to me, and this is you know COSLA, the police, a whole raft of partners of ours, have said how impressed they've been.

And the collaborative nature. We've kept our eye on the prize of collaboration, and as somebody said earlier on the national performance framework and that culture of looking to an outcome that has not been sacrificed in in the name of covid.

And I think I'm just very proud of the organisation in terms of challenges. I mean i think we'll go through a learning process which will be individual, as Barbara has said, but also one of organisational learning as well. What did we really do well here, what do we want to hold on to and capture.

But personally I remember, and it was not that long ago - it was a few weeks back, and I was having a really long day and I think the thing I've learned about myself in this is just how to deal with the relentlessness of it. And in any job whatever job you're in, however exposed or otherwise, relentlessness gets you down after a while. And it was a Friday afternoon and I was at my standing desk in front of my screen thinking this is pretty hard, this is quite tough and the phone went and somebody said there's been stabbing, we think it might be a terrorist attack. Now fortunately it was not, it was a pretty tragic and difficult attack, but at that point you suddenly think what's important here. Yeah what do I need to get back on my horse and carry on because the organisation demands it off me.

And indeed it's my role to do that so that relentlessness of it, and people I'm sure will have their own stories, felt like quite challenging occasionally. But you get back on your horse to say, and um and I'm not a particularly equestrian at all, but you get back on yours and you carry on and the organisation did me proud then and we'll do again in the future.

Barbara Allison: So I think what I'm most proud of is, yeah I think you know selfishly I'll mention my teams, but I think they've been fantastic.

So I always think my teams are split in two halves of supporting ministers, so I think that what we've done around private office briefings for the First Minister, the news guys in terms of responding to the media, our marketing campaigns, have been phenomenal. And a big shout out to Jason, who's our star.

Then the other part of my responsibilities are the workplace, so I think the fact we've been able to deliver chairs and screens and keyboards to people that's made a massive difference to working from home. I just think people have been phenomenal. So I'm very proud of the teams.

I think I find it hard not seeing people, I find that really difficult. Realising people are working incredibly hard, you see some of the times that emails coming out. But recognising that people are juggling, as we talked about before, child care and they want to deliver etc so I think that's been quite hard. Not to just see people and just you know find other ways to keep in touch. But you know I think overall the effort's been great.

So I found I've changed my way I work. I think as well as Leslie said the days are relentless, so I need some time at the end of the day, just to kind of look at what's in the inbox and things. So you know I think you adapt and I think I found to communicate well it took me a while to realise I had to adapt the way I worked to make it to make it feel manageable.

Compere: Yeah not seeing people, it's been a challenge. [redacted]

Lesley Fraser: The value I guess that that I hold personally and that gets me out of bed every morning is public service. I think great government is one of the great things about society functioning really well and, my goodness, you know it's just been extraordinary over this past period.

So not just us and our organisation, and all of the colleagues that Barbara's just been talking about, but you know all our public services.

Of course NHS and social care but everywhere. I've been talking to colleagues in Registers of Scotland and they've turned around house buying, you know in the last four months. I mean wow.

And it's everywhere so that fills me with joy and fills me with pride. And I'm amazed and, well sort of not surprised, because I know how brilliant people are.

I really miss bumping into people in coffee queues and getting little nuggets of conversation and finding out how people are. You know, I'm now getting a bit better at it, you know you can WhatsApp, you can skype, you can text, very often simultaneously, so there's lots of ways of catching up but that kind of human connection, I've missed that.

And what colleagues have been saying about just finding ways to put some boundaries around when you're working and when you're not. Yeah absolutely and that's a work in progress still for me.

Ken Thomson: So I'm going to start with the challenge and I want you to imagine an orchestra.

And a really great orchestra, if you come and conduct them, you don't actually have to do very much work as a conductor. For one thing you're the only person on the stage who makes no sound whatsoever.

And for another you've got a bunch of people who are committed creative professional skilled experienced people who know what to do and they know how to work with each other. And you can guide them and shape them and create the conditions in which they can do great work but basically you let them get on with it.

And this organisation, when it's running really well, it's just like that. And when it's like that the experience that I have if I'm the conductor for my teams as I turn I go to see my minister, and say are you getting what you need from my teams and they say, yeah they're doing a fantastic job - that's great.

And then there are the times when it's a bit more challenging, often because the world has changed radically in ways that mean that the way that this is structured and the way that we have our resources deployed.

You know everything's changed and the Permanent Secretary and I had a week like this, just after the leave vote in the European Union referendums. I remember that Leslie, you and I sitting with the First Minister and she was pretty clear that she was not getting what she wanted, and what were we going to do about it.

And just at that point there were only two players in the band and we were trying to play all of the instruments at the same time. And you know and very rapidly the teams came together in different configurations. We created teams that we'd never had before and we've just been through that experience again in the last three months. So the challenge for me in covid was, I don't know about four or five days into all of this, when everybody had left the building and we were creating a team here to do shielding and a team there to do testing and tracing and so on. And we got quite quickly to the point where nobody knew who was doing anything. And we were all away from our system so we couldn't update the business directory and so on. And you could see emails going into the system saying you know to email to everyone saying who is dealing with x and it was at that point we realised we had to put in place some kind of, you know we had to create the layout for the orchestra. So that people knew where the sections were and that you know that the violins were over there. and it was when you could feel that structure coming back in and I thought yeah this is going to work okay. So that was the challenging bit.

And then the rewarding bit, I remember an old colleague of mine saying that the thing about civil servants is they make it possible for ministers to be ministers. And there's no more exhilarating time when you experience that than being involved in really big decisions. You know whatever the nature of the decisions and sitting with the First Minister while she's speaking to the Prime Minister about effectively shutting down the economy. There aren't many bigger decisions than that. And the speed and the number of those decisions that we have taken and making sure that good government works through all of that, and that we remember our values that we do in a safe legal

constitutional way, and do it competently has been the most rewarding thing of the last few months.

Compere: Brilliant thank you.

So that's us just about out of time for today. It's been a really interesting discussion covering a wide range of areas. Many thanks to everyone who's been listening and a huge thanks to the panel for taking time out of their busy schedules to answer your questions.

Finally you will receive a short link to the feedback survey from the corporate comms team. We'd be really grateful if you could share your feedback so that we can improve future events. I hope you enjoy the rest of your day, thank you for listening.