TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

REGIONAL STEWARDSHIP IN ACTION AT THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, DISABILITY AND AGEING

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David Pembroke: The team at the Department of Health, Disability, and Ageing would like to dedicate this episode to their late colleague, Ashley Dow, who passed away on the 31st of March 2025. As a senior engagement officer, Ashley played a central role establishing the value of stewardship in aged care in Western Australia.

Hello, everyone, and welcome once again to Work With Purpose, a podcast about the Australian public sector and how it serves the Australian people. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. As we begin, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are meeting today, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri Peoples, and pay my respects to their elders past, present, and emerging, and acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and indeed this region. I'd also like to acknowledge the custodians of all the lands from where anybody listening to this podcast is joining us from. Today, we return to our APS Reform in Action Series delivered in partnership with the Australian Public Service Commission. In this series, we're looking at the projects, programs, and strategies that showcase the unique place-based approaches of the APS and indeed how they are growing the capability of the Australian Public Service.

Today, we are going to take a look at the Department of Health and Aged Care's local networks. In response to the Aged Care Royal Commission, the Australian government invested over $13 million to strengthen governance of aged care through a local network of Department of Health and Aged Care staff. The network has an office in each capital city and there are nine regional offices across Australia. The network plays a key role in representing the department on the ground as it implements a range of aged care reforms.

The work of the local network reflects the APS value of stewardship and the benefits it brings to the Australian people. Rebecca McIlroy is the Acting State Manager for WA and South Australia at the Department of Health and Aged Care. Her 23-year career in the Australian Public Service has spanned roles in legislation, stakeholder engagement, compliance, rural and remote operations, and policy development. She has a passion for education change and developing solutions to the many wicked problems she deals with every day. Rebecca, welcome to Work With Purpose.

Rebecca McIlroy: Thank you.

David Pembroke: Elsy Brammesan, PSM, is the State Manager of the New South Wales and ACT branch and has worked in the Department of Health and Aged Care for the last 14 years. For the past decade, her focus has been on aged care regulation, and in 2019, she was awarded a Public Service Medal for her significant contribution to aged care policy, development, and reform. Elsy, welcome to Work With Purpose.

Elsy Brammesan PSM: Thank you.

David Pembroke: So, perhaps Rebecca to you first, could you tell us a little bit about your work as the State Manager?

Rebecca McIlroy: The State Manager really is part of a wider system within the Department of Health and Aged Care progressing government priorities. So we are just one small cog in a giant wheel. Our focus really as a State Manager within the local network is around progressing the government's reforms for regional stewardship into aged care. So as you mentioned at the start, we've had a budget measure following the Royal Commission recommendations to start with the pilot project around implementation of regional stewardship, and that expanded in the 22-23 budget to cover the entire country, which was a really exciting outcome for us. In short though, we have teams working on the ground, working with providers, with consumers, and with other stakeholders to be able to improve the way the aged care system is working.

Practically, as you said, we do this from 17 regional centres, so each of the capital cities and then we have regional offices. So I look after both the Bunbury and the Port Augusta office within my remit. Elsy also looks after New South Wales ACT, and there's other State Managers looking after the other states, each with two states each. So while our work is focused on aged care, we also engage with other policy areas across the department to make sure as the local presence on the ground we're able to lean in the areas that we need to. And mostly that happens around the First Nations primary health care space. So no day is the same for us. Every day is really challenging and, at the moment with aged care reforms, it's really fast-paced, but at the end of that we know that we make real life impact with the way that older people are actually accessing the aged care system.

David Pembroke: And just in terms of the challenges of looking after an area as vast as South Australia and Western Australia, how do you go about doing that or working with your people such that you can provide effective coverage,

which I imagine would be different to the way Elsy has to because her area is not quite as large as yours to cover?

Rebecca McIlroy: Yeah, it was a real challenge for us in the start in how we looked at implementing regional stewardship, and I actually started the Country WA team with the initial pilot project. And the way we did that was a staged implementation to make sure that we got our model, we got our people, capacity, and capability building right, and we got our external stakeholder engagement aspects right. I think one of the things we'll talk about through this discussion is about how important it is for us to understand our local areas that we are responsible for so we can make sure that we're having the greatest impact on the aged care system for older people.

David Pembroke: So, Elsy, to you perhaps on that question, understanding those local areas and their particular needs, how do you go about understanding that and reflecting on that understanding and working with understanding with your teams? How do you do that as a manager?

Elsy Brammesan PSM: Yeah, sure. Thank you for the question. Like Rebecca said, any day is not the same, and the main focus is on local regional engagement. And the way we engage and understand the work in different areas is very different. Say, for example, in New South Wales, we have an office in Wollongong, Coff Harbour, and Dubbo, and the issues and areas that we need to address there are very different. And so we have localised staff that engage with providers on a day-to-day basis addressing the concerns that emerge. One of the thing is we may have a structured engagement program, but suddenly the day may change. If there is a critical closure, we need to manage and relocate people safely, working closely with the PHN or the providers and multiple agencies, and it could go to other emergency management. So it's not just mainstream Aged Care Act work. It could change at any given time. So that local knowledge becomes very important.

David Pembroke: And to Rebecca's point earlier, talking about regional stewardship and decision-making.

Elsy Brammesan PSM: That’s right.

David Pembroke: How do you enable and allow that decision-making to take place so close to the clients and to the customers and their needs? You're the State Manager, ultimately, you're responsible, but clearly you have to rely on your local people to make good decisions.

Elsy Brammesan PSM: That's right. So we have policies and procedures, and this is where we are very connected to the policy area, and we work on educating our own staff, and we have proper programs to educate our own staff. We have a national team that has that function. In turn, our engagement functions are about bringing that knowledge back and feeding it to the policy and program area and addressing the concerns that are emerging on a day-to-day basis.

David Pembroke: And how do the adjustments get made from there and how is that information used to upgrade and modernise the policies?

Elsy Brammesan PSM: So nationally the issues will be very different. It could be one day around a service that's not financially viable to another issue where it is more about lack of availability of beds. So depending on what the issue is, we would work with that particular policy area to adjust the policy settings

David Pembroke: Okay. So Rebecca, our listeners know a lot about stewardship. We've spoken quite a bit about stewardship, but how has regional stewardship evolved? How is it that that's been something that's now being implemented by your department?

Rebecca McIlroy: So I think if we just take things back a step, we know that over 200,000 people are receiving aged care in a residential aged care home. We know that over one million people are receiving some form of aged care support to keep them remaining living independently in their own home. So the need for us to make sure that, that system is operating effectively is really important, both from a departmental perspective, but we also have the government putting in billions of dollars of support into these programs. So the work we've done around stewardship within the department, and I've been around for a while now, has actually been the work that we've continued to do to support our regional providers, metro and country, in delivering really safe quality care. So with the way that we've implemented regional stewardship, as I mentioned before, we started with a pilot project where we had eight regional PHN regions where we implemented stewardship.

And as I said before, I was responsible for the implementation across Country WA. The other sites that we looked at were Adelaide, ACT, Eastern Melbourne, Gold Coast, NT, Southeast and New South Wales, and Tassie. So across those different locations, we had really different cohorts, really different communities, really different parts of the aged care system. So we were able to learn a lot through that initial rollout. We also know that the Royal Commission had some really quite clear feedback to the department about needing to have a more localised

approach in the way that we understood how the aged care system was working. When we looked at that, we looked at it from several different lenses, the lens of the provider, the lens of the consumer, and then the lens of the department to make sure that we got that implementation right. The teams themselves are working to support quite a few different aspects of that work.

So how we're able to build local intelligence on the ground and feed that back to our program and policy areas. And it would be good if we could talk later on about how some of that feedback has really implemented or changed the way that policies have been implemented across Australia. We also have made sure that we're interacting really closely with state and territory governments in the way that some of our programs have really significant interfaces for the older person, for example, primary healthcare or hospital services. But really each branch within our division is aiming to make sure that the aged care system is understood locally and then considered through that policy development cycle.

David Pembroke: So Elsy, to you, what have you seen since the implementation of regional stewardship that has been positive in terms of the delivery of services?

Elsy Brammesan PSM: Some of the examples that I can give you that are very positive, particularly the major uplift of APS staff that are working with the providers that are the local network offices. And in turn, we have seen the way we guide the aged care sector in the delivery of safe high quality of care is very different now. And we are building providers capability where necessary and also managing the exit of providers who are not performing as required, and we are fostering innovation and continuous improvement. Whereas in the past, innovations and improvements were done in isolation, we are able to increase that in the current environment. We're exercising leadership to support the government agencies and aged care quality and safety commission as well. And we are proactively managing the interface between aged care services, health services, accommodation services, and homelessness and disability services, those who are providing diverse services as well.

Like Rebecca mentioned, it's multifaceted. It's not just one area that we look after at the moment. The other final improvement that we've seen is the way we measure the performance of the aged care system in conjunction with the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission. So those are some of the improvements and the positives that we've seen through the regional stewardship that's in place.

David Pembroke: So Rebecca, if that's the good news, what's been the challenges to really apply regional stewardship so as it does create those benefits?

Rebecca McIlroy: So we definitely have had some challenges. It hasn't been all smooth sailing. This has been a very different way of working for us, but it's also been a very different way of working for the aged care sector. So we've had to spend a lot of time listening and understanding and developing trusted relationships, and that takes time. We've also needed to ensure that the way that we plan our stewardship work is measured. In the implementation of Country WA, for example, we really needed to make sure that we had a mix of projects. We had projects that could probably be seen as quick wins, and then we had projects that would be medium and longer term projects. And I know with one of our projects across Country WA, I've been working on that since I think going back to 2015. So it really is long-term work.

One of the challenges around stewardship though is good news travels fast. So when providers or consumer groups or PHNs or workforce providers have been able to get really good outcomes with our stewardship teams within the local network, more people want a part of us. So we really needed to make sure that we were focusing and prioritising our work based on risk, but also based on where we could get the biggest impact possible. You mentioned before one of the biggest challenges for me was around the size of Country WA and then also Country SA. So we really need to think about how we are engaging locally, but also how we're spreading ourselves across such a large region. One of the other challenges that we've had is about how we can make sure that we're best sharing the intelligence that we learn.

The information that we get from consumer groups and providers on the ground is extremely deep. There's a lot of information and value in what we're hearing and we need to make sure it's getting back to the right people at the right time in the right format. And that sounds easy when you say it in a sentence like that, but it is actually one of the most complicated parts in telling policy areas what they need to hear at the right time and in the right way. Lastly, investing in our teams, making sure that we've got the right people doing this type of work has been a really important part of capability and capacity development across not only the department, but also in how we're building capability across our leaders on the ground within the department. Lastly, I'll say, and I think I said lastly twice then, is making sure that we're supporting the work with the right tools and the right systems.

There's only so much engagement that you can do if you don't have that back-end support to be able to pull it all together. So we've been extremely lucky to have a branch which have focused on the strategy around regional stewardship, but also in building us the right tools for us to be able to do the work. IT costs money, it's an extreme amount of time, but we've been able to hit the nail on the head with the products they've built around stakeholder engagement systems, but also around data and how we can pull together a dashboard of data to be able to support regional stewardship so anyone in the local network can actually at their fingertips find the right information at the right time.

David Pembroke: So Elsy, Rebecca mentions the tools, the data, and the people, but for many of our audience out there today, they're thinking about stewardship and thinking about how do they develop and apply stewardship. So what's your advice to them about the principles that they really need to understand, not just tools, data, and people, although they are very important and obviously the ultimate products, but how do they get from, we know we've got to do it to a workable system?

Elsy Brammesan PSM: Thank you, David, for that question. As we all know, stewardship is a new public service value as well under the Public Service Act, and this value reflects on the important role that all APS employees play in ensuring that the APS serves the government, the parliament, and the Australian community now and into the future. So when you're talking about people wanting to implement stewardship, there are a couple of things that will be really great for them to implement. And first of all, understanding what is stewardship? Stewardship is a practice of caring for something that we have been trusted to look after. Being a good steward means accepting responsibility for that care and working to ensure the long-term integrity and sustainability of what has been entrusted to us. So to achieve this, there are a few things that people can implement.

Number one is engagement. So engagement where possible doing it face-to-face is really important. That's where you get major return for the investment that you're doing, particularly in the service delivery area. The second aspect is regulation. Really understanding the regulation that governs the industry that you're working in would be very important. And then comes the implementation, and that's where some of the aspects that Rebecca was talking about, the IT and all that support, having that would be really important along with the administration task where you have understanding of local supply of services. Without that local knowledge, you're not going to be able to implement stewardship really well. So fundamentally engaged, having an engaged and capable workforce, corporate support including resources and digital tools and

training that Rebecca has mentioned, collaboration and innovation with the policy areas and the industry that you are serving, and clear strategy and planning, including shared vision and shared responsibility for stewardship, these are the fundamental things and the principles that's going to help you implement very successful stewardship.

David Pembroke: So in your work with your teams across New South Wales and a CT, how do you practically go about this? Are you having regular conversations about stewardship? The impact of stewardship?

Elsy Brammesan PSM: Do you mean with my staff?

David Pembroke: Yeah, with your team.

Elsy Brammesan PSM: Yeah, absolutely. That is fundamentally a weekly conversation with the staff and understanding what challenges they're facing and understanding where we need to channel some of the training aspects, implementing tools for them to successfully engage with the providers is a routine work that we need to do to have really strong stewards.

David Pembroke: So Rebecca, clearly, you've had some success with this program of regional stewardship and the impact on the behaviours of your team in order to deliver with all the various stakeholders across vast areas. Where to from here? How do you bake it in? How do you really consolidate it? Where do you want to see it go from here?

Rebecca McIllroy: What an exciting question. I think this is where we get a little bit excited here, and so you might need to tell us to stop talking if we go on. But we're well integrated into the aged care system now. So providers know that we're here, other stakeholders know that we are here, and if they haven't had a direct contact with someone from the local network, then they've heard about someone who has. In regards to us being embedded as regional stewards, I think we're there and we've done that and we've achieved that. We have the Aged Care Act starting from 1 July 2025 so a lot of our work that we've been doing at the moment is around working with providers and consumers around understanding the aged care reforms, and for the future six months, we'll probably be working with them on embedding and implementing those changes.

But when you talk about where to from here in regards to the wider future, that's when I get really excited about some passion projects that I've got, which just happen to also fit in with the government's priorities around stewardship. So it works well. One of the main areas of focus for us across WA and SA and for the wider network will be about making sure

that consumers understand the changes to the aged care system. So making sure that education and understanding of how someone fits into the system is really important, and that's just not for someone who's ready for aged care. That's also for people like me who have a father who is receiving aged care services. So it's that wider impact as well. One of the other main areas of involvement or an increase of projects is around building the capability of the Aboriginal community controlled sector in increasing their delivery of aged care.

We've got some great relationships across the network with some amazing archos who are doing fantastic work for their regions and for their communities, and we're looking to build that capacity in relation to aged care to increase services, but also so first Nations older people can receive care and support from the First Nations organisations that they are already linked in with. One of the other areas of focus for us is around delayed discharge of older people. So people who are clinically ready to be discharged from hospital, but for one reason or another haven't been able to be discharged yet. So there's a lot of work happening in that space at the moment, both to look at how we can avoid hospital attendance in the first place, but also how we can smooth the interface between someone moving from hospital into aged care in the home or into aged care in the community.

The work that we do though, as we've talked about before, will always be guided by community in regards to the priorities that we're responsible for. So while there's some big ticket items there and they might be implemented differently across the local network offices, we will always be there to help providers work through challenges, whether it be workforce, financial, governance of boards, those types of projects to ensure that aged care services are operating in the best possible way within their communities.

David Pembroke: And for you, Elsy, what would you like to see perhaps in maybe say a three to five year period? If you're looking in, what are those changes that are going to have happened on the ground and have been embedded by the mindset shift and the behavioural shift in the public servants in delivering services to Australian people?

Elsy Brammesan PSM: Yeah, thank you. So I want to take one step back and add in addition to the delayed discharge work that the office is doing is the emergency preparedness as well. And I'll come back to your question in a second, David, if that's okay?

David Pembroke: Sure.

Elsy Brammesan PSM: So in terms of in line with that conversation, the other support that we have provided to the industry is the emergency responses. So if I can use the recent example of the Cyclone Alfred situation, as you know, Queensland and New South Wales was quite a lot of impact and there were close to 600 services, aged care services that were affected. And the local network office supported providers to mobilise generators and fuels in conjunction with the SES offices late at night so that services did not lack support system to charge a wheelchair, charge lifters, or oxygen tanks and everything. And there were some sites that needed evacuation so we were looking at vacant beds that were available to move residents to safely in the environment.

And we got approval from the Prime Minister to get surge workforce out to 10 services. So if I can give a real example of, we just got an email from a provider saying, "Thank you so much for the Surge workforce." They were working nonstop 15 hour days and sleeping at the service until the surge workforce came in, then they could go and attend to their own personal circumstance at home for their wife and children. So that's the real impact we have on the ground as local stewards and regional stewards. And so, like we mentioned earlier, our day can be smooth running engagement one day to attending to some emergency, whether it is bushfire or flood emergencies or working with hospitals, local health districts with the delayed discharge.

So coming back to your question about how do we strengthen the work and what I want to see in three years time is where we are able to very readily engage and provide support to providers in regional and remote areas where they need governance support with innovation, whether it is clinical leadership or workforce, where they can work together rather than in isolation to solve problems. So services don't need to face closure because they don't have support system. So if we can achieve that, where people are not working in silos but working together, and if we can create that environment, we would have succeeded. And I'd like to see that in three years time.

David Pembroke: Because it is such an important issue, such an emotional issue. Every family has people who are in some form of care. The Royal Commission was confronting in so many ways, and there are often so many stories and the media tends to focus on some stories, but clearly stewardship has perhaps played a role in really improving the performance. Would you agree with that, Rebecca, that it has helped to improve delivery of services to the aged care?

Rebecca McIlroy: Absolutely. I think when I think about stewardship, it really is a continuum. So I've got examples of my team being in a regional location, having a conversation with a remote aged care provider, being able to really understand the issues, so sit and listen and understand. And by the afternoon, there was a face-to-face meeting with an aged care assessor. And then by the end of the day, they've radically improved the way that aged care assessments occurred across that remote location. So it's really being able to facilitate relationships and partnerships all the way through to that example that Elsy talks about with Cyclone Alfred.

The work that the local network did for Cyclone Alfred was next level. We had people rostered on who were in the middle of a cyclone themselves focused on ensuring that aged care delivery was occurring. They're unsung heroes really in a way, that they're doing work that will never get on the front page of the paper. But as Elsy said, for the continual delivery of services, it wouldn't have happened without their local network support.

David Pembroke: Elsy, a final word to you about the importance and the effectiveness indeed of regional stewardship.

Elsy Brammesan PSM: Yeah, so I believe stewardship has always been a fundamental part of work in aged care, and if you didn't have that commitment to stewardship, you wouldn't be doing this work. But the real shift, what I've seen is the regional stewardship, because often providers in metro area or bigger providers may have their own finances and resources to get clinical support and governance arrangement and all of that, but having that regional focus, focus on areas where they need real support has been the major shift, and I'm very excited about that, supporting people that actually need help to continue to provide care. And that comes back to Bec's point about continuation of care. And when a smaller service, say, for example, the regional service, 16-bed service gets closed, families get dislocated, partnerships get dislocated, friendships that have been made in their 80s, they get dislocated. So we have real commitment to finding providers that are vulnerable and getting them that support through multiple grants programs that we have. Often in regional areas, they're not aware of some of the grants that are available. You need to explain the process, and sometimes people need to be invited to apply, and we play the role in connecting those services to the policy area where those grants are being run. So like Bec said, right at the beginning, if you let us speak, we'll be here forever because we are very excited about this work and the positive impact our work has on the industry that is looking after very vulnerable Australians.

David Pembroke: But it also seems, and this is a final question from me, because this is an interesting conversation, I could continue to ask questions, but stewardship also as a value, it seems to be a very important and valuable and effective way to communicate service to your staff. So clearly, has it been a way of you being able, have you found that your communication to staff through stewardship, through the lens of stewardship, has made the performance of your teams more effective? To you, first, Elsy, and then we'll close it off with you, Rebecca.

Elsy Brammesan PSM: I certainly agree. In the past, some of your listeners would know, regulation and working with the providers used to be together. Now removing the regulation to the commission and pure stewardship for the department means we are very focused on getting the outcomes for the providers without the fear of regulations. So providers can literally talk to us about where things are not working, and we find resources on how to make things work. So I'll stop there and pass on to Bec

Rebecca McIlroy: No, I think you said that really well, Elsy. But I think I'd probably like to leave a few lessons for different people who might be trying to implement stewardship within their own area of responsibility. We know that stewardship is everyone's responsibility, so everyone, regardless of what government department you're working with, has an element of stewardship in the work that they're doing. So for me, it was really important to allow the time up front, so allow the time to develop the relationships, understand the region, understand the data, understand the important stakeholders. But it's really easy to get stuck at that point, so you need to know when it's time to move on and start actually implementing stewardship. We also need to be really willing to listen, and that's just not saying that you're listening. That's actually listening.

And I remember an old manager for me gave me the flexibility to be able to do that in practice. So I actually went and sat under a tree and listened to the older people talk to me about the issue they were experiencing at the time. I've taken those principles from past jobs into the work that I'm doing now in stewardship. I listen more than I talk, which for my husband probably would be quite surprising, but I need to understand the actual information, actual issue, but then I also need to triangulate it to make sure I'm understanding what it is that I'm hearing. I also need to cultivate the experience within my team. So across the local network, we've got such expertise, not only in aged care, but in communications, in legislation, in policy development. We've got people who come with a workforce background, so we need to make sure that we're pulling all those things together to get the best out of our teams as possible

And don't underestimate the impact of the one-percenters. So we can do a very quick relationship introduction and, like I described before, a very quick introduction, and it can actually have a really, really big impact on the way that the aged care system is working. I think that when you piece together that really outcome focused mindset with the right teams and the right skillsets, you can develop some really good outcomes with the stewardship work you implement.

David Pembroke: Well, Rebecca and Elsy, valuable insights, useful guidance, great stories, and more power to you and your teams. And thank you for your service and for your stewardship because it's clearly having an impact. Thanks very much for coming to join me on Work With Purpose.

Rebecca McIlroy: Thank you for having us.

David Pembroke: So listeners, there you go. What a great series and collection of stories and advice and practical advice that you can now take away and think about, stewardship in you and your teams. Because as both Elsy and Rebecca reflected, it's always been a part of your work, but now it can be embedded into the actual mindsets, practices, and behaviours such that you can deliver outstanding services on behalf of the Australian people. So I'm very grateful for Rebecca and Elsy coming in to talk to us today about stewardship, but indeed regional stewardship in the roles that they have at the Department of Health and Aged Care.

So listeners, you can tune into past episodes of Work With Purpose at Spotify or Apple Podcasts, or wherever it is that you do get your podcasts from. And if you could leave us a rating or a review, it does help the program to be found. Please keep those reviews rolling in and anywhere else that you can let people know that we are creating stories and content about the Australian Public Service. You can follow Work With Purpose APS and at IPAA ACT on LinkedIn, where you can also stay up to date with everything about Work With Purpose. Work With Purpose is produced in collaboration between contentgroup and the Institute of Public Administration of Australia ACT. And the APS Reform In Action Series is produced in partnership with the Australian Public Service Commission.

A big thanks to Rebecca and Elsy for joining me today, and a big thanks to you for coming along and sharing some of your valuable time with us. We'll be back at the same time in another week with another episode of Work With Purpose. But for the moment, my name is David Pembroke, and it's bye for now. Work With Purpose is a production of contentgroup

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