00:00:03

[Susanna Goldschmidt]

So, hi everyone and thank you for joining us this afternoon. What we'd like to talk to you about today is the research foundation for the new digital experience called Me Air that we've created on our digital platform and that we'll be offering for our latest courses which are coming out this year. Me Air was developed by listening to English teachers and we'd like to talk you through the innovative co creation research that we did with teachers like yourselves that led us to develop the new tools and features that we're bringing out. The research enabled us to develop a solution designed for the reality of the classroom. And we've just been hearing about that reality, which is such a wonderful introduction to our session and with the aim of supporting you in delivering impactful teaching and developing motivated learners.

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So our starting point for thinking about MI AIR was a design thinking approach. So for those of you who aren't familiar with design thinking, I've got a quote for you which helps describe what it is. And this quote is from Tim Brown, who's the CEO of ideo, which is the global design and consulting firm that developed the design thinking technique originally. And he says design thinking is a human centered approach to innovation that draws from the designer's toolkit to integrate the needs of people, the possibilities of technology and the requirements for business success. So it really puts people at the heart of the solution that you're creating.

And this is very much what we did with Metair. Working in cross functional teams, we tried to understand our user needs and create solutions to address them. In our case, obviously that meant understanding what English teachers need to do in order to deliver successful lessons in their classrooms. Without further ado, I'm going to hand over to Lou who's going to talk us through the stages of the research we did.

00:01:44

[Louise Wilks]

Great.

Thanks Susa. Just share my screen.

So, hello everyone. I am going to very briefly take you back to 2020 very early on in the pandemic, because this is where the Me Air journey began. So obviously it was a time of change for all of us. Macmillan offices closed so suddenly we were all working from home, but teachers and learners. It was a significant change and so we kind of very quickly wanted to get feedback from our teachers.

So we sent a survey out in April 2020. The feedback we received from two and a half thousand teachers was that nine in ten of them were using digital tools to support the teaching way more than before, which wasn't a surprise due to the kind of changing nature of the pandemic, but more than half told us that they were struggling with distance

teaching and learning. So our initial priority was creating short term solutions to support teachers at that time. And what we did was put together some qualitative research panels. This was with a number of teachers across four different markets.

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And it meant that we could check in with them at different times just to see how things were going, the challenges they were facing, and so on. And what was interesting for us that all our research went from being more or less completely face to face, at least our quality of research, to to online. And we were using very similar tools to many of you in your teaching in that we were using zoom to do interviews and focus groups.

So we recruited our teachers and then ran three stages of interviews, initially across a seven month period. And it was an interesting time. And honestly, these initial interviews were almost like therapy sessions both for my team and the teachers we were speaking to. I think we were all struggling, all encountering very new experiences. But what we did find were that our teachers were started off kind of not so confident necessarily about using digital tools more and more, but actually as the pandemic progressed, started to become more and more confident and highlighted to us that they were actually even starting to enjoy using to support teaching at times.

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We also ran a survey again with more than 2,000 respondents. And at that time, most teachers were really rating themselves as more competent in different digital skills. But as our teachers digital skills skyrocketed, this obviously led to lots of other challenges for both teachers and learners. And Suzy is going to speak to you about these because this led very much to the next stage of our research. And when the development for me air really ramped up.

[Susanna Goldschmidt]

Thanks, Lou.

So back to our design thinking framework. We really wanted to dig into understanding our teacher needs. And so in a series of focus groups which were run online, as Lou described, we really started to engage in what was happening in the classroom. And a pretty consistent picture came out of that. We started to hear about a lot of resources in published courses that were not very intuitive and certainly not very engaging.

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We heard a lot from teachers who felt that the content and the format of the resources they had access to was a bit repetitive and the activities were too predictable. We found that the topics covered in the traditional courses they were using seem to lack relevance to students lives and interests and indeed could even put them off studying English. We heard a lot about learner variability and as Laura has described, how challenging it is to teach different ability levels and above all, students who have increasingly short attention spans. And we also heard about a fear of speaking which was only reinforced by the digital world in which everyone's living, which means that so many interactions are online rather

than face to face. And then on the teacher side, we heard a lot about workload, about how hard it is to find motivating resources at the right level.

Publishers provide lots of materials and certainly did and do, but they were often in lots of different disparate places and it was hard to find exactly what they needed. And it took time to learn digital tools. And I thought was really interesting, the research that Laura just shared with us from Gloria Mark about interrupted work. And I found myself thinking of those teachers who were desperately kind of looking, chopping and changing between different places and trying to find things all over the place. This was a message that we heard loud and clear.

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And you can see that borne out in these quotes from the participants in our research. More digital means more work. Attention spans are shorter than ever. Students are really shy and timid. And these are all real challenges that teachers were facing in the classroom.

So for us, it was time to reframe the problem and think about what we could start doing to address it. So really we wanted at this stage in our research process to validate what we'd heard and to check that we were understanding everything correctly. So we went back out to different groups of teachers and maybe we've got some of you online today, in which case, thank you so much for joining us. So we wanted to dig further into key challenges and we asked about the type of support that teachers wanted to see to help solve the problems they were facing. And to do this, we used a visual workspace and online whiteboard platform tool, miro, which enabled us to do real time collaboration and brainstorming.

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And this was one of those interesting moments where tools from the kind of design world fused over into the world of research and indeed teaching. And here you can see on screen the output of some of those workshops that we did, those co creation workshops with teachers, our facilitators, as you can see, kind of clustered the issues that came up in conversation into different categories. The challenges faced around, planning around delivery, assessments, support and other areas. And then the equivalent also for teachers on the left here, and then the challenges that students face as well on the right hand side. And as one teacher brilliantly put it, it feels like you have to become more and more creative.

You have to spend more and more time looking for different activities that are dynamic, because with each generation, each cohort that they teach, you need something different. And this was very much the issue that we were Hearing. And I think it chimes very well with what Laura was describing about this need for constant motion. You always need more and more activity. We heard strongly in the research we did too.

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And yeah, and finally this need to try and get closer to the real world and reproduce a world that's recognisable to children and not just a virtual, distant, non reality. So, yeah. So in summary, teachers wanted us to give them more up to date, dynamic resources they were hoping for. Resources that would help them immerse their students in real learning situations and give them real opportunities for practicing English that would really chime with them and really, really correspond to the real world that they live in. Give them engaging and motivating projects.

And now thinking about Laura's comments about engagement and the need not only to engage, but also to slow down and learn, that's really what project based learning gives you, isn't it? Gives you a chance to go slower and to engage those critical thinking skills. And finally teaching suggestions and ideas based in best practices to enrich lessons and also to provide you guys with opportunities for professional growth. So then we moved into the ideating phase, which you can see coming up here. And to.

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To come up with different ideas and creative solutions to address these problems. We wanted to employ both a divergent thinking style and a convergent thinking style. And for anyone who's familiar with design thinking, and I know it's, it's a framework that's also suggested for projects in some of our own courses. Divergent thinking is like madness with method. It's where you try to come up with a high quantity of ideas, but you're not too judgmental about them.

It's like brainstorming and you can worry about critical evaluation later. You're trying here to be disruptive and do lateral thinking. And then later convergent thinking is what you employ to kind of cut down the number of ideas you have to reduce the options and focus on the ones that you think have got the most potential. And at this stage, we brought in the help of some consultants to help us on this creative thinking journey. And we did a series of thought experiments that you can see kind of depicted on this slide here.

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So first of all, we thought about what was really crucial, what were the crucial problems that teachers really wanted us to solve. So that was defining our escape room. How are we going to get out of here? How are we going to solve this problem? And then the particles of our universe we imagined, what are the things that we at Macmillan have got that will help us to address These challenges.

We've obviously got different types of content, we've got course structures, we've got lesson plans, all of those different things that we offer. And then we looked at all of those wonderful post it notes that teachers had shared with us in the focus groups that we ran. And we had a Walt Disney moment. We asked ourselves, if we lived in a fantasy world and we could do anything, what would we do? And then again, we brought it back to reality.

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We thought of Confucius who said, if you chased two rabbits, you will catch neither. So we really tried to home in on what we thought were the absolute key things that we focus

on. And that's what enabled us to define our targets and to what we called unlock our code. So define what were the elements, what were the different parts of the solution that we thought we could weave into every course that we publish in the future. And that leads us to the ideas that we're about to present.

So over to you again, Louis.

[Louise Wilks]

Thanks, Susan.

So as Susie highlighted, we, after having all those internal sessions. Oh, sorry, can you see my screen? Okay, not yet. No, no. Oh, sorry, sorry.

Can you see it now?

[Susanna Goldschmidt]

Yes, now.

[Louise Wilks]

Fantastic.

[Susanna Goldschmidt]

Thank you.

[Louise Wilks]

So, yeah, as Susie highlighted, after having all of those internal sessions, we came up with all sorts of ideas to kind of support the challenges that teachers had highlighted.

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And we held a series of online focus groups in again because the idea here was that we wanted to go back to our teachers and make sure that these ideas really suited the reality of the ELT classroom. We came up with lots of ideas and then what we did was invite participants to focus groups and we wanted them to really fast forward three years into the future to 2024, because this took place in 2021. And we introduced a series of characters to our teachers, including our kind of star character, our lead, Maria, an ELT teacher. And she was using a range of resources to support her and her students in teaching and learning English. And what we did was talk our teachers through a day in the life of Maria.

At this point, we shared lots of different kind of ideas for resources. I'll share some examples with you here and kind of how the feedback from our teachers really influenced the development of them. But there were lots, there were some that kind of have been developed and will become part of MIA and others that weren't seen as so suitable that we kind of scrapped. But the first example I want to discuss with you is Dynamic Resources. So the idea of this is that it would support the challenge of student engagement and

motivation and the fact that Resources can sometimes really lack relevance and not be so so relevant to students interests.

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Dynamic Resources is something that would be kind of up to date, added to the platform, kind of at different times and be kind of really related to for example a recent news story or a trending video. So kind of really up to date resources that hopefully would be in line with students interests. We shared some examples with our teachers and the feedback was that this would keep lessons fresh and interesting and would be a break from the kind of regular routine content to get students engaged. It would also reduce teacher workload, which was our intention because we know that teachers are going online searching for all sorts of content to keep lessons fresh. And the idea is that this would be available to them on the platform.

Other feedback was that this content was changed frequently enough to remain relevant, but not so frequently that teachers have kind of inundated with new content every day. Other feedback was that teachers would like supporting lesson notes so that it wasn't just the content. And again, this would save them time to be able to incorporate any content into the lessons. And they really liked the idea of a range of media types to support different learning styles. So as a result of the research, the content for Dynamic Resources will be updated monthly and it will be related to really recent online resources and it will be supported by lesson plans.

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This is a brief quote from a teacher during this research. So if the lesson is related to the latest news, she felt that this would engage students and be fun.

As Suzy and I never like to miss an opportunity to do further research and we've got quite a few of you on this webinar. If there are any topics that you feel students would be really interested in for the Dynamic Resources, remember that the idea is that they're kind of quite new and updated and related to students interests. If you could drop any ideas that you come up with in the chat, we'll collate this afterwards and you never know that that might be our next development in the ME platform.

The next example I want to share with you is Global Schools. So again, the idea of this was that it would support student engagement and motivation and really give learning English a clear purpose. It would be a global network of online schools where we matched classes together. They were teaching the same courses and it would give the idea whether it would give students real opportunities to practice English in a real context, to really kind of give learning a clear purpose. The feedback on this was that it was kind of the biggest wow factor.

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It was what the it was the area that gained the highest Rating of everything that we showed during the research, our teachers felt it would potentially be very motivating and enriching for students because they could really put into practice what they've learned in a real

context with real people and other students also learning English. The idea initially was that it'd be mainly synchronous communication, so live conversations or live presentations, for example, again, all online. But the feedback from our teachers was that while this would be pretty engaging for some students, they would really like to have the opportunity or the option for asynchronous communication as well, because it would reduce things like the admin potentially required with connecting at the same time, aligning schedules, et cetera, and also mean that all students felt that they would be involved. So the kind of shy of students who will be less likely to speak wouldn't be kind of left behind if they had the opportunity to share some written communication with their peers. And also being matched with schools was seen as quite a big selling point because we know exchanges already exist.

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But teachers spoke of how it's quite challenging to find other schools that were kind of with students teaching a similar course and similar level of English. So the changes following the research is that global schools will include both any synchronous and synchronous approach to really give you the option. Depending on your students, it'll be monthly swaps and cultural exchanges. And the idea is that there'll be no extra teacher preparation needed to really make it as kind of realistic as possible that you can fit something like this into your lessons.

Another quote was that global schools would open up public possibilities for students to put into practice what they've learned. And again, it's about this kind of real communication, real opportunities to use English.

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Another example is the teacher zone. This was to meet the challenge that Susie highlighted, that a lot of teachers have mentioned to us that publishing materials are often in lots of different places and they can struggle to locate them. And it's also about the challenge with teaching different ability levels in one class. The idea with the teacher zone is that you'd have all your resources in one place and they'd also be easy to search for so that you could easily find them. And it'll include things like lesson plans, teaching ideas, and also professional development opportunities.

Again, the feedback was that it was essential to have everything in one place. Our teachers generally felt that lesson plans would save them time. Most, however, would like customise them to align with their specific class needs or maybe institutional requirements. And we also observed that lots of individual teachers planned in very different ways into different levels of detail. And so the idea was that these plans would really need to be kind of very adaptable, complete, but also concise.

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Teachers generally like the idea of the opportunity of professional development, but time did come up with something that was potentially a barrier for this. So following the research, the lesson plans will be very much ready to use adaptable. These are related to the course content, but they'll be focused very much on kind of supporting varied learning

styles and needs. And also the planning tools will be combined with professional development. And these will be kind of quick, practical teaching tips to allow you to kind of incorporate these on the go.

But also more kind of extensive professional development as well to cover kind of, if you, whether you, how much time basically you've got for professional development.

Another quote, planning takes a long time, so it'll be great to have support.

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Another element is gamification, and this is again about supporting students with kind of keeping them engaged and motivated. And the solution was something that would turn practice into a game with points, badges and leaderboards. And the feedback was generally that gamification would engage and motivate students. But there was some mixed feedback about the competitive element in that some teachers felt that some students would be really motivated by the idea of kind of points, badges, leaderboards, etc. But that others might potentially feel left behind, especially if maybe their English level at the moment was a little lower, for example.

And so as a result of this, the point system very much rewards effort, persistence and accuracy rather than being purely based on academic performance.

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And again, a quote here that many children are finding traditional lessons boring and they prefer to do more gamified exercises. So I've spoken about some of the examples that we shared that after kind of tweaking based on feedback from teachers will be part of Metair. But as I mentioned, there were lots of different ideas. Not absolutely everything appealed. There were some ideas that teachers didn't feel would really be suitable for the reality of the ELT classroom.

One example was mel, which was our Macmillan Education Learning AI powered personal teaching assistant. While most teachers felt that having an assistant would potentially free up the time because the idea was that MEL would provide kind of suggestions, update them about their timetable and support them in lots of different ways. But there were, because it was kind of an AI powered thing, there were lots of fears about teachers potentially losing autonomy and control, the kind of loss of the human aspect. I remember one teacher describing MEL as scary, another as very kind of futuristic. And there was a sense of nervousness about Teachers becoming kind of too dependable on AI.

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So unfortunately Mel was kind of scrapped. Not literally because we didn't actually make Mel, but yeah, she didn't make the cut. So Mel won't be part of me air as a result of the feedback. And we've got a couple of quotes here. In one, you'd be handing over your vocation to a machine.

Another that teach a concern that teachers might become too dependable on the AI. Gabby, would you be able to load the poll please? Because what is quite interesting to me

when we look back at this, this is in 2021, AI was not so prevalent in our lives at all. And then since then, it's obviously become something that some teachers and probably a lot of students are using on almost a daily basis. So it would be interesting to hear from you whether you do share these concerns still about having an AI powered personal assistant.

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So we've got the poll there that Gabby's loaded. But also if you can put any comments about your reasons why in the chat, it'd be interesting for us to see this.

And then I'll hand back over to Susie now to move on to highlight the next stage of the research.

[Susanna Goldscmidt]

Great, thanks, Lou.

So yes, we were then obviously moving into the business part of the of the project, if I can put it that way. So the part of the project where we would actually need to design and create our solution. And in this as before, we wanted to involve yourselves as much as we feasibly could to ensure that we were going in the right direction. So here are some of the early prototypes that we developed. And these were really kind of designed to bring the concepts to life, but they weren't intended to be the final design.

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So you can see an early idea for what the teacher zone would look like with the resources top left and then this is the progress tracker with data visualizations in the middle at the bottom and then on the right you can see that professional development area with Mel, who was still part of the design at this stage. And we received a lot of useful commentary on this that you can see on screen, which helped us to iterate these designs and to improve on them further. And this is the current look and feel that we're working on. And here what we're looking at are some prototypes. So these are wire, we call them wireframes.

So early draft versions of what the interface design will look like. And we're really continuing to validate these and check in with teachers throughout to ensure that we're getting them right and that they're really usable, very easy to use is one of our. The cornerstones of the experience we're trying to achieve. And what you can see on screen here in the bottom right, actually is a user testing platform that we use to use to carry out that testing with teachers around the world online. But it's interesting to reflect how day to day the use of tools like this one is even not just for talking with teachers, also for delivering lessons and having webinars like this one.

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So they've really kind of taken over the whole of our process and it's really helped us facilitate this type of research. And you can see again here, here are some more screens of us talking with teachers online during usability testing. And in the bottom right, a teacher is performing a series of tasks for us. You can see she's on step 29 there, which

helps us to see how easy it is and how possible it is to achieve the desired outcome with the design that we're creating. So this helps us to make sure that what we're building really meets your needs.

And that's very much part of an ongoing dialogue. So even after the features are launched and you'll be able to access them on new generation of courses coming out from Macmillan Education from this year onwards. But even post launch, we'll continue with this close collaboration with yourselves and we're very eager to work with you. We'll say a few words about that later, but we continue to gather customer comments at every opportunity to listen and observe. And thank you to those who've hosted us in your schools.

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We're always very grateful when we have that opportunity to see you in action. Using resources in live lessons that enables us to iterate on our designs, to refine what we've built, make changes to our interface where necessary, and indeed to continue to improve what we're able to offer you.

[Louise Wilks]

Yeah, and I think from mine and Susie's perspective, the key message that we really want you to go away with is how important it is for teachers, for us to hear from teachers and for them to input at every stage of everything we develop. And we've always done lots of research at Macmillan Education, but I think I've been here for eight years and I think as time's gone, we do more and more research and get feedback from teachers at every stage. I think what's changed since this whole research around me air is that we get feedback not just on kind of a print sample unit, which used to be mainly our focus and the digital was very much separate, but now Everything is incorporated and we focus on kind of validating a unit experience to really kind of represent the reality of the, of the. Of how teachers are going to be using the solutions. So you've got some examples here.

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And as Susie's highlighted, we get. We continuously carried on doing research. It didn't end with the pandemic. We've. We're constantly getting feedback from our teachers and as Susie mentioned, we're very, very keen to hear from anyone who would be interested in participating.

So we've included a QR code here. So if you've heard this and you think you would be interested in participating in any of our research. Gabby's also put a link in the chat, but, yeah, if you could fill in this form and we'd love to get in touch with you about potentially participating. We're doing projects all of the time, so there's usually some opportunity for you to get involved. Thank you very much.

00:28:52

[Will Rixon]

Thank you, you two, very much.

[Louise Wilks]

Thanks, Will. Thank you.

[Will Rixon]

Gary, can we keep that QR code for a bit, if you don't mind?

Look at all those emojis.

[Susanna Goldschmidt]

Oh, wow, that's a lovely reaction. Thanks, everybody. Oh, we're really glad you enjoyed it.

[Louise Wilks]

Yes, thank you so much.

[Will Rixon]

Isn't it great? So you've seen. There have been. I don't know if you've seen it. There are lots of comments in the chat, so we can, we can look at them later, I think, to see people's reactions to what you're saying.

And we've had sort of, lots of kind of comments about it. People, I think, just, you know, rather just generally saying they, they like the idea of AI, but they are just kind of worried about it being used in the wrong way, I think we can say. But we have to consider the context of our students and their learning style as well. So maybe one eye doesn't. One AI doesn't fit.

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All sort of response and perhaps some just trepidation that AI is sort of quite publicly not used responsibly. Very, you know, a lot of the time and people just being a bit sort of wary just to make sure that it is being used responsibly and it's being done for the right reasons as well.

[Louise Wilks]

Yeah, most definitely.

[Will Rixon]

So they're asking if this is going to be available with all textbooks, do you mind just explaining a little bit more about how it's available, how widely it's going to be available?

[Susanna Goldschmidt]

Absolutely. So some of the features that we just showed you, those that did make the cut, so things like global Schools and the new Teacher Zone, which is the area where you can

find resources, will be available with the new generation of courses that we're publishing from this year. So any course that's.

Any Macmillan education course that's coming out from say, July onwards, for which you're able to start seeing samples very soon, will have these features. The features, however, will be on the ME platform, which is our existing digital platform. So the same place that you already go to for all of your resources.

00:30:55

[Will Rixon]

Thanks, Susie. Any literature that teachers can read to sort of get themselves a bit more clued up on AI in education or anything along those lines?

[Susanna Goldschmidt]

I believe we've published a couple of white papers, haven't we, Lou, that are very relevant to this.

[Louise Wilks]

Yeah, yeah, that's true, actually. Yeah, on.

I think they're on the Insights Index page maybe, but yeah, no, we've. We've definitely published. Not Susie and I personally, but Macmillan have definitely published some white papers around that.

[Susanna Goldschmidt]

So we can share the links with you, I'm sure.

[Louise Wilks]

Yeah.

[Will Rixon]

Right now, there we go. That's the Insights index page. There are definitely some insights to be had on there. You can also register to be part of the Insights Index as well.

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[Louise Wilks]

I saw someone was asking about the Insights into Index program.

Basically, if you sign up, there are. We do research in lots of different ways and we usually, depending on whether it's a specific course, reach out to kind of teachers in specific markets or teachers and students in different ages. And you'll also kind of receive some of

our insights. We do lots of white papers and put together some research based information as well. So that's what the program is.

[Will Rixon]

Lovely. Thanks, Liam. All right, I think that's you're done. You can take a break. I think we'll see you in about five hours or so.

Thanks a lot.

[Louise Wilks]

Thanks, Will. Thank you so much, everyone. Bye bye.