

Reform of Australian Government Administration – Northern Territory Public Sector Response

Summary

The Northern Territory Public Sector (NTPS) strongly encourages the direction of the proposed reforms of Australian Government administration, and offers assistance in further discussions of possible reform directions and future implementation.

To assist in a way forward, the NTPS suggests a number of areas for collaborative effort, which are summarised in a table in response to Chapter 9 – Next Steps.

Introduction

The NTPS response has been prepared following an invitation to comment on the discussion paper entitled *Reform of Australian Government Administration: building the world's best public service*.

This response draws on discussions with a range of NTPS employees, and broader stakeholders, with direct and recent experiences in working on policy development and service delivery activities with the Australian Public Service (APS).

As noted by the Advisory Group, many of the challenges and opportunities raised in the discussion paper are shared by other jurisdictions. This is arguably none more so than for the NTPS, which is presented with significant challenges particularly in the areas of remote service delivery, Indigenous disadvantage and capacity constraints.

In the interests of brevity and prioritisation, responses have not been provided to every specific question posed in the discussion paper but have instead focused on the areas of greatest interest for the NTPS.

The NTPS recognises that successful reform, through initiatives such as those outlined in the discussion paper, will require committed efforts from the APS as well as from state and territory jurisdictions and other stakeholders. Perhaps most importantly, genuinely collaborative and flexible approaches must be applied if creative policy development and innovative service delivery is to be practical and sustainable across all jurisdictions.

Responses

Chapters 1 and 2 – The Public Sector and Challenges

The APS' role has certainly evolved significantly over time. While the debate about the division of roles and responsibilities between the Australian Government and state and territory governments is perennial, it is worthwhile recognising that state and territory governments, local government and non-government organisations are important if the APS is to achieve its goals. This recognition is consistent with recent positive reforms in new COAG arrangements through National Partnership Agreements.

The statistical snapshot of the APS paints a very interesting picture. Of most note to the NTPS, 75 per cent of the APS senior executive service are located in the Australian Capital Territory, and yet 63 per cent of APS employees are located outside the Australian Capital Territory. The importance of this is the very real risk that jurisdictional differences are not fully understood during the deliberative processes of policy development and service delivery design.

There is some confusion about the distinct roles, responsibilities and decision-making authority between central offices and regional offices of the APS. Clarifying this would enhance collaborative efforts between the APS and other jurisdictions. Based on NTPS experiences, the most effective collaborations have occurred where the local knowledge within regional offices, in a service delivery context, has been sought during the development of policies and programs, with some flexibility for further refinement during implementation.

The representation of Indigenous people remains very low in the APS, as it is in the NTPS, which is of obvious concern as far as joint initiatives in the areas of remote service delivery and broader engagement with Indigenous Australians.

The views and attitudes of APS employees are broadly consistent with those recently surveyed in the NTPS. The highest rating results for the NTPS were in the areas of community service and fairness and an apolitical, impartial and ethical service. The lowest rating results were in the areas of employment based on merit, fair internal review systems and managing performance.

The nature of the challenges facing the APS outlined in the discussion paper is generically applicable to the NTPS environment: increasing complexity of policy challenges, increasing public expectations, demographic change, technological change, globalisation and financial pressures. More specifically for the NTPS environment, the following challenges are worth noting:

- Indigenous disadvantage – The well-being of Indigenous Australians is arguably the most complex 'wicked problem' in public policy today. While the signs are positive from the recent Remote Service Delivery National Partnership Agreement, decades of extensive research and new approaches have yet to stem poor outcomes for Indigenous Australians, particularly in regional and remote areas.

- Financial pressures – The financial pressures from the global financial crisis are expected to be even greater in the NT than other jurisdictions due to the greater reliance proportionally on GST revenues. This impact will be further exacerbated on the NTPS due to the higher per capita cost of providing infrastructure and services to regional and remote areas, well beyond 'efficient' service delivery cost models based on more populous jurisdictions.

Chapters 3 and 4 – Aspirations and Values

The five characteristics of a highly performing public service noted in the discussion paper are certainly commendable including public trust and putting the citizen first. However, consistent with an earlier point, it may also be worthwhile recognising more explicitly that state and territory governments, local governments and non-government organisations play important roles for the APS to achieve its goals. Perhaps the addition of terminology such as 'collaborative', 'outward-looking' and/or 'partnerships' would promote affirmative action.

A values-driven culture that retains public trust is critical for all public services. The NTPS agrees that the current APS values could be streamlined and rationalised into a smaller number that is more memorable and easier to embed in organisational cultures. While some might argue that the task would be near impossible, the merits of developing a generic set of core values that might be agreed across all public services could be explored.

Chapter 5 – Forward Looking and Creative

The new COAG arrangements through National Partnership Agreements will facilitate creativity and innovation through being outcome focused. The early signs are very positive, particularly the joint Regional Operations Centres established under the Remote Service Delivery National Partnership Agreement. More tangible benefits are expected as the cultures of the participating public services adapt to the new model and relationships mature.

However, the National Partnership Agreements model should ensure an outcomes focus, maintaining sufficient flexibility to allow state and territory governments appropriate customisation in managing inputs and reporting.

The NTPS fully supports the proposed initiatives to improve policy formulation and integration and in particular the strategic policy hubs concept including cross-sector diversity of input and a presence outside Canberra. The introduction of a charter of policy making principles is also supported, perhaps applying a similar approach to a recent example from the United Kingdom, The Compact, which was developed jointly by their Cabinet Office and Treasury equivalents.

The recognised need for workforce capability building initiatives in the APS is perhaps even more essential for the NTPS, which has a lower median length of service and smaller replacement pools. The proposed deepening of the relationship with institutions such as ANZSOG is strongly encouraged.

In support of improving collaboration between the APS and the NTPS, and to assist workforce capability building and a richer variety of experiences across jurisdictions, it would be useful to explore the development of an applied learning experience in developing effective policy settings for regional and remote service delivery, based in the Northern Territory, which could be delivered through ANZSOG. Such a program would deliver a rich and practical experience, particularly for public service executives whose careers have focused solely on urban-based policy making activities, and present opportunities to improve the delivery of services at all scales.

Chapter 6 – Effective and Citizen-Centred

To better connect policy development to service delivery, the NTPS supports a more citizen-centred approach including involving communities and service recipients in design and implementation options. A recent joint initiative under the Remote Service Delivery National Partnership Agreement, proposed service hubs (integrated one-stop shops) in Territory Growth Towns will improve engagement and empowerment in remote communities, maximising a collaborative approach between the APS and NTPS. There may be value in considering the use of such groups more widely in specific areas where multi-skilled groups work together over a defined period to develop policy implementation strategies and enhance the delivery of services.

With overlapping responsibilities and initiatives between the APS and NTPS, and occasionally within the APS between national and state and territory offices, role confusion, miscommunication and community perceptions of disjointed services can easily develop. Drawing on a number of very positive examples of APS and NTPS collaborations, establishing clarity and a common understanding about the respective roles, responsibilities and accountabilities is vital to effective outcomes, as is maintaining strong relationships between relevant senior executives from both services.

Chapters 7 and 8 – Flexibility and Efficiency

Lessons from the very positive examples of APS and NTPS collaborations noted earlier include building workforce capabilities in collaborative skills and fostering greater networking, exchange and mobility opportunities across jurisdictions. The labour market pressures noted in the discussion paper are universal and improved support and coordination of networking, exchange and mobility across services is likely to result in improved retention rates of employees through richer career experiences. Such opportunities are likely to further enhance trust and appreciation of the contextual differences between the APS and state and territory public services.

Efficiency in all aspects of government operation is essential to ensure a capacity to deal with the challenges noted in the discussion paper: increasing complexity of policy challenges, increasing public expectations, demographic change, technological change, globalisation and financial pressures.

The application of integrated one-stop shops is certainly one appropriate efficiency measure, which will form part of the Remote Service Delivery National Partnership Agreement in the Territory Growth Towns. The discipline of seeking ongoing efficiency dividends can also be very effective, as long as this is undertaken with a strong strategic focus and an understanding of relative government priorities, and not an incremental paring of the delivery of public services. It can be useful as a way of forcing internal re-investment in areas of government priority. Cross-jurisdictional and multi-sector fertilisation of policy and service delivery innovations, through initiatives such as those proposed in chapter 5 of the discussion paper, is strongly encouraged by the NTPS.

Chapter 9 – Next Steps

The NTPS proposes the following specific actions to further support and build on some of the specific directions of the APS reforms proposed in the discussion paper.

Collaboration	
1. Regional Operations Centres	The new initiative of co-located APS and NTPS Regional Operations Centres under the Remote Service Delivery National Partnership Agreement is already showing evidence of improving mutual understanding and collaborative problem-solving. This model will be closely monitored by the NTPS with a view to further possible applications with the APS and more broadly with other jurisdictions.
2. Mutual understanding and respect	Improving mechanisms that can draw on valuable local knowledge across public services and within regional offices, during the development of policies and programs, is strongly encouraged. The NTPS will explore improvements to local networks engagement and timely input to APS processes, particularly in the context of policy implementation and service delivery in the NT.
Capability	
3. ANZSOG applied learning program in remote service delivery	An applied learning, experience-based program for senior public servants in remote service delivery could be based in the Northern Territory and delivered in partnership through ANZSOG. Such a

	<p>program would be particularly beneficial to APS agencies where an identified capability need for an employees to experience remote service delivery, Indigenous communities and policy implementation issues could be fast-tracked. Preliminary discussions with ANZSOG have been encouraging and the design and content of a formal proposal will be pursued by the NTPS and the Charles Darwin University, in consultation with the APS and other jurisdictions.</p>
<p>4. Networking, exchange and mobility programs</p>	<p>Improved support and coordination of networking, exchange and mobility across public services, to assist building workforce capability and increasing employee retention, is strongly encouraged. The NTPS will explore the development of possible structured programs, and identification of potential barriers, for further discussion with the APS.</p>
<p><i>Citizen-Centred</i></p>	
<p>5. Service hubs in Territory Growth Towns</p>	<p>The proposed 'service hubs' initiative (integrated one-stop shops) in Territory Growth Towns, as part of the Remote Service Delivery National Partnership Agreement, is expected to improve engagement and empowerment in remote communities. This initiative will be closely monitored by the NTPS and APS, and could serve as a very important pilot for broader application in other jurisdictions.</p>
<p>6. Strategic policy hubs outside Canberra</p>	<p>The concept of 'strategic policy hubs', including cross-sector diversity of input and a presence outside Canberra, is strongly encouraged by the NTPS to improve policy formulation and integration. The NTPS offers assistance in identifying and coordinating an appropriate strategic policy hub to be based in the NT, ideally in association with a respected tertiary institution, perhaps in an area of national interest such as Indigenous policy.</p>