

Reform of Australian Government administration

Building the world's best public service

Submission to The Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide a submission to the Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration.

The discussion paper is well researched, including useful measures, it is succinct and easy to read. The suggested reform directions are broad and I support them. A challenge is balancing the tension between agency accountability and autonomy to deliver with whole of APS requirements that will deliver improvements.

Chapter 1 The Australian Government sector today

1. Do you think Chapter 1 accurately captures the role of the Australian Public Service?

I agree with the discussion paper¹ that the fundamental purpose of the APS has remained constant. With strong roots in the Westminster system, the APS:

- serves the government of the day, including by striving to be a professional and rational advocate of ideas that are in the best long-term interests of Australia
- fulfils important accountability responsibilities, through Ministers, to the Parliament
- serves the public, within the policy and program framework determined by the government.

While the role of the APS remains constant, our environment is more complex and there are more challenges due to for example internationalisation, threats to security and changes in society.

2. What are the implications of the statistical snapshot, and of employee views and attitudes in Chapter 1 for the future of the APS?

It is positive that the discussion paper states that the APS today is an organisation made up of motivated people committed to the attainment of outcomes for the Australian people.

It is of concern that the primary identification of APS employees is with their agency rather than to the APS. The comments about alignment reflect my experience and it will be a challenge to change the culture, as it is more important than ever for APS employees primary identification to be with the APS. Also of concern is the decline in employment for people from groups with disabilities or indigenous background. The perceptions by less than half of employees that their agency is well managed, is different from my experience. At times, governance, key decisions, priorities and alignment to government policy, strategic objectives and analysis of performance may not be fed down the line to staff and in language that they understand. I have also observed very bright and technically competent

people be promoted into senior leadership roles, at times without sufficient support and development to manage a team, plan and manage work and financial management. This may contribute to the perceptions reported.

Another issue of concern is the important job satisfaction attributes listed. One of the primary job satisfaction attributes ought to be service the public, the government of the day and the job challenge in fulfilling the fundamental role of the APS.

A practical way that would start to change perceptions of alignment to the APS employees at all levels and also improve efficiency, is transition to an APS approach for security, police checks and security clearances, and away from the current agency centric approach. The more employees and contractors are exposed to APS approaches rather than agency specific, and then it is more likely their attitudes will change.

Also, adopting the concept outlined later in the paper, of cross agency groups to develop policy. Perhaps also use more cross agency selection processes for some roles and actively encourage staff at more junior levels to obtain experience in other agencies, portfolios.

Chapter 2 Challenges in the strategic environment

3. What are the most important challenges facing the public sector over the next ten years?

The discussion paper articulates a comprehensive set of challenges, for example current circumstance where many high priority public policy challenges do not fit neatly within one ministerial portfolio or a single agency's set of responsibilities. I agree that successfully tackling these complex policy issues requires the APS to be more agile, adaptable, innovative, open and outward looking. Expectations of government are increasing, the community is becoming better educated and more informed about government and there is also a growing expectation of individuals and communities that they will receive services that are responsive to their particular needs and circumstances.

Developing policy across jurisdictions and integrating service delivery to be community, citizen or business centric is becoming the norm. I agree that this context requires different approaches and thinking.

Service delivery challenge is compounded as most of the major service agencies rely on large and complex bespoke software systems. Technological change provides significant challenges for the public sector, and also opportunities. While there have been major advances with online service delivery, there are major challenges with backend legacy systems and some business process design to transform to a more productive service orientated architecture, where components are more plug and play, enabling far more responsive and flexible service delivery and at lower cost.

One of the biggest challenges is engendering an APS wide culture that embraces new ways of thinking and working. Fundamental to this culture shift is building the attitude that a primary job attribute is to serve the government and community and the job challenge to make a difference.

4. What are the key implications for how the public sector will need to operate?

I endorse the key implications and proposition that a whole-of-government and across APS strategic approach is needed. I agree that some of the barriers to reform are embedded in the prevailing public service culture and architecture, hence it will therefore be necessary to re-examine that architecture to ensure it supports, rather than hinders, the ability of the APS to overcome future challenges.

Developing policy across jurisdictions and integrating service delivery to be community, citizen or business centric is becoming the norm. I agree that this context requires different approaches and thinking.

Refer comments to the previous question.

Chapter 3 An aspiration for Australia's public service

4. What do you think is an appropriate aspiration for the Australian Public Service?

I agree with the aspiration outlined for the aspiration outlined for the APS. Prime Minister Rudd's expectations of the public service are clear.

6. Do the five key characteristics outlined in Chapter 3 adequately encapsulate what you would expect from a high performing public service?

I endorse the five areas outlined in the discussion paper in which the APS will need to excel if it is to deliver on government expectations.

The challenge is to understand the gap between aspiration and current state, the underlying causes and taking decisive action to bridge the gap.

Chapter 4 A values driven culture that retains public trust

7. Should the APS Values be streamlined? What values do you consider should be included in a revised set of APS values?

It is a good idea to streamline the APS values. Conversation at all levels and across the APS is suggested as a way to draw out the core values. The essence are captured in a), e), f), g) and n). Some of the current values could be viewed as guides on how to live the values.

A broader question is whether agencies continue with agency specific values. An alternative as used with Commonwealth Government branding, is that all agencies use the APS values, and then perhaps include specific areas of emphasis.

8. How do we ensure that APS leaders fulfil their responsibilities to promote and uphold the values?

To ensure APS leaders uphold the values, responsibilities must be embedded in the performance management framework, with some form of periodic and independent assessment of behaviour and leaders held accountable. Changes in behaviour and hence attitude could be measured by survey and in addition to the information referenced in the discussion paper.

9. Do you think the APS engages appropriately and actively with government on an apolitical basis?

In the main, the APS has and will continue to engage with government on an apolitical basis. An important dynamic is ministerial offices and officers. While a code of conduct for ministerial staff is a positive move, perhaps a legislative framework would underpin clear accountability and support apolitical engagement with the APS.

10. Are further reforms needed to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the APS when dealing with ministerial offices?

While a code of conduct for ministerial staff is a positive move, I recommend further reforms, such as a legislative framework to provide clear accountability and support apolitical engagement with the APS.

This is an important topic and ongoing conversation within Government, the opposition and across the APS will maintain visibility. Perhaps more conversation could help on how to quickly identify areas or individuals where perhaps behaviour is not apolitical.

Chapter 5 High quality, forward looking and creative policy advice

The discussion paper outlines some innovative possibilities for reform direction and worth pursuing. There appear to be challenges to overcome. One is time pressure, where finding the time and effort for broader engagement etc is desired, however one doesn't quite get there. Another is more along the 'not invented here' or 'we are different' perspective, whereas behaviour to engender is of having an open mind and perspective on what could be different, what are the possibilities and actively seeking out a range of perspectives.

11. How can internal and external collaboration be strengthened to improve policy development and implementation?

There are examples across the APS, of agencies engaging the community, business, including co-design and collaboration. Perhaps these approaches could be adopted more broadly and even progress to some standard processes, tools and techniques for policy development and service delivery. The more the APS can transition to standardised processes that are expected to be improved, then the more likely of engagement with community and improved outcomes from policy development and service delivery.

12. What should be done to continuously improve the capability of the APS workforce in policy formulation and implementation?

Ideas in the discussion paper are worth pursuing. Trialing 'strategic policy hubs' and other ways of developing policy and service delivery, across agencies and portfolios, sends a clear signal about expectations of the APS and a visible way to engender expected behaviours.

Another is creating time defined workgroups across agencies, with defined scope to develop and deliver on improvements which are measured.

The workgroups require broad policy expertise as well as service delivery and business systems and other expertise as identified in the discussion paper. By integrating all knowledge/ expertise from policy conception through to optimal service delivery, ought to result in reducing time to develop and deliver evidenced based policy, into the community and operating as expected.

Learning from the private sector, and as noted above, moving towards standard processes, tools and techniques, which are expected to be improved, is likely to enhance policy development, while also enabling creativity and innovation.

13. What can be done to bring the workforce development approach of the APS up to the level of the best organisations globally?

A way to develop the workforce is bringing a broader range from across society, of people on various flexible engagement arrangements. In addition, perhaps less full time and permanent roles to provide a richer range of skills in the workplace and that can be called upon as needs arise.

This could be combined with policy and action to encourage and assist APS staff take up roles in different agencies/ portfolios and also across policy development and service delivery as well as assignments with not for profit and private sector.

14. How do you think a stronger culture of innovation can be fostered?

A culture of innovation could be engendered by requiring all agencies to embed continuous improvement programs that engage employees and reward improvement, with other action to bring forward innovative proposals. In addition, managing risk to service delivery and the reputation of the APS, also provide opportunities for people to innovate and accept that not all outcomes will be as anticipated. The challenge is to try, learn and move forward.

15. What approaches to engaging with risk are most appropriate for the APS to provide high quality, forward looking and creative policy advice?

16. How can agency performance management processes be amended to maximise the focus on the attainment of outcomes?

Chapter 6 High quality, effective programs and services focused on the needs of citizens

17. How do we embed a citizen centred philosophy in all aspects of program and service design and delivery?

There are useful examples in some agencies of citizen centric philosophy, engaging the community, business, including co-design and collaboration. A way to embed a citizen centred philosophy is to adopt some standard processes for policy development and service delivery. The more the APS can transition to standardised processes that are expected to be improved, then more likelihood of engagement with community and improved outcomes from policy development and service delivery.

18. How can we better bring together service design, delivery and policy formulation processes—within individual programs and across all of government?

As outlined in the discussion paper and also above, trialing ‘strategic policy hubs’ and other ways of developing policy and service delivery, across agencies and portfolios. The workgroups require broad policy expertise as well as service delivery and business systems and other expertise as identified in the discussion paper. Refer previous comments.

At agency and portfolio level, adopting standard processes and bringing a range of different skills, including from community, industry, academic way to embed a citizen centred philosophy, could help with individual programs and across government.

19. What options could be pursued to ensure citizens, especially those with higher needs, can access government information and services that they need?

The approach outlined above could also apply to those citizens and groups with higher needs. It is important to recognize that people with special needs will probably require face to face access rather than online channels and higher cost to develop and deliver services for them. Some service delivery innovations are now providing access to services locally and these types of innovations are to be commended. It is very important to engage these citizens and groups in co-design so that services are developed for their needs and delivered according to those needs.

There have been excellent innovations of taking service delivery into the community, especially during events such as bush fires and floods. It is important to build on these innovations.

20. How can we ensure performance management frameworks focus on the attainment of outcomes for citizens?

A way to embed focus on outcomes for citizens is to include in job descriptions and duty statements and with accountability for delivering built into the performance management framework. Reporting to

government, for example Portfolio Budget Statements and Annual Reports could include reporting on services delivered to citizens and against performance measures.

Chapter 7 Flexibility and agility

21. What is the optimal rate of mobility between APS agencies and other parts of the labour market? What could the APS do to encourage and support greater mobility?

I am not in a position to comment on the rate of mobility between APS agencies and the labour market. It is a commendable approach and useful to introduce measures then report on them. It will require freeing up engagement, such as fixed term engagement or other innovations rather than traditional full time and permanent roles and ensuring a broader mix of expertise moves in and out of the APS.

22. What practical mechanisms could be used to foster a more unified public service culture?

A practical way to foster a more unified public service culture is adopt approach for branding and apply to APS values. That is, agencies use the APS values, and then perhaps include specific areas of emphasis.

Another practical way that would start to change perceptions of employees at all levels and also improve efficiency, is transition to an APS approach for security, police checks and security clearances, and away from the current agency centric approach. The more employees and contractors are exposed to APS approaches rather than agency specific, and then it is more likely their attitudes will change.

Another practical way is on more flexibility in engaging people from outside the APS.

As proposed in the paper, establishing policy hubs and other cross agency teams with defined scope and focus to deliver cross agency outcomes, within specified timeframes.

23. How could recruitment practices be enhanced within Australian Government entities? What are the strengths of current recruitment processes?

It is important to retain the merit principle and continue with improved recruitment processes. It is also important to actively recruit people with broader range of skills. The APSC has established mechanisms such as the Ready Now Register, however availability is not well known or used. The approach is commendable, however more needs to be done to gain traction and deliver benefits expected. In addition establish register of skilled people from the private and education sectors that can be accessed at short notice for defined assignments.

24. What are your top three ideas to encourage the pursuit of continuous improvement across the public service?

Learning from the private sector, and as noted above, moving towards standard processes, tools and techniques, which are expected to be improved, is likely to enhance policy development, while also enabling creativity and innovation.

Perhaps develop the expectation that agencies embed continuous improvement programs that engage employees and reward improvement, with other action to bring forward innovative proposals. There are examples across APS agencies and in the private sector. It is important to have simple processes, with tools and measurement and mindset that employees at all levels strive to improve.

Chapter 8 Efficiency in all aspects of government operations

25. How can Australian Government policy departments improve their own efficiency?

As outlined above, move towards standard processes, broader mix of skill in developing policy and measuring performance and trialing policy hubs. Engage all impacted by policy, service delivery and business systems in developing policy.

26. How can Australian Government service delivery agencies improve their own efficiency?

As with policy development, move towards standard processes, more influence in policy development, broader mix of skill in service delivery and measuring performance. Establish mechanisms whereby service delivery agencies are expected to implement standard approaches and aim for best practice.

27. What mechanisms should be used to systematically improve efficiency across the public service as a whole?

Similar to policy hubs, create temporary teams that focus on for example service delivery, both business and systems, with brief to identify common sets of architectures, draw out better practice across government and the private sector and implement improvement agendas. There are some excellent examples of capability in various agencies, a challenge is building broader knowledge, then having the capability deployed across agencies.

Arising from the Gershon Review into information and communications technology (ICT) in 2008, some important progress is being made to provide better value for money. There are other opportunities to deliver more benefits, for example by overlaying with specific citizen centric reform requirements. Again, this requires cross agency groups to progress.

28. What skills and capabilities are required to drive efficiency throughout public sector organisations?

Recruit and enable people with the capability and mindset of finding and delivering improvements. Offer fixed term assignments with responsibility to actively seek out improvements.
