

Ask ET transcript – October 2020

Panel

- [redacted] (Compere)
- Leslie Evans (Permanent Secretary)
- Ken Thomson (DG Constitution and External Affairs)
- Nicky Richards (Director for People)
- Paul Johnston (DG Education, Communities and Justice)
- Elinor Mitchell (Acting DG Health and Social Care)

Compere: Hello and welcome to this virtual instalment of Ask ET. I'm [redacted].

We are piloting a new format for the session for the first time with the panel sharing their own answers via video clip. I hope you enjoy the session today, and as always, with the aim of improving how these sessions feel and increasing engagement across the organisation, we're really keen to get your feedback.

So, today, I'll be putting questions to five members of the Scottish Government's senior team; the Permanent Secretary Leslie Evans, DG for Constitution and External Affairs Ken Thomson, DG for Education, Communities and Justice Paul Johnston, DG for Health and Social Care Elinor Mitchell and Director for People, Nicky Richards.

We've had an extraordinarily high number of questions in through Slido - with over 100 questions submitted, which is absolutely fantastic. Although we won't be able to get through them all, we'll try and cover as many as possible in the time we have today.

Before we get stuck in, there's a question I'd like to kick off with as a bit of an ice breaker which I'm sure won't be covered by the questions that have been submitted! So, as you will all know it is Bake Off Season and with the beloved Scottish winter fast approaching, I'd like to find out from each of you- what is your favourite winter mood-busting bake? Permanent Secretary, can I come to you first.

Permanent Secretary: So if we're talking mood busting winter baking I think keep it simple, and here in my family the best and most popular winter bake is certainly homemade apple pie. The trick is to get the pastry really good. So, none of your store bought stuff, it's got to be homemade pastry, and also to get that balance between the sharpness of the apples, a wee bit sugar in there. But I think keep it simple, homemade apple pie, definite winner.

Paul Johnston: Well hello colleagues. It's really good to have this opportunity to speak and thank you for all of the questions that you have asked. So, in terms of a winter mood busting bake – I was lucky enough to have some planned, organised, October leave and I tasted, in a lovely restaurant in the Highlands, actually for the first time, a Scottish bread and butter pudding. Now some of you will think 'why on earth have I not been having that before?'. I wasn't sure about it but it was delicious.

So for me that's what I'm keen to have more of – probably shouldn't be having too much – but highly recommended. Some nice warming bread and butter pudding.

Nicky Richards: I was reading something the other day about how to find ways through all the grim news and restrictions that we're all trying to work through and what was quite interesting in that was that it was highlighting the importance of play. And what it was saying was that the opposite of play isn't work but depression. So it was really clear that not just for kids but also for adults, we really need to find things at the moment that energise us and light us up, that allow us to play. Certainly bake off has to be in that category. And I've found that a couple of mornings within the last week, I've had a mince pie before 9am – so I think I need to stick with the mince pies as being my mood-busting bake and it's certainly something that is brightening up my day at the minute.

Elinor Mitchell: My favourite winter mood busting bake – that's a tough one. As a celiac, and therefore gluten free I've done my own baking for most of my life because although there's lots in the supermarkets nowadays for gluten-free that didn't use to be the case. I consider myself quite a good baker. I do love a cheese scone, particularly on a Sunday morning, love a bakewell tart, whatever comes to mind really. So no particular favourite, although I do love the bake off – it's the highlight of a Tuesday night.

Ken Thomson: My best bake over the winter has been sourdough pizza.

Compere: having seen pictures of the Permanent Secretary and Ken's baking on Twitter, I'm sure those all sound mouth wateringly good, so to spare people listening in, I am going to try not think of them for the rest of the session.

I'm going to move now to the first theme of questions submitted and that is around the organisational mood. The first question reads: There is definitely a feeling of organisational tiredness – can we acknowledge this and what can we do to address it? Permanent Secretary, if I could come to you.

Permanent Secretary: Can we acknowledge organisational tiredness? Absolutely we can, I think it would be unnatural for us not to recognise our people feel exhausted, not just tired. And not just in our organisation; in institutions, organisations and families across the country. It's been a long haul and we're now facing Winter. So I think it is really important actually that we do have a space where people can be open and honest. We've certainly done that within our discussions with the Executive Team and with my colleague DGs. So have your team got a space and a time when it's possible, not to be moaning, but to recognise that it is tough, it is tough professionally and it is tough domestically and we've got every right to feel that we've been through a lot. But equally what helps, so what helps you, what helps your team and what would help from the organisation corporately to enable you to get through the next few weeks and months of what will still be pretty challenging circumstances. And challenging professional asks. So, it's understandable that we're tired. There should be places for us to discuss this openly, and to recognise that openly, be frank about it. And to discuss and share what helps, what works, personally, professionally, as we look towards the Winter.

Nicky Richards: It's clear that Covid hasn't impacted everybody in the same way. So everyone's been impacted but it's not always been equal. And I think for some people – and that might be in their personal circumstances – they might be worrying about their health, they might be worrying about the health of others, they might be worrying about their livelihoods, their friends and family and for others it will have changed their experience of work, so I think all of us are trying to adapt as best we can. But across the organisation, that impact has been experienced quite differently and in some places the pressure and impact on workloads has been really acute. And certainly, I know I've seen a number of emails coming in at 2am and worse, and I'm concerned that that becomes an expectation that you've got that kind of level of availability all the time and that's not easy. We've done quite a lot to try and keep things healthy and sustainable. We've taken a lot of steps to try to align resources, to bring resources across to the areas that need them most. We've had the high priority vacancies process, we've got a number of pieces of work under way to bring in additional resource through external recruitment at quite a significant level but it's clear that that's not enough and I think we need to acknowledge that it's not going to be sufficient to meet all of the needs and expectations that there are across the organisation. And I think that we do need to really take care of each other- people putting in those extra hours, doing that extra work because they have a really deep sense of public service and they want to do the best for the country during such a critical time.

But likewise, everyone needs a break and we need to keep stepping back just to get perspective and make sure we don't slip into this as a default pattern. And I think, everyone will know themselves, the degree to which that's a risk for them to slip into that kind of pattern. We've done a huge amount on wellbeing – there have been blogs and articles on Saltire and there's been a really positive response to that and I think that sharing of experience across the organisation and making that a really open conversation has been an important part of seeing it through – and certainly, I think the support of colleagues, I have found particularly significant and sometimes just people acknowledging that they're not ok, that it is too much is really important – it allows other people to step in and support you. So you know trying to avoid being too heroic and feeling that you can't ever say that you've had enough, that it's too much is something that I think we need to guard against and look out for each other.

We did the new wellbeing template as a way in to the monthly conversation and in particular to get a handle on how the working from home experience had been and I think that if you haven't had that kind of conversation with your line manager then it's really worthwhile doing. It was something that we encouraged during September but it's absolutely something I would encourage people to come back to. There is support out there, there is a lot of support out there and there are things you can get access to, there are webinars, there are wellbeing services, there's loads of guidance and support out there. So do look out for each other and keep an eye on yourself. Try and tune in to when you think you're overdoing it, or if you're having a bad day, you're having a bad day. And I think we just need to cut each other a bit of slack at the moment and make sure we're not doing more than we should.

Compere: Our second theme is around winter working from home costs. I'm going to look to Nicky to answer these in the first instance and the question reads: Are you

going to compensate staff for the additional cost of working from home - not all are saving money. And added to that, should staff be applying for the £6 a week? Nicky.

Nicky Richards: I know it's been a hot topic around the degree to which we will be able to reimburse, as an organisation, some of the costs of working from home. And in particular costs around additional fuel costs over the winter.

And I think that it's been a really positive picture, the way in which SG's been able to support colleagues to work from home where they can. So you know equipment - chairs, desk, monitors, mice, keyboards, all of that kind of thing. I think it has been enormously helpful in helping people create an environment at home where they can be productive and safe and comfortable in the way that they work. And if you haven't done that then please do, you know it's not complex and it is possible to do it. I know I kind of struggled on for a while with laptops propped up on books and things, but it's really not ideal. So do think about the environment you are in, and if you do need equipment please do ask for that.

And there are ways in which expenditure, for example on telephone calls, home insurance premiums, increased broadband expenses, things like that, there are possibilities of reimbursing that kind of expenditure on receipt on an annual basis. So that I think can assist people as well if they've got really significant issues that they are facing.

And I think we've tried very hard to be flexible. So where people have had caring responsibilities, where they've got to look after their children at home, where's it's not feasible to work from home, we've tried to find other ways to support them and to make sure they've been are protected and able to continue without financial detriment.

There's the home working allowance that HMRC set out in their guidance around heating and lighting. It's important for people to understand this isn't an allowance which we, as an organisation, can just claim from HMRC and then pass on. It has to be funded from within Scottish Government budgets, so it has to be paid for essentially by the taxpayer in Scotland.

And there are some difficult balancing acts I think for us to work through. It's really important that staff are able to work safely from home, so the equipment and things we can provide I think are helpful. But at the same time it doesn't take much time looking at the news and elsewhere to see quite what a devastating impact Covid 19 is having on the economy. The number of people who are losing their jobs, the work that we need to do in terms of mitigating the impact on individuals so you that also has an impact on public finances.

So we've had to balance, and think through quite carefully, what would be defensible for us to do across the board for SG staff without that putting a burden on the taxpayer which doesn't feel justified. And we concluded that we don't think it's unreasonable for us to be in a position where people can reclaim the £6 a week via your tax return. That's quite possible to do and HMRC have set up a process to do that looks relatively straightforward. I've not tried it yet but I got the email and it looks like it should be relatively straightforward. So that is possible to do against your tax

bill. But to do that universally for everyone – I know, and I'm quite close to the office so quite often I could walk in, but even just on the bus fares I used to spend a week I know that I am saving money by working from home. And I think for many, many of us the commuting cost that we're saving, the other expenses we have from being in the office have reduced so actually there's quite an offset for most of us in terms of the savings we've been able to generate from working from home.

But we know that's not the same for everyone and if people are in real hardship and this is a big worry for them then please to get in contact with us. We don't want anybody to be in a position where this is causing real difficulty for them. So please do register a query by HR Online on iFix and we'll deal with that in the strictest confidence and can work through it. So please if you're in hardship, or worried that actually that someone in your team is, then please do let us know and we can consider that on a more targeted basis. But I think generally we are needing to balance our expenditure on these kinds of issues and really think about the place we hold as public servants in relation to the wider society, and the economy, and the people that are suffering most on this.

Compere: Onto the next question, during Covid, staff are being promoted on TRS without fair and open competition - what can be done? Nicky

Nicky Richards: On this issue about TRS and temporary promotion, I think it's really important that people understand that there hasn't been any change to policy, so the policy remains as it was and should be being adhered to in the way that it was so if people have got very specific concerns about unfairness then those should be raised with their line manager or directly with HR.

Certainly, it is clear that given the huge impact of the pandemic on the organisation, it's been crucial that business areas can make rapid staffing changes, that they can do what they need to do in order to respond to increased demands. And I think people have looked at TRS rather than a full recruitment campaign and that's been the right thing to do, it's avoided delays, it's allowed a quick response and it perhaps recognises that this isn't a long term role or a long term need, it's something that might be required for a period of up to a year, but actually, things after that point will hopefully come back into a better order. And if you're going to go down that recruitment line, that does need the approval of your deputy director and people should consider it very very carefully, particularly how they are going about that recruitment process because it's so important that people are transparent and open and have a sense of fairness around it.

I think we've always, particularly during times like this, are trying to balance flexibility and the need to meet urgent requirements with transparency and fairness and it's not always an easy balance to strike. One of the things that we've done at senior civil service level is – and we had a good conversation with the executive team about it – is in the early stages, I think there were some roles within the SCS that were filled very quickly on temporary promotion, and the view across ET when we stepped back was that it was very important that these were done transparently and fairly and we concluded that all temporary promotion opportunities within the senior civil service should be subject to an expression of interest process, so that notification goes round the whole organisation and it can be really quick, it can be really light touch

but it makes the opportunities visible and it allows us to make sure that there's a really good field. And actually, it has operated really effectively – it's been a quick and fair way of filling posts, so I do think there are ways through it but we need to recognise at the minute that TRS is part of the range of what we're responding but it doesn't mean that we need to do it in a way that doesn't respect fairness and transparency.

Compere: Many colleagues have raised issues around the recruitment process - why can some areas recruit but others left under resourced? Nicky if I can look to you again for this.

Nicky Richards: On this issue about recruitment across the organisation we, as I said in answer to one of the earlier questions, really ramped up our recruitment activities and A to C bands we've got an enormous amount of recruitment underway. The resourcing team are currently dealing with over 1000 posts.

So it's a very very significant range of recruitment that's underway and that covers both internally and externally advertised posts, in core directorates and across the public bodies who use our service. We've used agency contracts to bring in some extra temporary resources and to really focus support into some of the areas that are the busiest.

But despite all of that we know that demands are not fully met. And even with the additional measures, the additional resources that Cabinet have agreed, it's clear that we're in a very very challenging budgetary position. And we're really at the limits I think of the amount of recruitment that we'll either be able to manage organisationally but also that we'll be able to afford from a budgetary perspective, this year and particularly next year for a full year.

So the answer really that we really keep coming back to around the Executive Team table is one of prioritisation. And I think there's been some really good examples of where people have gone through, and managed to deal with priorities and have been really thoughtful about what work they've been able to put on hold, the work they've needed to engage Ministers to renegotiate expectations. But it's absolutely crucial that that process continues because, quite simply, we will not be able to manage the range of expectations that are placed upon us just without that constant prioritisation.

And I think it's tough because the resourcing process that we're in, we're terming it kind of priority recruitment but the reality is I've said, if you've got a thousand posts to fill, not every single one of those can go at exactly the same pace. So there's an enormous amount of recruitment that the team are managing which we're going to have to be thoughtful about how we do. So I would ask people to be really patient and thoughtful about the way in which they are engaging with the resourcing team about the recruitment they have underway. There is a lot on the go and constantly kind of following up and asking questions actually kind of slows things down. Our systems that underpin all of this are not helpful, and they are highly manual and they are not that user friendly. And that makes it really challenging for everyone to work through.

Compere: And in keeping with the theme around recruitment, and Ken I'm going to come to you for this one, does ET support location independent jobs except in exceptional circumstances? Could we look to have a first class workforce through all roles having flexible locations, so a blended approach moving away from Edinburgh centric roles? Ken.

Ken Thomson: So during Covid I've had a team working in London, in Scotland House London, which has been closed. Working alongside people in Edinburgh and other parts of Scotland. They've never met physically in that whole time but they've worked together really well. So I think that's really shown us that we can have high performing teams that aren't all in the same place and we really need to keep that ability as we move forward.

Compere: Thank you for that. and the next question, I'm going to look to Paul to answer. The mental/physical wellbeing of some staff has greatly improved by working from home. How can we continue the best ways of working for different people? Can we work from home permanently? Paul.

Paul Johnston: So I recognise that working from home has been a really mixed experience for many colleagues. It's been really interesting to see the Saltire comments and I recognise for some avoiding the commute and staying at home has been good and for others there's a real desire to get back into the office as soon as possible.

What I'm keen to see is that we bank the positives that we've had from the last few months and so we do ensure that working from home is - it continues wherever possible, where that fits with the needs of work. But I really hope that before too long we will also to meet more freely with colleagues; to be able to connect more freely and to support each other, because I recognise that many of us are missing that social connection, and just those informal opportunities to engage with each other. I do think that so much of our work is a real people business and we get work done through those human connections. So, yes to flexibility and to ongoing home, working, but also a real desire on my part that we are able to meet together more fully to engage with individuals and teams, because I think that's a vital element of our work.

Compere: And conversely, our next question is: What options are being considered for returning to the office and when (if at all) might we have a longer term view of working arrangements for the next year i.e. when we'll be back in offices and on what basis (part time etc)? Permanent Secretary if I could come to you for this.

Permanent Secretary: So when might we return to the office and also what the longer term working arrangements are for next year. So, my view and where we are on returning to work in the office is, I've made a statement to staff as you're all aware that we're not going to be back in the office before 2021. I think we will need to keep pace of where we are with the second wave and where we are with Covid generally, and constraining arrangements across Scotland during that time. Of course we have offices in the Central Belt, but we have offices around the rest of the country too. I think the important thing to be aware of is that we're learning what works in terms of keeping our contact and professional support, and pastoral care for people working

at home who find it difficult. And to bear in mind the importance of retaining some flexibility when we do return to work; to pick up on some of the advantages that we have found in terms of having some time to work from home and have some time work from the office. There will need to be a balance, we'll need to listen and talk to staff, to managers, to Ministers, but also to the Unions about getting that balance right. But if you're saying will it feel exactly the same when we return to the office, short term no, it doesn't anyway, I go in once a week to meet with the First Minister and go to cabinet. So I know building St Andrew's House feels differently. But longer term will it feel differently? Yes, I think it will, and I think our building footprint across Scotland will be different as a result as well.

Compere: Turning now to IT. We're continually being asked to use a non-SCOTS device – or our SCOTS device doesn't support particular conferencing software – when can we expect better IT? Paul.

Paul Johnston: So in terms of IT, I would want to start really by saying a huge thank you to our colleagues who often behind the scenes have been working flat out to ensure that we have got the best possible IT that can be provided at this time. I know it's not perfect, but I've certainly found that my trusty tablet has worked really well and I've also been on a bit of a learning curve I guess like many of you in terms of getting used to using Teams. I'm looking forward to that becoming even more effective, and again I'm grateful for the work that's being done to increase the functionality of Teams. So yes, I recognise that there's a lot more to do, I'm grateful for the work that is being done. I do think we've made real progress. We're working in ways that we probably couldn't have imagined working - or that I couldn't have imagined working in –even a year ago.

Compere: And of course, by the time colleagues are listening in, Teams will have begun being deployed... and I for one, am very excited about this! Moving now to the next question and I'm going to look to the Permanent Secretary to answer this one. What's your vision of what the organisation will look like this time next year and in five years? Permanent Secretary.

Permanent Secretary: My vision of the organisation - this time next year and in five years' time. Five years' time is quite an ask. What I will say about five years' time before I return to next year which is slightly easier to anticipate though not totally straightforward. In terms of five years I would like to think that the civil service values are still enduring, that the national performance framework will still be what we work towards, our north star, and our outcomes for Scotland, and that some of what we have learned over the past few months in terms of managing and coming out of and our renewed response to Covid, our post Covid learning. But that will be informing and supporting how we operate as an organisation within Scotland. But it could be very different landscape by that time on all sorts of levels not least the way that we've embraced digitalisation, the way which we are working across our organisation and across our portfolios and with other partners in Scotland. That should be even more important and even more evident to us in five years' time.

In terms of next year, of course this time next we will have emerged thoroughly from an election. The election is due to be in May, even if it's delayed a little we will still be by this time next year I would anticipate being out of the election period. So we

will be serving a brand new government who will undoubtedly will have a lot of energy, will have a lot of ambition. We'll have a lot of new people, faces around the table from the recruitment that we're undertaking at the moment. I hope that we'll have lots of energy having been able to have a holiday which I know many people missed out on this Summer. So, refreshed and sparkly eyed and ready for the challenge. I think we will also have a good deal of learning to be able to put into place this time next year. In how we've come to terms with living with Covid but also how we are responding to the challenge that it set for our economy, for other health demands and indeed for some of the societal issues that this has raised for us too.

Compere: Thank you Permanent Secretary. Moving now to the next question which is on carbon neutrality. Will ET commit to closing inefficient offices? And tied to that, what plans are there to rationalise the SG estate? Paul.

Paul Johnston: I recognise that we've got used to new ways of working and we want to build in that flexibility and we may not want to work from offices in the same way that we have in the past. Do we all need to have a default of going in to the office five days a week? I'm not convinced that we do. And so I think it's really important that work is on the go for our overall strategy on our estate, that we're looking really carefully at what our requirements are likely to be and how we can get access to really good offices and as part of that, offices that have the least detrimental impact on the environment as possible, so again, I'm really conscious that work is underway on all of that and that we'll want to engage with the whole organisation on that work as it develops.

Compere: Thank you. On to the next question. When are we moving to a four day week? Nicky if I could look to you for that question.

Nicky Richards: Somebody asked a question about moving to a four day week and obviously there has been some interest in these kinds of flexible working approaches. And I think some pilots and interest, both in this country and elsewhere, about ways in which productivity and you know kind of hours worked can be balanced out.

I think there would probably be a bit of an ironic laugh from quite a lot of folks who would probably welcome a six day week during this current process giving how hard a number of people are having to work in order to manage all of the business that we're needing to provide. And there's no doubt that as an organisation, government's now work in a 24/7 operation. You know, the media enquiries, the expectations, none of these things flow through naturally within a set working hours in the way that they used to in the past.

So a one size fits all approach is unlikely to work. We've got such a range of different roles across SG, from highly operational roles, public facing roles, policy roles, media facing roles. So very very varied actually so we'd need to think quite hard about what's practical and how we work that through in terms of a flexible approach to work and a future of work more generally.

So I think as we consider what this, particularly the impact of the pandemic, we have to step back and say what does this mean – it's given us such a different experience

of work. And I think we would want to keep thinking about that wider package of measures that would help us improve and develop the flexibility that's already there. But it is absolutely critical that that can best suit the business requirements of the Scottish Government in its service of the people of Scotland.

Compere: We've received a question in relation to Micase and the timescales afforded to officials vs those afforded to Ministers with officials only getting two days in some cases while Ministers and PO get in the region of 10 days to review and issue the final response. What can be done to address this? Elinor.

Elinor Mitchell: Challenges with MiCase. It's a really important issue. Correspondence is a front facing part of what we do and when the public write in to us it's perfectly reasonable for them to expect a prompt, helpful and fulsome answer. I know numbers have been increasing really significantly – some teams in my DG family have experienced increases in correspondence in the order of about 1500% which is obviously impossible for any individual or one team to keep in touch with so some things we have done is to get a whole new bunch of people in, get up to speed quickly and work through those kind of issues.

It's difficult for everybody. It's difficult for the teams that are trying to load the correspondence on to the system, it's difficult for those at the receiving end and it's difficult for those in ministerial private offices. My single biggest piece of advice on this is simply to keep in touch with everybody – keep in touch with private office, make sure everyone understands what's going on, keep in touch with your line manager. When things build up, don't suffer in silence, put your hand up, ask for help, make sure that things are answered as promptly as you can and if you're getting into difficulties, renegotiate time lines.

Compere: On to the next question. Why are only C band and above able to update their own flexi? And also - there are plenty of development opportunities for SCS but not many for those below SCS - what can be done? Nicky.

Nicky Richards: So, there's been some questions around the capacity for the folks below C Band to update their own flexi, and also about the flow of opportunities for people below Senior Civil Service.

On the first, around flexi, I think generally the processes have tended to flow that it's important that people at kind of Team Leader level will have a sufficient overview of the work and what's required for the business to be able to keep that insight around flexi and to be able to then make that decisions in relation to their teams. I know that can be a burden for C Band staff and that might be a frustration for folks across the teams, and I think it's always important that we keep an eye on those sort of business rules that are in place, and whether they still, whether they still feel that they're, you know, fit for purpose, do they need a bit of review, do they need, do we need to evolve some of these further. I think part of the challenge for us is again some of the underpinning systems. We would like there to be much, much higher levels of self-service, and for that self-service to be intuitive and you know, kind of much, much more flexible in the way in which it operates. Our systems are not good, and a lot of requirements particularly around flexi leave end up having to come into

central teams within the HR Service Centre to resolve, which again is not a good use of time for anyone including for those central teams. So this is an issue, and it's something which we have to then spend a lot of time, and lot of traffic in various directions trying to delete pending leave, then move things around. So, so we recognise that some of these things can be frustrating, and certainly there are a number that we would like to address, for all sorts of reasons. So I think that's one where it's not going to change for the immediate time, but is something that we would come back to and review, and certainly as part of our wider transformation programme, and review and replacement of systems that we're developing at the moment. These are the kind of things that we would try and iron out and come to a review in negotiations with the Unions in terms of policy positions before we can then embed those with any new systems. So there's often a flow through, to work through. But I know these things can be frustrating and the systems don't help.

On the opportunities, we are now advertising a lot of promotion opportunities in the priorities roles across B and C bands. So I would just encourage people to keep checking the pages. There are a lot of opportunities around. There's a huge number of vacancies live at any one time and a lot of those are very interesting and exciting roles that are you know right at the heart of addressing big issues facing the country. So please do keep looking at those. I know that there will be opportunities there. In terms of the sort of development programmes, there's a lot of work underway, and learning resources for managers and leaders at all levels are out there and available through Saltire and the webinar series. And do get in touch with the learning team if there's particular opportunities that you would like to access. But I would encourage you to look at things like the new line manager programme. There's a lot of that that we're continuing that we're doing on-line rather than face-to-face to enable us to still offer those development services. And if you want to get engaged around those sort of opportunities then please do get in contact with us.

Compere: And now, how are you equipping staff to uphold the civil service code? Do we sufficiently educate and challenge ministers on complex issues so they can make informed choices? Sometimes it feels a bit like 'yes, minister'. Ken.

Ken Thomson: Do we challenge Ministers on complex issues? Well yes, I think we do. We've had complex issues in the constitutional debate in the last few years, in EU exit and now on Covid. And these are big controversial issues that attract lots of views out there. There's lots to get your head round. And I think we've shown we can get our heads round deeply complex stuff, tell it straight for Ministers, engage them in really good discussions and take good decisions for the country and for the people in it.

Compere: And on to the next question. The comments section on Saltire is often an emotive space for many colleagues. A question received describes some conversations lending itself towards colleagues feeling "ganged up against" and "keyboard lynched". What can be done to ensure that the comments section remains a space for open discussion and respectful debate? And also, what is being done to keep trans and non-binary staff safer on the intranet and in our office spaces? Paul if I could look to you for this one.

Paul Johnston: Well I think it's great that we have a comments facility on Saltire and I think it's a great way, for me personally, tuning into some of the views and concerns that exist in the organisation.

But I do recognise that for some the comments on certain issues have been really difficult. And I suppose what I would emphasise is the fact that we all need to pause and reflect before we post a comment. Can we just think about the values that we have got actually at the heart of the National Performance Framework which talks about kindness and dignity.

So please, let's not post anything that we would look back on and say is not kind or is not respectful. I appreciate there are many issues where we have got strong views, sometimes deeply held personal views. Let's remember any comments are being seen by a very wide number of people. Let's remember they are being done on an official workspace, that we are bound by the Civil Service Code. And as an organisation, and indeed as a public service in Scotland, we've said that we're committed to these really important values around kindness and respect. And of course, we're also absolutely determined to build an organisation that is increasingly diverse and inclusive. And I would ask that in all of our comments, we're really at pains to respect each other and to respect that deep commitment to diversity and inclusion in all that we do and in all that we say.

Compere: There is a lot going on around wellbeing – how can the Scottish Government encourage physical wellbeing while working from home? Elinor

Elinor Mitchell: I'm very pleased indeed to see the focus on wellbeing. I think it's so important. Looking after people is our primary responsibility.

The particular question around physical wellbeing while working from home. As a bit of an aside, I was interested in an article the other day which suggested that those in sedentary jobs were more likely to have better cognitive health, but there must be a balance in there somewhere.

I mean, it's a personal responsibility isn't it. It's no different from when you're in the office, it's about regular breaks, it's about making sure you don't have meetings pencilled in from every waking hour of the day, it's about making sure you get the chance to go outside, take in some vitamin D while you can. Keep an eye on your step count and prioritising times to do things that keep you healthy and happy.

Compere: What actions have been taken as a result of the 2019 people survey?
Ken.

Ken Thomson: My big takeaway from the last People Survey, and it's been really relevant all through this strange year, has been about resilience and wellbeing. Personal and for teams. And thinking about how well we can sprint but also how we get recovery and we can sustain a marathon pace for the long term. That's a real challenge at the moment, it's really important for the sake of all of us and the organisation that we get it right.

Compere: Is there any intention to activate the key stroke software that exists on our systems to monitor staff output? Permanent Secretary.

Permanent Secretary: You're asking is there any intention to activate the key stroke software that exists on our systems to monitor staff output. We do not use any key stroke software on SCOTS devices and systems, and my understanding is that there is no plans to do so. So I think the answer to that is no, that's not something we use, and we don't intend to use it in the future.

Compere: As a B band working on Covid, how can my flexi and leave be protected – I have no time to take leave. Are there plans to allow more than 10 day carryover? Nicky.

Nicky Richards: People have been asking about annual leave, and I know there's quite a lot of concerns around this particularly when people either don't particularly want to take their leave because they can't really get very far and also because the pressure of work is making it quite challenging for them to step back. They may be generating big flexi balances and they're worried about leaving their team and leaving others exposed or overloaded if they step back and take annual leave.

And we're talking to the unions about this and particularly about how we might look at the arrangements for carryover. You can carryover up to two weeks' worth of annual leave already so there is that provision already in place. And I think the other point to bear in mind is just quite how important it is to take a proper break. We need to look out for each other and I think sometimes if you, if we really really feel that we can't get away then we need to reflect, then we need step back, and talk to our line manager around that. I know even around the Executive Team table they, I think for a while, people were finding it very very difficult to step back and realise that actually it was absolutely crucial that they did. So finding cover arrangements, making arrangements so that people can step in and cove for you, and you can then cover for them – you know are there ways of reorganising the work.

So it's so important to get away, even if you are just at home but getting away from work for a little while and taking leave I think is crucial. So I would encourage people not to store it up. Please take your leave, please do take a break, look after yourselves, spend the time with your family. You know even if it's just reading a book and catching up on the box set, but please do get a break from work. And as soon as we've concluded the conversations with the unions then we'll come back with any developments or changes around the carry over position.

Compere: so now onto a Brexit related question – are there going to be staff moves to support it? As we approach January and Brexit, how will the Executive Team work with ministers to ensure work is clearly prioritised? Ken and Elinor I'll come to you in that order.

Ken Thomson: So have we moved staff to get ready for Brexit? Well we've been doing that for about four years now. We've got teams that exist now that didn't before.

And of course now we're doing all of this work, heading for the end of the year, with Covid on top of the EU exit challenges and with the other challenges that winter brings, whether it's bad weather or more people in hospitals.

So it's really important that we're good at organisational readiness and that we see all of these risks together and we prepare together for them. And that's what we're doing.

Elinor Mitchell: Prioritisation is an ongoing challenge. In my DG family, we have a process in place which is called the strategic prioritisation framework which sounds like a lot of words but it's actually been a really important process where directors and their teams look at the things that they must deliver between now and the end of March and that prioritisation also begins to tease out what are the things that are being reprioritised or stopped.

We take them to ministers and sometimes they agree with our prioritisation and sometimes we have a negotiation about it. But that's the process we undergo in this DG family, and certainly at ET level we are very aware of the concurrent risks, the pressures on people, the pressures on wellbeing, and the stress that puts some teams in particular under. We look at it through a number of lenses. We look at it through delivery reports, we look at it through risk reports and it's something that we are constantly reviewing to ensure that we are doing everything we can to make sure that we are focusing on the top priority things and the things that are absolutely essential.

Compere: and now turning to our next question. Class is still an issue in society and we talk a lot about diversity, but less about class? Do we need greater class diversity, especially at senior levels? And also, what is being done to tackle socio-economic inequalities in the Scottish Government? There is never mention of this group when we speak of equalities or D&I. Paul if I could look to you for this one.

Paul Johnston: Thanks for the question about class and about what we need to do to tackle socio-economic inequalities in the Scottish Government. I recognise that this is a really important area of work. It is part of becoming a more diverse and inclusive employer and I take the challenge that there may be many times where we need to have a clearer focus on socio-economic diversity. I was filling in the People Survey just today and it was interesting just to reflect on those questions about background. Personally, my parents didn't have any university education. I think they both left school when they were around 14 and went on to do a whole variety of work of which they were very proud. But I pursued a very different path in terms of going to university. And I think it's vital that we are an organisation where there's a place for people of all sorts of, well all social-economic background, rooted in that view that there's respect for one another. So yes a lot more work that we have to do here and another area where I think staff networks can play a very powerful role in terms of challenging us as an organisation and supporting our further development.

Compere: Ken I'm going to look to you for this one. What can the SG offer to junior staff who want to develop into future leaders? There are limited places in the Graduate Development Programme fast stream and programmes of that type. Ken.

Ken Thomson: So how do you develop as a leader? Well it depends what you mean by leadership.

So my definition means leadership is being influential on the things that matter. And I think you can do that in a number of ways. So I always think of the 70-20-10 rule.

So 70% of what you learn you learn on the job by doing it. So think about how you can be influential, how you can lead in your existing job.

20% comes from speaking to the people working with you, by saying, “why did you do that” or “what can I learn from how you came at that”. And it’s only the 10% that comes from the formal developmental courses. And these days you can do a lot of that online or by searching out distanced learning opportunities.

So think 70-20-10 and just do it.

Compere: Could we find a creative way of providing those living/working alone with additional support e.g. perhaps create a kind of informal work 'support bubble' network? Elinor if I could come to you for this one.

Elinor Mitchell: So creative ways of supporting those who are working or living alone. It’s a really interesting one, I’ve seen lots of great ideas of how people have really been rallying around and supporting their colleagues during these times. Ranging from the really simple, informal emoji every morning to and then following up with a phonecall, a coffee morning, to putting time in folks’ calendar over lunch where folk can just chat while their having their sandwich or cup of tea, to much more structured approaches to making sure folk are actually talking to people during the course of the day and through team meetings and all of the rest of it.

We have a variety of staff networks already so I don’t see why we couldn’t have one for remote working. I think it is important to recognise the challenges for everyone in this. It’s not so much working from home any more is it, it is living at work. And I think that’s hard whether you are at home alone or whether you are at home with lots of other people in quite crowded accommodation.

So I would like to see some ideas generated on this and what people think would work best, take them away and work out how best we can support our people. Because it’s an incredibly important thing that we continue to look after each other and look out for each other.

Compere: and now, on to our final question and one that I’m quite interested in as well. And that reads: with all the changes that Covid has brought, what would you most like to see kept? And I’ll ask the panel members to answer this individually.

Permanent Secretary: So in terms of what we have learned from Covid, you will all have your own learning stories – I have. Certainly, it has tested my leadership, it has tested my resilience, I have seen the organisation at its very best in terms of supporting and responding, supporting each other, and responding to the call that

came to respond to Scotland's need and to support our ministers in responding to something that none of us could have anticipated.

What we have learned – I think we have learned that we are more resilient than we thought we were. We are more agile and flexible than we thought we could be, our ability to really prioritise and focus on what matters, so the capacity of the organisation and the willingness and the professional skill that has been demonstrated, working at pace, in partnership while still maintaining an adherence to our civil service values but also those which are encapsulated within the national performance framework. I am immensely proud of how the organisation has responded and is continuing to respond to Covid. I have seen individuals and teams go beyond the call of duty and beyond what might be reasonably expected of them. I do not want us to get into the habits of working very long hours or of working over weekends and that is why we are looking very carefully at how we prioritise our work, that we're talking to our ministers about how we do that and we are recruiting at pace so that we have more people come in and supplement the resources that we have for Covid and for other areas of important government work.

I suppose if there's one thing I feel that we need to learn about from our Covid time, it's how we put all this learning – the best of this learning - into practice and don't let it go. So - capture it while we're aware of it and I know people are doing that, both at the corporate level and at the local level. But really, those of you who have been involved in Covid directly, and those of you who have been responsible for backfilling people supporting Covid endeavour, I want to give you a real vote of thanks and appreciation. I am indeed a very proud Perm Sec.

Paul Johnston: So Yes, Covid has brought such massive change. We've mentioned technology earlier and I hope we will continue for the long term to connect with each other really regularly using video so that we can see each other's faces and as I've said, I hope we will be able to get together face to face physically before too long but the improvements that we've seen in terms of digital technology must be retained. Reducing our travel times, not travelling around the country for short meetings, including for short meetings with ministers unless it's absolutely necessary – I think there's certainly a development there.

I suppose though one of the other things that I really think really needs to be kept is the focus that we've got on looking both at social, economic and health issues together – not in separate boxes, not suggesting that there's one that matters and the others don't matter, but that just as we want to see a country that is healthy, so we want a prospering economy and we want to support those who are most vulnerable. Now, it's really difficult to bring together all of these considerations, and of course there are tensions but I think we've seen through our work on Covid how absolutely vital it is to look at what we're describing as the four harms; Covid health, non Covid health, social and economic harms; to bring all of these things together and then to give ministers our very best advice and judgement on how they can move forward in a way that minimises harm altogether. So I think there's some work there we need to do in not being a siloed organisation, not being in little pockets, but really committed to working together across boundaries to give ministers the very best advice that we can on how they can deliver their objectives for Scotland.

Elinor Mitchell: So the Covid changes and what I would most like to see kept – it's a tricky one, so three highlights from me.

One is comms. I think we have seen more mindfulness, or thoughtfulness, around our communications. I see more inclusivity – there's no assumptions about who overheard that meeting or who overheard that phone call. So I think that's really positive.

The second is less commuting. It's good for the environment of course. Less wasted time in terms of hours worked during the day.

And the third is more interest in people's life outside of work. And by that I mean, I think we've become a bit more tolerant to everything else that goes on in people's lives. So children, cats, dogs, family members popping up in team meetings, people being distracted, people having to take five minutes away. We've become much much more tolerant of that and I think that's a very very positive thing.

Those were the three I would highlight although I'm sure there are more – you'll have your own. Thank you.

Nicky Richards: There's a question about what we'd like to keep of all of the changes that Covid has brought and I think it's hard as so many of those changes are at societal level or an economic level and [indistinct] – there's not a lot of positivity amongst all of that. I think the two things for me are - I think one is that we've all become more attuned to nature and I think, certainly, that fantastic Spring that we went through which feels quite distinct to us now – but really just exploring your local environment, walking around local streets – I don't have a garden so I didn't have that kind of immediate peace to get into but I could still see the birds in the trees out of the windows, I could still see the progress of the baby ducks and the baby swans on the canal and I think there was a real sense of appreciation that's come from that that I hope we can all hang on to because I think there's a real, kind of, deep wellbeing that comes from that sort of engagement with nature. So I hope we can all hang on to that and have a true appreciation of our local environment.

The other thing is linked to working from home – I think it's created this incredible sea change in the way that we see the opportunities and possibilities of remote working and I really hope that we can keep that. I'm so struck though by quite how polarising that is though. Some people absolutely hate it and some people completely love it and it's really helped them. And I'm sure for a lot of us some kind of hybrid would look quite popular. I think the challenge for us in the medium term is probably going to be accommodating any kind of hybrid model – I think it's going to be really challenging because the reality of keeping office spaces clean and safe is not going to allow that level of flexibility. But certainly I think as we look to, hopefully, a post Covid future, and one where we have a vaccination or something which allows us to keep that under control sufficiently – I think it gives us an insight here into what could be done and ways of coming together virtually that we would never have made these accelerations in practice without this, kind of, really dramatic intervention. So I think it has showed us new ways of doing things and made us much more comfortable and competent with that. And I think that's worth hanging on to.

Ken Thomson: What would I keep from the experience of the last eight months? Do you know, the one thing I would keep is the ability to look out for each other. I've just been talking to some colleagues – one of them, his son is ill and in hospital tonight, and everyone just wanted to stop thinking about the work and be with that person and support them in how they were feeling about it. So let's keep looking out for each other.

Compere: So unfortunately we are just about out of time. I think there were so many excellent questions covering a wide range of topics.

Thank you to our Panel for taking part in today's discussion and a huge thank you to colleagues for all your questions. I'm sorry we couldn't answer them all but I hope you've found the discussion useful.

Finally, you'll be able to find a link to a feedback survey in the follow up Saltire article about the event, and we'd be really grateful if you could share your feedback with us, so please keep your eyes peeled.

And now with that, thank you for tuning in and enjoy the rest of your day.