



Public Sector  
Commission

# Future Enabled

A **strategic narrative** of  
professionalism, purpose and pride  
in the Western Australian public sector



# From the Public Sector Commissioner

**It's often hard to put down in words the full extent of the work of the public sector and its people.**

We operate in virtually every place, big and small, across a state that's the size of western Europe. Western Australia has some of the most remote communities in the world, a huge coastline and an extraordinary cultural heritage. Our climate ranges from Mediterranean to monsoonal, with an occasional touch of snow in places.

Western Australia also has an eclectic mix of people from many backgrounds who live here and call this state their home. For First Nations people, those born in Australia and those who have come from across the globe, their lives and livelihoods are intricately tied in with the potential of this state and the services we provide.

But none of this should stop us from trying to tell our story. Because our story is important – important for everyone who lives here and beyond, and for those of us who work in the sector.

Our story is also an important part of our democratic system – how we serve the government of the day and deliver on its priorities.

The best kind of story is a quest – in our case for the best possible services and policies for a resilient and sustainable Western Australia shared with and by all its citizens and communities.

A great quest has characters – a backstory and history – as well as challenges to overcome, skills and behaviours to meet the challenges, and evolution and growth with new capabilities.

This narrative tells our story. It recognises the skills, experiences, effort, commitment and dedication of our people; and the extraordinary range of services we provide and the service we give. It deliberately sets our story in our context. It is the story of our professionalism, purpose and pride.

This narrative also looks forward to what is ahead – both the opportunities and the challenges. It provides the impetus for focused planning, leadership, capability and delivery as we take the next step in our continuing journey of service.

The Public Sector Leadership Council is committed to this narrative to drive a future enabled public sector in Western Australia.



**SHARYN O'NEILL PSM**



Public Sector Leadership Council members

# Our story about the public sector and the spirit of service

**The work of the public sector and its people is centred on helping to find solutions to complex problems for public good. Now, in a rapidly changing world, we have to not only help find solutions for today's problems and challenges but be well prepared for the possibilities of the many futures that lie ahead. We have to be future enabled.**

In Western Australia, the public sector has played an important role for a long time, serving governments, the parliament and citizens as a key part of a strong and accountable democracy.

**Working for the public across all the things that we do isn't always easy or straightforward.**

Frontline health and care workers, teachers and police operate in remote communities as well as in bustling towns and cities across the state. Transport and communications systems weave across the vastness thanks to many different professions and trades. Scientists, researchers and specialists put their minds to old, new and emerging issues each day. Regulators and policy makers tackle difficult challenges to set a path forward.

We do all this because we believe in the difference we're trying to make and because we know that what we do helps citizens prosper and thrive. We are driven by a spirit of service.

This narrative is the story of our sector: who we are and what we do; what we are trying to achieve; and how we work to serve government, community and democracy. It describes our intent to work with professionalism, purpose and pride; and is designed to speak to everyone who works in and with the public sector in this state.

Our narrative also has to consider the particular conditions of the time including a tight labour market and skills shortages that are likely to get worse before they get better.

**Part of our story is continuity and another part reflects dramatic change.**

The test is to balance tradition and change – the need to be the same (stable, reliable and familiar) and the need to be different (innovative, transformative and adaptable).

A story like this can reassure and it can challenge. It helps unite us behind a common purpose and direction. It helps inspire a shared commitment and make sense of the important work each of us does and how it fits into the bigger picture of our teams, our agencies, the sector and, beyond that and most importantly, Western Australia.

It is also designed to create a context for change by setting a clear and inspiring journey, helping those who work for us understand this context and relate it to their own experiences. It helps us to remain contemporary and be future enabled.

Our narrative won't apply in exactly the same way to everyone because of the range of our work, skills, expertise and roles – from service delivery to policy making, from advice and regulation to maintaining the legal, social and economic systems and services that Western Australians rely on.

But even if our people have their own connection, it is still a story that binds and connects us all in the enterprise of public service for the common good.



This narrative describes  our intent to work with **professionalism, purpose and pride.**



## The place of the public sector in our democracy

**The public sector supports democracy by serving the public interest. It upholds the rule of law to treat all citizens equally and with respect. It is an important public institution in its own right.**

Independent, impartial and apolitical, the public sector serves the priorities of each government by providing administrative continuity and professional advice and support. It is accountable to the elected government and, through it, to the parliament in serving citizens.

Critically, it also has responsibility for stewardship of long term institutional strength and capacity.

The effective “governing marriage” between ministers and the public sector can’t reduce the public sector to the delivery arm of political goals. That is in the interest of neither government nor the public sector, and certainly not the community or the public good.

Around the world, including across Australia, the role and value of an effective, confident and capable public sector have been tested by a combination of complex changes, policy and management reforms, and a shifting dynamic between politics and public administration. Roles, relationships and foundations of mutual trust and respect have at times become uncertain and stretched.

As well, these changes have impacted the capacity in the public sector for policy analysis and development, reflecting and reinforcing a loss of expertise.

The work of policy advice, generating new insights and driving service innovation has become more contested, including greater use of consultants and other external resources. The result over time is some loss of confidence and clarity in the public sector about its role and distinctive value as the trusted primary provider of objective, timely and tailored advice.

With the pace of change and demand, the public sector is increasingly about agility and rapid response as well as the ability to “think slowly” for effective solutions. Its people need to work at both speeds, which raises difficult questions of risk and relevance.

And all of this in the glare of public scrutiny and accountability.



**The public sector is independent, impartial and apolitical.**



# Key shifts to be future enabled

**In common with other jurisdictions in Australia and around the world, Western Australia is navigating a series of transitions.**

Across the public sector, we need to grapple with the consequences – the new risks and the new opportunities – of rapid change and uncertainty.

The story of the public sector for the next few years weaves together 6 key shifts to be future enabled.



## Diversifying the economy for a stronger Western Australia

**Building a great state that supports all those who live in it is a core element of the public sector's spirit of service. Using our skills and expertise, we can effectively enable, regulate and respond to business, social and environmental patterns to bring about a more diversified economic base for Western Australia.**

Over many years, the public sector has been shaped by the state's distinctive history and geography, and the patterns of growth and development of our world class resource and mining based economy.

But the domination of these traditional engines of growth has exposed the state to boom and bust cycles, and constrained the emergence of a more diversified and resilient economy.

Now, Western Australia is matching its unique strengths with global trends to deliver secure, high quality jobs through increased investment across industries and regions. Priorities include expanding cleaner energy sources, growing the defence industries, increasing the space industries and value adding to primary industries while also continuing the strength of the mining sector.

Alongside these is a renewed focus on tourism, events and creative industries; international education; and health and medical life sciences.

Achieving a more diversified economic agenda means reducing unnecessary red tape; providing quicker turnarounds for industry approvals without compromising quality; reforming the regulatory framework for a contemporary market; attracting investors to the state; stimulating new trade and industries; building infrastructure; and increasing digitisation for efficiency and service.

### **Our story is tied to these transitions.**

For these transitions to be successful, we need to strengthen skills in critical thinking and re-thinking, systems thinking and market analysis. Research capability has always been important but now there is a new imperative to move efficiently into development, bringing new products and services to market.

National and international networks and relationships are increasingly vital to further leverage Western Australia's position as a diversified economy. We have to grow our ESG (environmental, social and governance) reputation, look to innovation more often and, at the same time, consider a different approach to risk management.

In all this, we must retain and develop deep knowledge and technical, domain specific expertise. As well, our leaders need highly developed strategic influencing skills to help shape and mobilise the necessary reforms and provide advice for policy and better delivery.



## Investing the economic dividend for public good

**Improving the lives of all Western Australians is the unifying goal that galvanises the public sector. As the state diversifies its economy, we can use our deep learnings and experiences from the past to find new ways to integrate economic, social and environmental outcomes for long term public good.**

We know that strong economic and financial performance is matched by continuing social challenges and pressures. So it's critical for the state to "invest the dividend" of a more resilient and sustainable economy for the benefit of everyone.

There is already huge investment in education, health and family support. But there are always emerging areas for consideration and action.

One social investment priority is homelessness. Sleeping rough, couch surfing and living in boarding houses or supported accommodation for the homeless and severely overcrowded accommodation are challenges front and centre when thinking about investing the economic dividend. And they cannot be solved by working alone.

Also of significance is adapting to climate change, looking beyond business as usual to collaborate with industry and the community to prepare for changes to our climate and achieve the aspiration of net zero emissions.

Western Australia is already taking practical action in areas such as clean manufacturing, transforming energy generation and use, storing carbon and caring for our landscapes, making use of lower carbon transport, and climate resilient cities and regions.

**Our story is about how this investment can best be applied for public good.**

This includes incorporating citizen and user feedback to co-create inclusive, responsive and forward thinking social policies. We need to take a comprehensive, whole of government policy approach, adopting a life course perspective in the design and implementation of social policy so everyone has the necessary foundation to live fulfilling lives from infancy to old age.

We can take the learnings from the COVID-19 crisis and response and use them in clever ways. We need to future proof social policies to meet current and future challenges, and enhance our evidence based policy development. Collecting and analysing data on new social risks and opportunities are important as is providing advice and support for the design and reform of policies that include engagement and collaboration with social partners, stakeholders and civil society.

Listening to the expectations, needs and concerns of citizens when designing and reforming social policy is central to maintaining trust in our social institutions.



## Empowering First Nations people with a secure future

**The legacies of Western Australia's history, from colonisation to the Stolen Generations, continue to affect First Nations people today. The public sector has a particular responsibility as part of its enduring values to enable First Nations people to secure a positive future.**

Past injustices live on through intergenerational trauma and cycles of disadvantage. Racial discrimination, systemic inequality and implicit bias continue to hold back progress, despite considerable improvements in recent years. Reform efforts are hampered by the long standing marginalisation of First Nations people from the political process and other formal structures for decision making.

Recognising that the foundations of empowerment for First Nations people have been eroded by past policies, the role of government is to provide the necessary supports and contribute to the structural, economic and social changes that are needed. In some cases, this means stepping back to create space for change; in other cases, it means stepping up and driving essential reforms. In all cases, working in partnership with First Nations people is critical.

### **Our story is vital to the goal of empowerment.**

Empowering First Nations people, families and communities to live good lives and choose their own futures comes from establishing a secure foundation.

Coordination between the state, Australian and local governments, private sector and broader community is paramount, with flexibility to address issues that do not fit within traditional agency responsibilities.

As policy decisions about First Nations people cannot be made without First Nations people, working in partnership and/or shared decision making is essential. This means genuinely engaging with those affected at a level proportional to the potential impact or opportunity; and being clear about processes, expectations and responsibilities.

The public sector must be a culturally secure workplace, offering attractive and meaningful career paths for First Nations employees; and every one of us must be aware of First Nations culture, history and experiences so we can work in culturally informed ways.

We need to develop and implement policies and services as close to the local or regional level as possible, incorporating the experiences of users and providers. By becoming more adept at integrating policy and services across portfolios and working to shared outcomes, effort and investment can be better targeted and service delivery more effective.

We need to use evidence, evaluations, research and lived experiences to understand how to accurately interpret data about First Nations people and involve them in this.

We need to work on reconciliation and measurable improvements in the "closing the gap" agenda as well as the opportunity to embrace an ethic of sustainability, stewardship and care within First Nations culture. These are increasingly important parts of our contribution to the national focus on "voice".



## Assembling collective intelligence for problem solving

**The nature of the relationship between citizens and governments is shifting, with many issues increasingly driven by communities being more outspoken about their priorities and expectations. The public sector is in a unique position to bring together its varied resources and those of the community to effectively tackle challenging public policy issues.**

This demands new skills, expertise and ways of working. It requires deep listening and different avenues to engage with and understand communities.

Given the complexity of many of the challenges governments and communities face, it's unrealistic to assume all of the knowledge and expertise is to be found in the public sector. That's probably never been true and it's certainly not the case now.

A great deal of our work involves drawing on the experience and expertise of citizens and communities to design and deliver services that help them in their daily lives.

**Our story is increasingly one of connections in the search for solutions and improvements.**

This includes connecting people and ideas, levels of government, data and insights, regions and the world. Connectedness as a hallmark of the sector includes the ability to make common cause in response to opportunities and risks that can't be dealt with alone. Ideas, data, expertise and resources need to be rapidly and safely shared for better results and lasting impact.

It's about knowing how and when to convene "assemblies" of collective intelligence from across the sector and, when needed, from the community, academia, business and industry.

Partnering and working in new combinations of skill and expertise are the new normal to deliver robust, innovative policy advice and high quality services, especially in complex areas that cut across portfolio boundaries.

Linking knowledge and experience with knowing enough to gather and then apply additional knowledge and different perspectives – horizon scanning and commissioning – can improve the quality of our advice to government and our ability to turn practical proposals into good outcomes.

As well, combining technical knowledge with complex inter-jurisdictional problem solving, whole of government systems thinking, solid technology knowledge, data confidence, citizen centricity and a willingness to engage in the public arena are key attributes for public sector leadership.



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## E-thinking services for lives and livelihoods

**Digital capabilities are increasing both innovation and disruption throughout society and the economy. This new horizon provides the public sector with enormous opportunities as well as challenges to harness its capabilities to navigate the implications of digitisation for its services and workforce.**

New models of digital collaboration and the rise of automation, machine learning and artificial intelligence are demanding a better balance between huge opportunities for productivity and increased performance, and significant risks for security and privacy.

Western Australia is aiming to change the way the community interacts with government – with services to be digital first, not digital only; and with people, businesses and communities at the centre so no one is left behind. All Western Australians should be able to enjoy the benefits of digital technologies and services in their everyday lives.

**Our story is to enable our people to work in positions and roles that leverage the highest value.**

It's not about replacing people with machines. But to achieve this, workforce planning and digital transformation have to go hand in hand.

Strong technology skills and the right internal capabilities to deliver convenient, smart and secure services for all Western Australians are essential for a future enabled public sector. Skills in digital, data and analytics are no longer the sole province of the "IT department". We all need a foundational set of competencies that go beyond basic digital literacy. This implies the need for greater confidence in the use of new digital tools and platforms for better service delivery, policy and regulation.

The new horizon offers profoundly different models of governance that break down traditional silos, flatten hierarchies, and redistribute power, authority and influence between government and citizens. All of these test some of the traditional authority and accountability mechanisms.

In some ways, the changes make our work tougher. In others, the same changes provide new practices to help us respond to and improve all aspects of our performance.

We need a multi-faceted understanding of the potential for digital, data and technology to transform the function of government and better meet the needs of the public. We need to apply data in our daily work, having the abilities to source data, carry out analysis and define actionable metrics for success and outcomes.

The same is true of policy making and public problem solving that are increasingly impacted by the mix of technology and digital tools. It is imperative that we keep growing our capacity to collect, analyse and share data for solution design and performance monitoring.



## Activating foresight for enduring service

**The public sector endures beyond any political cycle and has a responsibility to serve the priorities of successive governments. By using foresight, we can provide stewardship of long term institutional strength and capacity.**

While part of the value of the public sector is the tradition it represents and the memory it holds from what has gone before, the public sector cannot remain static.

With uncertainty and change come opportunities for innovation and new ways to shape economic and social transformation for the public good. This is a time for great creativity and possibility too which makes the demand for honest, well informed, creative and constructive advice and delivery even more important than ever.

**Our story involves using foresight techniques to better anticipate changes and trends impacting the state's priorities.**

In this way we can constantly improve the advice we provide to government and the community to prepare and respond.

Specific focus is needed on building foresight as part of strengthening policy analysis and development so we continue our place as the trusted primary provider of objective, timely and tailored advice for government.

We need to identify the deep driving forces that may impact, alter and even upset the apple cart. We need to stay informed of long term societal changes and assess geopolitical shifts. We need to know about and understand emerging signals across levels of government, businesses and industries.

This foresight can help us visualise alternatives so informed decisions on what needs to be done in the mid to long term can be taken. It is a powerful lever that can help us shape proactive policymaking, harness shifting conditions and plan for and mitigate risks. It can help us anticipate change; navigate through economic, social and environmental uncertainties; and prepare for desired futures.

Through this we must never take our eye off the trust and confidence that government and community expect and that underpin our work. At the heart of everything we tell ourselves and others about who we are and what we contribute is integrity – being honest and direct, reliable and accountable, and ethical and fair. It's the foundation on which we have earned trust and demonstrated trustworthiness over many decades and must always remain so.

Only by doing this can we stay true to our purpose that is driven by a spirit of service. That spirit values community and citizens as well as good process and operational practice. That spirit works for the long term public good in helping governments deliver their priorities.



## A future enabled capability pathway

**To be future enabled, the public sector and its people have to continue to find, develop and combine a wide range of talent and skills.**

They have to have access to, and confidence with, a changing mix of knowledge, collaboration and delivery tools and techniques for better services, policy and regulation.

This is not new: the public sector has always had to keep adapting and improving. What is new is the pace of change and the emerging areas of priority.

At the fundamental level, the public sector has to do 3 things exceptionally well.

The first is to **think**, and sometimes to **re-think** – to draw on a wide mix of knowledge and experience to question, analyse, imagine and create.

The second is to **solve** problems with efficiency, humility and heart, working within the resources and authority from government decisions and priorities; and with a complex network of people and organisations inside and outside government, especially those most affected by policies, programs and services.



**Think, solve and deliver** are interconnected: doing each of them well means doing all of them well.

The third is to **deliver**, helping successive governments achieve their priorities and goals for growth, inclusion and sustainability for all Western Australians as well as executing their legislative responsibilities. The public sector has to integrate the different pieces of its work to deliver results that make a difference for people and communities.

The public sector needs to invest in, and draw from, a foundation of capabilities to do this thinking, solving and delivering within the context of government goals and priorities, and the changing agenda of opportunities and risks facing the state.

Also of key importance is putting in place the conditions for every one of its people to maximise the impact of their leadership to deliver their best.

Helping to develop, design and deliver good ideas and new responses to complex challenges with those most directly affected is central to the public sector's enduring impact and relevance.



## Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge and pay respect to Elders, Traditional Owners and Custodians from the many land and language groups of Western Australia.

Copies are available in different formats on request.

Public Sector Commission  
Dumas House, 2 Havelock Street  
WEST PERTH WA 6005

T: 08 6552 8500  
E: [admin@psc.wa.gov.au](mailto:admin@psc.wa.gov.au)  
W: [WA.gov.au](http://WA.gov.au)

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