Transcript of Radio Ombudsman #26: Angela MacDonald on her role as Complaints Champion for UK Government

Angela MacDonald, Deputy Chief Executive and Second Permanent Secretary of HMRC, talks to Rob Behrens about her career in the Civil Service and her role as Complaints Champion for UK Government organisations. She discusses the role of leadership in making sure organisations meet the new complaint standards and act on the learning from complaints.

Rob Behrens: Hello everyone. This is Rob Behrens here on Radio Ombudsman, welcoming you to our first edition out of lockdown. And today I have a very special guest with us, Angela MacDonald from HMRC. Angela, you're extremely welcome. Thank you for joining us today from Sheffield.

Angela MacDonald: Yeah. My pleasure, Rob. Lovely to talk to you again.

Rob Behrens: OK, so Angela to those who know her is a very senior and important person in transformation in the Civil Service. She became Deputy Chief Executive and Second Permanent Secretary of HMRC in 2020. She's an operations professional with 30-years' experience of service delivery, transformation and change in both the public and private sector. Exactly the kind of person we need in these challenging times. So, Angela, can I begin by asking you a bit about your background and where you grew up?

Angela MacDonald: So, I'm in Sheffield today, which is kind of a part of my background. I'm a Yorkshire person and I was born here, I lived here and I've never left here, which might be an interesting thing for people to think, 'Actually, blimey, there's a permanent secretary that's based in Yorkshire'. But I am that rare person – I am that person. I have probably not got the traditional career trajectory that you might

think that gets you here. I really fluffed my A-levels. I never went to university. I was too busy doing the things you're not supposed to be doing when you're 17 and I ended up working in a local insurance company at the most junior end, working on the frontline, servicing customers, and I worked my way up from there all the way through.

I joined the Civil Service in 2009. And I've been in DWP and HMRC since 2017. But my jobs have always been about being there to support the customer, whether that be service delivery jobs or transforming the experience of those customers or marketing. I did sales for a while, which was a very interesting experience for a couple of years. So, a variety of things, but always somewhere revolving around doing something to serve the customer in one way or the other.

Rob Behrens: Right. Well, that's great because it's so different from the stereotype of what a senior public servant does. When you were 17 what sort of values did you have in terms of your core principles?

Angela MacDonald: I was always brought up that there was a whole focus about doing the right thing and being prepared to be honest about that and that there would be consequences some of the time to saying what you thought. But that actually everything was possible, and you could get it if you wanted it. My parents - I've been through challenging times like everybody has. My maiden name is Burn and my dad will always say, “No matter what's happening, remember you're a Burn.”

It isn't about whether or not you get knocked down because things happen all the time. It's about your ability to pick yourself back up and learn from it and keep going.

I've always been quite a noisy person. I'm very extroverted and I've always had lots of opinions which, Rob, will come as no surprise to you. But I think the thing that I've learned with age is actually how you make space for other people's opinions, not just your own, and the value of other people.

But that ability to be honest and take the risk and feel that you're doing the right thing and pick yourself back up has always been sort of a thing that has underpinned many of the choices I've made. And sometimes that's been fantastically successful and sometimes it's been a bit of an issue. But I've always felt I had to be able to look at myself in the mirror before I could look at anybody else.

Rob Behrens: So, you were values driven rather than transactional. It sounds as if you didn't know what it was you were aiming for at the very beginning of your career.

Angela MacDonald: Gosh, no. I would love to tell you that I had this fantastic career plan, but if you would have said to me at 17 that the life I'm living now - so for instance, on Friday I was in an away day with all of the permanent secretaries of the Civil Service with, you know, everybody from the Security Services to the Home Office to the Treasury and that I'd be sat in a room as an equal at that table, I would have thought that was the maddest thing you could ever tell me. You know, it just seemed like a whole universe away.

But I think that there is a real challenge that people think that you need to have a big grand plan and that if you make a misstep on that plan - let's say you don't get the right A-levels or let's say you don't go to the right university or let's say you don't get the right first job, that somehow that means the whole of your life is not going to unfold. I'm a big believer in driving forward and taking the opportunities that life presents to you. And being open to those opportunities.

And I think if I hadn't done that then there's no way I would have ended up here. But yes, I think a plan is important sort of directionally, but a plan is not a route march through because there are so many things when you're 17 that you don't even know exists. In fact, I'm not even sure I knew at 17 what the Civil Service was and what a permanent secretary even was to even aspire to it. I'm sure I wouldn't have known what an Ombudsman was when I was 17.

Rob Behrens: Yeah. I think that there are people who are 70 who don't know what an Ombudsman is, and that's one of the challenges that we have. But my final question about this is: Do you feel that you were stereotyped or prejudiced being a young woman aspiring for a career?

Angela MacDonald: Definitely. I spent a while with the tag of gobby, Northern woman. I remember when I very first joined the Civil Service - bearing in mind this is 13 years ago - my boss at the time said you're scaring all the men which I thought was an immensely interesting piece of feedback. And I doubt very much if I was a man - I probably would have been assertive and I would have been told I had great opinions. But: ‘You’re scaring all the men’ - it was an interesting piece of feedback.

What I've learned and reflected on about some of that is actually the reality is that it isn't my gender which is influencing my personality style. I am an extreme extrovert and I've come to learn about myself that I'm an extreme extrovert and that that means I think out loud.

If I'm sitting silent, and if after a while I haven't spoken, it almost feels like a physical pain. I need words to come out of my mouth - no matter what the words are, and those who know me well will know that. I spent quite a lot of time apologising for myself, and then I had a different boss, a fantastic boss, who said, “Actually, the things about you that are naturally you are the reason why you’re successful. So why are you spending so much time trying to convert yourself into somebody else?

“Find the organisation or the boss or the problem that needs a person with your skills and your personality style and go and fit there. Don't try to go for a job and then squash yourself into some other person's version of what good looks like.

“There are so many different jobs. There are enough jobs and diversity to suit every personality style, every need, every desire. Find the fit that's the fit for you.”

That piece of advice has meant that since then I have very consciously sought out bosses who wanted my style, who wanted my skills, who valued me as I am, who weren't going to take me in and go, “That's very lovely but now you're in here, could you just turn into somebody else?” Because I can't do it. And it's also a nightmare for them trying to manage me when I wasn't really what they wanted. So, loving myself and owning my own style has been probably one of the big learns.

Rob Behrens: Did you do this all on your own or did you need mentors to help you?

Angela MacDonald: Oh no, I got support. I got support from different people over different time periods and again sometimes you have these pivotal moments, don't you? So, when I first went to HMRC and I met a colleague for the very first time and you do your introduction. And I said that “I'm Angela and actually I'm a loud person. People can find this about me.” And she said, “Well, I've been working with you now for about six weeks and I haven't seen that. But given that you know yourself better than anybody else this narrative you're projecting about who you are. If that's what you're saying to everybody then you're creating your own reputation before you've even sat down and done anything. Think about the story you tell of yourself as well as the story people tell of you.”

And so that was mind-blowing as one piece of intervention. I then spent the next six months with my coach unpicking that, working out what I thought about it, thinking through what had led me to being that.

And it's probably, you know, I spent from the very youngest age being told to shut up and sit down. So that probably comes from there. But there has been a few interventions from individuals which have

really put a discontinuity into my thought process and then with a coach or with a particular mentor I've really delved into that and unpacked it and worked out what I would do with it as a consequence of that insight.

Rob Behrens: Thank you. That's very interesting. And of course, it's complicated and it's different for everybody.

Angela MacDonald: Of course.

Rob Behrens: But that's why you need help. Seeking help is not a sign of weakness. It's actually a sign of strength.

Angela MacDonald: All of the best people I know have had support because none of us - we all have some natural talent. But the reality is in order to be the best version of ourselves, it's a combination of our experiences, the feedback that we get, our curiosity, how open we are to learning. And I recognise that again, depending upon who you are, you may do that through academic learning or exploring those things on your own. But for an awful lot of people actually that learning and that openness to the differences of how the world works, you get that by interacting with other people, by the feedback that you get, by listening and as I say, being curious. So, I think the people who I see who really succeed, they're created by a community. They're an accumulation of the inputs that they have had. We're never finished, we're always growing.

Rob Behrens: Yeah, I think Ralph McTell, the folk singer, had a lovely line where he said, “I've heard of people like me, but I never made the connection” and it just shows the importance of the dialogue that you're talking about.

Angela MacDonald: Definitely, yes.

Rob Behrens: So, a couple of years ago, as the Ombudsman, we laid a report before Parliament called Making Complaints Count in which we had an in-depth look at how government departments handle complaints across the board, not only in the health service, but in non-health departments. And out of that came a deep concern that there was something fundamentally wrong with the way in which, routinely, government departments were looking at complaints, and we floated the idea of Complaint Standards for government organisations.

And you have been a magnificent supporter of this development, for which we are very grateful, to create a single set of standards across the board. Why do you think this work is so important in terms of your commitment to it?

Angela MacDonald: We in the Civil Service, and I suppose in the broader public sector too, we're here to serve the public and we do that through millions and millions of interactions. And, being realistic, even if we are fantastic 99% of the time, that 1% when you're serving 70 million people is an awful lot of people somewhere. The one thing I can guarantee you is right now as we are recording this conversation, Rob, somewhere across the Civil Service or the broader public sector, something isn't going right somewhere.

A service isn't being delivered, a mistake is being made. Not because we're negligent, but because the Civil Service is peopled by human beings. And the reality is that mistakes happen, problems occur. When those things happen, you do everything you possibly can to prevent it happening, but the reality is how you intervene, how you make a difference, how you rescue and put the situation right, and then how you learn from it. That's what then becomes incredibly important.

And your average citizen doesn't see the divisions and departments and specific bits. The way we name ourselves, the way we put

ourselves together organisationally, they just see government services, or they see local council services, or they see NHS services. They just see services. When we put things right, there should be some commonality, some good way, some sharing of best practice about how we put it right when it goes wrong. In my role as the Cross Government Complaints Champion, having had the opportunity to spend time with the departments large and small, what you realise is that there is massive diversity of experience and capability in those different departments.

So, if you're somebody like HMRC, we're enormous - 65,000 people - and therefore, you know, there's a good several hundred people in the complaints department, they can learn from each other, they can grow from each other, they've got good IT, they can write good letters, it all kind of comes together.

But actually we've got some places where the place is teeny-tiny, and the complaints person is a part-time person who kind of does it for two days a week. That person has very little infrastructure, has very little support. How do we make sure that the customer gets the same experience regardless of the two? I think that what our responsibility is, is of course to do everything we can to avoid problems in the first place. But the mark of who we are is what we do when it goes wrong and there has to be a good-quality consistent way of doing that, that means that you're not at the whim of whether or not somebody's invested in both resources, in their half a person or somebody else's invested resources in 200 or 300 people.

Rob Behrens: OK. That's very interesting. It leads me to ask you this. Why do you think from your experience that the issues you raised are so marginalised in government, so as not to carry the impetus that clearly they do in a minority of departments?

Angela MacDonald: Yeah, I think that the concept of being a customer focused organisation, I still think in bits of the Civil Service is still in its relatively early days now. You might think that's a really weird thing

to say given that we're all, you know, 400,000 are all here to deliver services for the citizen. But, actually, if you think that our big responsibility is to deliver the agenda of the government of the day, that's incredibly important for ministers. It's incredibly important for senior Civil Servants.

And we're here to make sure that the policies are implemented across the broad agenda. We are a customer focused organisation. If we were the private sector, you value your customers more than anything because if you don't give them a good experience, they leave you. They take their business to some other place, you then lose your customers and you go bust and therefore your senior leadership are absolutely obsessed with the customer because it is the only reason you exist if you are, I don't know, a fashion brand or a financial services organisation. It's not the same in the Civil Service. You can't go anywhere else.

Whether we deliver you a fantastic service or a terrible service, you're stuck with us. If you're the HMRC, whether or not you think your taxes are managed well or managed badly, you can't go and get your tax from somewhere else. You're stuck with me. So, you are very limited. You know, you don't have that customer focused ability to take the ultimate sanction, which is to withdraw your custom, which is why so many private sector organisations are so customer obsessed.

I've definitely seen change in the 12 years I've been a civil servant. I definitely think that: ‘The customers aren't going anywhere. So, they've kind of got to put up with what they're putting up with.’ It definitely was - it isn't now - but it was a narrative that I encountered when I first arrived. Having spent 20 years in financial services, just felt like the weirdest and strangest - I couldn't grasp why you could think such a thing. So, I think we are moving.

But I think that some of the levers which drive a customer obsessed environment in the private sector just aren't there in the public sector. So, what you've got to do is, you've got to create a different reason why you should be customer obsessed. Some other motivation for why it's so important that things are done right first time, things

are communicated well and easily to the customer, that things are done in a timely fashion. You've got to help your organisation be motivated because it's the right thing to do and what other financial benefits you get.

And so, for instance, again if I'm in tax world, we want people to be compliant. We want people to pay the tax that's due. We stand a bigger chance of them paying the tax that's due if they understand what we need from them, we take their data in well, when they've got a problem, we help them to solve it, all of which hopefully will result in them paying their tax on time and correctly. And if that doesn't happen then I've got to spend a shed load of money sorting out a compliance intervention to try to sort it out or they don't pay on time. So, I've got to spend money on debt.

So, a really well educated, really well serviced customer is better compliant, which means I don't have to spend money making them compliant. So, there is my case for why great service and great comms equals better tax. You've got to try to create some reason because it isn't the traditional, ‘If you don't, they'll leave you’.

Rob Behrens: Yeah. And included in that, would you agree that the more service users trust a department, the more effective is going to be the relationship between the department and those who use the service and therefore more efficient?

Angela MacDonald: Absolutely. So again, using myself as an example, people are quite intimidated in the main about tax, they worry about that brown envelope dropping on the floor. They worry about getting things wrong and so what that can often do is lead them to ring me up and go: “Is this correct? Have I done it right? Is there a problem?”, which is costing me money because they're ringing me for reassurance or they're ringing, you know: “Did you get that thing I sent you? Have you changed my account? Have you done the right thing?” or “Is this a scam?” Thinking about HMRC, I don't know about you, Rob, but did you receive - it made me laugh when I received the phone call that

said that HMRC had a warrant out for my arrest. And if I didn't press three and hand over £5,000, I was going to be in big trouble. I don't know if you received those scam calls, but that kind of trust and relationship and connection either puts the customer at risk, they can lose their data, they can be scammed. Or it leads to the customer being worried and anxious, which leads to them ringing me, chasing me, double-checking me, which again means I'm spending time and money on those customers as opposed to other customers who might need different kind of a help.

So, there's a big relationship here, which is actually quite complicated and also depends on the topic. So that's my relationship challenge on tax, it's probably something quite different if you're talking to a doctor and having an operation or you're in school and you're talking to education, you know, there's all these different kinds of relationships on the go.

I'm relying on you to deliver this for me because I've got no other choice, there is only you, which is the reality of our situation. And there's a consequence for me if it goes wrong and you've got to build something that we're all confident in.

Rob Behrens: Thank you. When we consulted on the standards across the public service, we found that people in departments are saying to us that they need skills, professional skills, in order to invest properly in complaint standards.

They need the opportunity to share experiences with other departments because, as you say, there's a diversity of practice. And thirdly, they need recognition from their leaders in agencies or departments or trusts that they are part of the core business of the organisation, not some subsidiary or underclass associated with it.

And I've been struck by the times that I've met complaints handlers in private behind closed doors, and they've said to me, “Help! If you don't give us the help, if you don't create the immediacy to explain to our bosses that we are part of a solution to the things that they are interested in. No-one else is going to do it.”

Which of those things do you think is the most difficult to achieve in rolling out the complaint standards?

Angela MacDonald: Gosh. Well, they all bring different complexities, I think. I think that the growing of skills and the sharing of best practice between departments is actually something that a role like mine makes a difference to. One of the big advantages that I have – 'with great power comes, great responsibility,' - is I get a chance to waft my job title at things and that means I get convening power.

And so, I have the ability to bring together the different departments, to bring together the people who can make a difference, to make sure that we're sharing skills. We do quite a lot to try to create through the Cross-Government Complaints Forum, a place by which we can connect different practitioners, large scale or small scale. So, they can learn from each other. It isn't about, 'let's put a training course in'. Lots of these things grow from experience and there's nothing as fantastic as learning from a colleague who does the same job as you somewhere else.

So, I think there's logistics and challenges and you've got to be doing that perpetually to kind of drive that forward.

But whilst that's got logistical challenges, I don't think that's the hardest part. I actually think that the more complicated part of it is how do you become a learning organisation? So, I don't think that leaders wilfully disregard the experience of their customers. I think that all the leaders I meet care passionately about that and I don't think that people ignore complaint numbers either.

But the challenge can be that the complaint numbers are typically relatively small. So, I need to service a million customers. I'm achieving a service standard of 95% and 5% of those customers had a problem. I'd be looking at that and going "Yippee 95% success rate, yeehaw! That's fantastic in all of this great grand scheme of things."

It can be easy to focus on: how do I do the best I can for the mass? I think the real challenge is how do you glean insights, particularly if

the complaint numbers are really small, because one incident isn't a theme or a trend.

So how do you turn that complaint content into something that means that you create a case for change for the leaders so that they can see actually, gosh, over these last 12 months, we regularly seem to be tripping over this, that and the next thing. And it's not a large volume but blimey, it's a drip, drip, drip, month after month.

I think our responsibility as complaint specialists is how do you make the consequences useful? So that what the leadership can see is why actually there's real added value not just because it's the right thing to do, but because actually it will make a material difference to the outcomes. And oddly, I do think that the smaller you are, I think the harder that can be. Because if you're only doing a thousand a year and two of them go wrong, how do you create a theme or a trend? How does that become a learn rather than it was a one off human related mistake? So, the smaller you are, I think the harder that is to pull off.

Rob Behrens: From what you're saying, it's about the rational case for incorporating effective complaint standards in your wider processes.

In Scotland, when they do this, the Ombudsman has a regulatory power to be able to say to departments: “Actually, your complaints process is not good enough because you don't meet the standards we've set out. We are insisting now that you change them.”

Now we don't have that option in England. The government is not interested in that at the moment. Do you think that's a weakness or a strength?

Angela MacDonald: Ah you're leading me into a conversation there, so I am not going to make a comment on the decisions the ministers are making. I can see the opportunity that can come from a regulatory intervention. But to be honest, if the only way a department or an organisation makes a change is because they've been regulatorily pushed into it, we'll get

the outcome, but I'm not sure that means we've necessarily won the intellectual war here.

The real win is it takes people like me and people in my position - because unless we firmly believe - picking up on what I said earlier in the power of the customer being important - even if the customer can't leave us and that there is depth of learning to be had in not just fixing the cases for individual customers, but also for the themes and insight about what that tells you about not just the customer experiences but the costs, the hidden costs, the downsides and consequences, the compensation that you pay. All of this is costing taxpayers money when those things go wrong. I think it's up to us to pull that towards us as the leadership community.

I definitely know there are some things across an array of topics that you do because you're regulatorily obliged to do it. But I don't think you can create a customer environment because you're regulatorily obliged to do it. I think you've got to do it because that's the culture that pervades your organisation and you ruthlessly pursue that from top to bottom.

Over my 12 years, I'm increasingly seeing that pull of what it's like to be a citizen here, what it's like to be a customer. What are the gaps? What are the customer experiences? What are we learning? I'm seeing that blossoming and blossoming. I'm not saying that there aren't patches where there's more to be done and maybe that might be the place you would convince ministers that 80% will do it because it's the right thing to do and I need something to help me with the 20% who won't, if Pareto applies.

And maybe that's where we get to, but I would hate to think that the only reason we really grabbed hold of this agenda was because we were worried that you were going to come and knock on the door. We've not grasped it, if that's where we have to end up.

Rob Behrens: Yeah, I think that's a good answer. And I wasn't trying to get you to embarrass your ministers. Because when I was at the OIA, the Higher Education Ombudsman, we delivered this initiative between

universities and the Ombudsman without any regulation whatsoever. So, I do take your point that it's making the case from the customer perspective or the user perspective, which is critical here.

Angela MacDonald: But I do wonder, though, Rob, whether or not there is anything interesting to learn from the Scottish experience about whether or not it has accelerated things, or how frequently it's had to be used. We might not be doing it ourselves, but I'm always curious as to see how other models work. So maybe it's a set of questions I should ask.

Rob Behrens: Well, I think you know what's interesting about Scotland is that they have a Public Service Ombudsman. Complaint standards don't just apply to central government or to one functional area. They apply across the board. The potential for learning is much wider.

But they can do that because they're smaller in terms of size. So they don't need a large central body to monitor this in a way that perhaps we do, so that brings me on towards the end.

But this is important too. How do you think this initiative, which seems to be very popular - I mean we're not pushing against closed doors here. I had wondered whether it would be interesting and acceptable to people, and I've found that actually this is an idea which has been coming for a long time and people are very pleased with it, which is good. And thanks to your initiatives and the support of being the Complaints Champion that's accelerated. But what's the best way of monitoring it so that we can continue to adjust it and get it right?

Angela MacDonald: I think what we really need to reflect for ourselves, given that we've now got some traction, and this is something I think both you and I play a role in, is how will we how will we measure our success.

So if this lands as we want it to land, how will we know? And I don't think there's one answer to that question. And again, it depends, because some departments, some groups, already live to these

standards or have successfully been doing it for a while. This is no major change for them. They will carry on and it's easy to adopt. For others this is going to be a massive hill to climb and a big change.

I don't think it's about volumes of complaints because life moves on and there's always something going wrong somewhere. But I think we need to decide how will we measure and understand whether or not that we are in fact getting the improvements. And is that qualitative research? Is it quantitative research? Is it the whole of government or is it actually the particular areas, groups, departments where it did feel like there was a bigger hill to climb? And I think that's from the perspective of the customer.

And then I think that there is also an insight and what we need to be reflecting back on from the colleagues concerned because ideally I don't want anybody feeling that they've got to ask you to come and intervene on their behalf. By a department agreeing to these standards, I'm hoping to miss out that part. I'm hoping that actually somebody like me can say to departments, “Are you delivering against the standards?” And the executive will need to be able to play back whether they are or they aren't in the different places without the individual junior colleague feeling like it's all on them.

We shouldn't take for granted that just because we put a standard out that the gulf will be bridged. There will definitely be some follow through, but I think what we need to do is to work out how we focus that.

Because the risk is - let's take a department like mine. Let's take DWP. Given the volume of customers that we deal with, we are majority of the cases that you would see from a non-NHS perspective. If we're not careful we'll go “Yippee! This is what it looks like for the majority of customers.” Yeah, but it wasn't the 80% who were already there that were the challenge. It was the 20% where you might see a case once a year or you might see a particular trend very rarely. Those are the ones where we need to do some checking in and say, “How can we help? How are you managing to implement? Is there anything that we need to do?”

And that I think will be partly about the insight that you will gain from the conversations and the interactions you have, and the complaints and it will also be partly the insights I will gain through my Complaints Forum, through the conversations I'm regularly having with the other second permanent secretaries across the departments who are in the main jobs like mine, which are the operational running of the departments. I think between us we will gain it through, but ideally because we've set a clear view that says we'll know this is working when we see A happening rather than B happening, I think we've got to articulate that out so that everybody can see it.

Rob Behrens: Thank you for illustrating that this has to be a collaborative exercise. This is not something that the Ombudsman can wave a magic wand and say, “You need to be doing this, chaps,” and it'll all be alright. It's got to be interactive. It's got to be based on real life experience and sharing good practice and less good practice in a in a way which is helpful.

And people have got to see that it's not over-bureaucratised and it's something there for a continuing good reason. So I'm very grateful to you for what you're doing. You are a key pillar in this project.

I want to end this conversation - I don't want to end it, but I have to - by asking you to reflect on 30 years of experience of service delivery, transformation and change in public and private sectors. There are lots of young people, young graduates, listening to this programme who are thinking of embarking on a career in public service. What advice would you give to them?

Angela MacDonald: Well, I would say it is an incredibly exciting and diverse environment. There is not a profession or a topic that you cannot flourish in in the Civil Service. Whether you want to do comms, whether you want to do digital, whether you want to be an accountant or an HR professional. Whether you're interested in the

environment or the future of renewable energies. All of those things are available to you in the Civil Service.

So I think we should see the Civil Service as a massive opportunity. Whilst that might be pursuing a career in Whitehall, actually the majority of the Civil Servants are not in Whitehall, they're across the UK. You can get to the top of the Civil Service like me and live and base yourself in Yorkshire. There is more to the Civil Service than the world of SW1 - and not that it is not a fantastic place down there also.

See the opportunity and the breadth of opportunity. I'd probably reflect Rob on the conversation I had with my son. My son's 26. I'm here in Sheffield today, he was at Sheffield University for four years and when he was coming out of university, he stressed enormously about what that first job was going to be.

If he didn't make the right choice, if he didn't get into the right place if it wasn't the right thing then that was it. He was going to have set himself off in the wrong direction, and he was going to be all over the place and we had quite a lot of conversation about that thing that says 'The most important thing is just to start'.

Because how can you possibly know at 18 when you leave school, or at 21 or 22 when you leave university, you can never know, no matter how good the careers department of your educational institution is, you can never know all the opportunities. You can never know what things life is going to offer you, but you've got to be in it to win it. So, get out there and get started.

And then make the most of the chances that come. Be curious. Take the opportunity. If it doesn't work, if it turns out to have been a completely wrong choice, the world doesn't end, just do something else.

That fear that you're going to make a wrong and you're going to make a misstep - it's really, really understandable. But actually, here was I fluffing my A levels at 17 and here I am now at 51 leading the largest government department. All things are possible in life. Just

be open to those opportunities and gosh you're going to make mistakes. That's fine. Learn from them and carry on.

Rob Behrens: Thank you. All my guests on Radio Ombudsman are special. But you are especially special. It's been an absolute delight to talk to you. Inspiring, educational, funny. Northern based. Everything we would want. I'm grateful for what you're doing. Everyone will be grateful to have had the opportunity to listen to you. So, Angela, thank you. This is Rob Behrens signing off from Radio Ombudsman. Take care.