



Auditor-General for Australia



23 April 2026

Senator the Hon Sue Lines
President of the Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear President

Resolution of the Senate requesting the Australian National Audit Office reinstate the Defence major projects report

Thank you for your correspondence of 1 April 2026 drawing attention to the resolution of the Senate requesting that the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) urgently re-instate the annual Defence major projects report (MPR) in order to continue reviewing the Department of Defence's (Defence) major equipment acquisition projects.

The ANAO is committed to its purpose to support accountability and transparency in the Australian Government sector through independent reporting to the Parliament. As you know, the purpose can be achieved through a variety of reporting mechanisms supported by the *Auditor-General Act 1997*. I acknowledge the critical importance of continuing to bring transparency and accountability to Defence capability acquisitions.

There is no doubt that the MPR, as part of a suite of reporting tools, has served the Parliament well over the last 18 years. The report has been commissioned by the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit (JCPAA) as a priority assurance review under the *Auditor General Act 1997*. The JCPAA has established guidelines for Defence to prepare a report on major projects and requested that the ANAO conduct an assurance review over the material presented by Defence. The JCPAA's guidelines required material to be presented by Defence in a way that allows for unclassified publication.

Since 2021–2022, Defence has taken decisions that some of the information covered by the guidelines is not able to be disclosed as it would or could be reasonably expected to cause damage to the security, defence or international relations of the Commonwealth. Information designated by Defence as 'not for publication' included project level capability milestones and delivery dates. Notwithstanding its removal, the ANAO has had access to the material for the purposes of conducting its limited assurance review.

As a result of Defence's removal of information, transparency has diminished, as has the ANAO's ability to provide meaningful analysis in the report. An Emphasis of Matter has been included by the ANAO in the MPR since 2021–2022 drawing Parliament's attention to the impact of Defence's removal of information from its project level material. The ANAO has raised the issue of diminishing transparency in the MPR in its engagement with JCPAA inquiries into the MPR and through its Annual Reports presented in the Parliament in 2022–2023 and 2023–2024. The JCPAA has considered the issue of diminishing transparency and 'not for publication' by Defence in Report 503, *Inquiry into the Defence Major Projects report 2020–21 and 2021–22 and Procurement of Hunter Class Frigates*; and Report 507, *Inquiry into the Defence 2022–23 Major Projects Report*.

In light of the growing non-disclosure of information, I have come to the conclusion that the MPR is no longer fit for purpose as the vehicle to bring the transparency and accountability that it has in the past. A copy of my advice to the JCPAA on this matter is attached as further background. As you know, the JCPAA has resolved to not request Defence and the ANAO to continue to produce the MPR.

I am committed to maintaining or enhancing the ANAO's assurance over Defence's acquisition program. A description of the range of reporting I propose or have underway is attached. Importantly, the ANAO has recently commenced a performance audit of Defence's management of its capability investment priorities, which will bring transparency to capability investment performance and how Defence manages the biennial Integrated Investment Program. I am considering this as a biennial performance audit.

The audit will consider whether the governance arrangements for managing Defence's capability investments are fit-for-purpose and whether Defence is delivering on its capability investment priorities on time, on budget, and to scope. It includes reviewing Defence major equipment acquisition projects with respect to agreed cost, scope and schedule. In doing so, the ANAO will draw upon data from more than 100 capability investments included in Defence's performance measure 6.1 to: report on the aggregate analysis across major acquisition projects under this measure by domain; provide dashboards of selected major projects, including analysis on the projects reported in the 2024–25 MPR; and demonstrate performance against Government second pass approval (similar to the MPR) and latest amended approval (Defence's performance measure 6.1).

This performance audit is part of the ANAO's audit work program of performance audits of Defence focussed on acquisition and sustainment activities and the Auditor-General's audits of Defence's financial statements and performance statements, which include targets for delivery of future capability.

Undertaking performance audits under the *Auditor-General Act 1997* provides a number of benefits. Performance audits are deep dives with recommendations and are conducted to a higher level of assurance (reasonable assurance) than the MPR (limited assurance). In a performance audit the Auditor-General determines the audit approach, scope and what information is disclosed to Parliament. While the *Auditor-General Act 1997* requires consideration by the Auditor-General of sensitive information in public reports, the ANAO has long been able to present information in a way that supports scrutiny by the Parliament of key issues in cost, schedule and capability.

The approach to scrutiny that is proposed is in line with the US Government Accountability Office, which conducts the Annual Weapons Systems Assessment as a performance audit, and the UK National Audit Office (NAO), which discontinued its Defence major projects report in 2015.

If the MPR were to be reinstated in its current form, that would require a request from the JCPAA under the *Auditor General Act 1997*. It would also require reductions in the planned performance audit program given the ANAO's current resources.

For transparency purposes, consistent with standard ANAO practice in correspondence with parliamentarians, a copy of this letter will be published on the ANAO website. I am also copying the chair of the JCPAA given the Committee's role in the MPR.

Thank you and I am available to provide additional information or discuss this letter further with you.

Yours sincerely



Dr Caralee McLiesh PSM
Auditor-General for Australia

Attachment A - advice to JCPAA from 8 December 2025

Attachment B - ANAO assurance over Defence Capability Acquisitions

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Auditor-General for Australia



8 December 2025

Mr Josh Burns MP
Chair
Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

By email: jcpaa@aph.gov.au

Dear Mr Burns

Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit – future of the Major Projects Report (MPR)

After the private briefing with the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit (JCPAA) regarding the MPR on 4 September 2025, you requested that I provide a suggested way forward for the future of the MPR.

Over its 18-year history, the MPR has served to bring transparency to Parliament of Defence's acquisition performance. A further goal for the product was to improve Defence's acquisition performance. While the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) has observed improvements over time, Defence has indicated that more impactful change in the department's processes derives from the performance audits conducted by the ANAO.

Decisions taken by Defence to not disclose certain project information call into question whether the MPR remains a fit-for-purpose vehicle in providing transparency to the Parliament including against a background of the cost of the assurance activity to the ANAO and Defence. Other developments such as the Government's announcement to create a Defence Delivery Agency, and the potential Parliamentary Joint Committee on Defence also mean that it is timely to consider the most appropriate way to bring transparency and accountability to Defence's acquisition program.

I have formed a view that the diminishing transparency provided in the MPR renders it no longer fit-for-purpose. Defence has advised me that the MPR is not driving meaningful improvements to acquisition performance in the way that other ANAO work does. Given that the MPR is developed at the request of the Committee, I propose a private briefing with the JCPAA on an alternative approach, elements of which are set out below following a meeting with you.

The ANAO now conducts an annual audit, which provides reasonable assurance of Defence's performance statements. These statements include a measure (Measure 6.1) on Defence's Key Activity "Deliver Future Capability". The measure includes targets relating to projects being on track within scope (80 per cent), schedule (80 per cent) and cost (80 per cent) of the Integrated Investment Program (IIP) approved by Government. While Defence's reporting against this measure is not at a project level, the auditor's report provides an opportunity for the Committee to consider whether and how it might wish to inquire into performance against the measure.

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Further, I propose that the ANAO will seek to prioritise performance audits within the Defence portfolio, with a focus on acquisitions, capability sustainment and procurement. This may include a series of audits of the Defence IIP. At present, the ANAO is scoping a performance audit of the IIP, which has the potential to inform future approaches to acquisition transparency.

I have attached an outline of considerations that have contributed to my assessment of a future approach to transparency of Defence acquisitions.

Should the Committee wish to continue the MPR at this time I would propose that fewer major projects are included to support more cost-effective delivery, for example by covering only Defence's "projects of concern," and data collection is further aligned with Defence's internal assurance systems.

I appreciate that an alternative approach would be a departure from longstanding reporting in a particular style through the MPR. On this basis I seek an opportunity to discuss this further with the Committee, in the context of consideration of of the Committee's role in requesting the assurance review of the MPR and establishing the MPR guidelines.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Caralee', written in a cursive style.

Dr Caralee McLiesh PSM
Auditor-General

Background

In the early 2000s, parliamentary interest in Defence acquisition projects was high. In 2003, the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Reference Committee found that there was poor visibility on the progress of major projects. The Committee recommended that the Senate request the Auditor-General to produce an annual report on the progress of major Defence projects.¹

In 2006, the JCPAA recommended that the ANAO produce an annual report based on data supplied by Defence on the progress of the top 30 capital equipment projects. The first report covered nine major projects, with the intention of reporting up to 30 in subsequent years.²

The 2024–25 MPR will be the 18th edition in the series. The MPR review is conducted under Australian Standard on Assurance Engagements (ASAE) 3000. A review under this standard, known as a 'limited assurance' review, is not as extensive as individual performance audits conducted by the ANAO. The scope of the MPR engagement is set out in Guidelines established by the JCPAA following consultation between the ANAO and Defence. The Auditor-General has issued modified (qualified) opinions on eight occasions. These related to Defence system limitations or sections of the PDSSs where the ANAO could not provide assurance based on the information presented by Defence.

The MPR includes Project Data Summary Sheets (PDSSs) prepared by Defence in line with the MPR Guidelines, which are endorsed by the JCPAA. Defence prepares a *Statement by the Secretary of Defence* (which includes the PDSS) that forms part of the report. The ANAO conducts its limited assurance review of this statement and undertakes an analysis of key elements of Defence's PDSSs — including scope, schedule, cost, and risks.

Issues considered in determining whether the MPR remains fit for purpose

1. Appropriate transparency to the Parliament

The Auditor-General has included an Emphasis of Matter in the past three reports. These draw attention to the non-disclosure of certain information by Defence in its reporting on projects, including project-level capability milestones and forecast delivery dates. The cumulative impact of this non-disclosure has reduced the level of transparency to the Parliament and stakeholders. In 2023–24, this covered 20 of the 21 projects. In 2022–23, 12 of the 20 projects were affected and in the 2021–22 MPR, four of the 21 projects were affected. While not disclosing information, Defence has provided all information necessary to the ANAO to conduct the review. Defence's decisions to not disclose information affect the ANAO's ability to provide longitudinal analysis on project performance.

The issue of transparency was canvassed by the JCPAA in [Report 503](#) and [Report 507](#) relating to its annual inquiries on the MPR. In Report 503, the JCPAA recommended that for future inquiries into the MPR, the ANAO provide a confidential submission regarding information not disclosed by Defence, and for Defence to organise confidential or classified briefings.

- The Auditor-General's response to the recommendation agreed that the Parliament, including the JCPAA should have access to confidential information through briefings, and highlighted that Defence is best placed to provide the confidential submission that the Committee is seeking ([Executive Minute: Australian National Audit Office – Report 503 – Recommendation 1](#)).

¹ Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, Report on the inquiry into materiel acquisition and management in Defence, March 2003, p. xv, available from https://www.aph.gov.au/~media/wopapub/senate/committee/fadt_ctte/completed_inquiries/2002_04/dmo/report/report_pdf.ashx [accessed 14 October 2025].

² Auditor-General Report No. 9 2008–09, *Major Projects Report 2007–08*, available from https://www.anao.gov.au/sites/default/files/2008%2009_audit_report_09.pdf [accessed 14 October 2025].

- Defence's response acknowledged the observations of the JCPAA in Report 503 and supported five of the six recommendations. The Government did not support part of Recommendation 6 relating to the Department of Finance to determine and then advise the 'procuring entity' whether value for money assessments have been completed appropriately ([Executive minute: Department of Defence/Australian Government – Report 503 – Recommendation 1-6](#)).

2. Improving Defence performance

The MPR has contributed to accountability of Defence major projects, notwithstanding Defence's recent non-disclosure decisions. The annual JCPAA inquiries on the MPR, supported by the ANAO, have led to improvements in Defence project reporting and associated governance arrangements. This includes:

- Efforts to centralise and standardise risk reporting, including adopting an enterprise risk tool, 'Predict!'.
- Compliance reviews to improve project governance and lifecycle management processes.
- Reporting on budget estimates, actual expenditure, and contingency usage.
- Records management and reporting of Projects of Concern and Projects of Interest.
- A Lessons Governance Board to identify project and enterprise strategic lessons.
- Reduced year on year liquidated damages.³
- Accountability for the development of Australian Industry Capability plans.
- Improved automation of Defence processes that has reduced costs for producing the MPR.

The preparation of the MPR by Defence is not directly supported by one system. Defence has an opportunity to use its new Enterprise Resource Planning program to keep improving how it reports on major projects to the Government, especially around project scope, schedule and cost.

3. Strategic and technological shifts

The projects reviewed in the MPR are acquisitions generally in the domains of sea, land and air. The 2024 National Defence Strategy (NDS)⁴ includes cyber and space domains as well as new arrangements with respect to nuclear powered submarines (i.e., AUKUS). The NDS describes Australia's strategic and global geopolitical environment as the most challenging since the Second World War.⁵ The strategic warning time for conflict has reduced and Australia no longer enjoys the benefit of a 10-year window.

MPR projects are traditionally, multi-year, and in some instances decade, long-term acquisitions. Defence priorities may shift to respond to technological advancements and the geostrategic environment. The NDS is supported by the Integrated Investment Program (IIP). The IIP sets out specific capabilities the Government will invest in to deliver an integrated, focused force across its capability domains to give effect to the NDS.⁶ The NDS and IIP are updated biennially.

4. New approach to acquisition project delivery

The NDS introduced the Minimum Viable Capability (MVC) acquisition approach.⁷ This approach is an iterative acquisition development pathway designed to deliver capabilities faster, more flexibly, and with greater responsiveness to strategic priorities.

The project methodology reflecting this approach is still to be fully embedded in Defence. This creates ambiguity as to how Defence will report against MVC with respect to budget performance and integration

³ JCPAA Report 473: Defence Major Projects Report (2016–17), paragraph 1.8, available from https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Public_Accounts_and_Audit/MPR2016-17/Report_473 [accessed 14 October 2025].

⁴ 2024 National Defence Strategy, available from <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/2024-national-defence-strategy-2024-integrated-investment-program> [accessed 14 October 2025].

⁵ Ibid., page 5.

⁶ Ibid., 2024 Integrated Investment Program, paragraphs 1.4 to 1.7.

⁷ Ibid., 2024 National Defence Strategy, paragraphs 6.2 to 6.3, 8.5, 8.8 to 8.9.

with reporting against conventional milestones of Initial Operational Capability (IOC) and Final Operational Capability (FOC). This issue has emerged in the current review of the 2024–25 MPR.

Defence has advised the ANAO that it continues to work on codifying policy relating to MVC to ensure standardised and common application. Until the approach is settled, the ANAO is unable to forecast the impact on the current structure of Defence reporting contained in the MPR.

5. Coverage of Defence in other ANAO audit products

Defence is subject to financial statements auditing as required by the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013*. Financial statements auditing includes aggregate financial reporting and disclosures relating to supplier expenses, assets under construction, and specialist military equipment. The valuation of specialist military equipment, general assets and assets under construction are audit focus areas. Financial statement audits provide reasonable assurance.

From 2024–25, Defence is subject to performance statements auditing, which includes assurance of Defence’s aggregate performance information. A key performance statements measure for Defence includes the delivery of capability through the IIP (measure 6.1). Performance statement audits provide reasonable assurance.

Performance audits are also conducted in Defence. Over the medium term, the ANAO conducts up to five performance audits annually in Defence with at least one major procurement/acquisition covered in the annual work program. Performance audits provide reasonable assurance.

Attachment B: ANAO assurance over Defence Capability Acquisitions

Transparency and accountability in relation to major Defence acquisitions has been a longstanding focus of parliamentary interest and the Auditor-General's audit work program. The ANAO is finalising the 2026–27 Annual Audit Work Program (AAWP) and in doing so will ensure that across its suite of performance audits, performance statements audits and financial statements audits, it continues to bring transparency and accountability over Defence's acquisitions and supports the Parliament in its scrutiny of Defence.

Performance audits

Current performance audits. The ANAO has commenced a performance audit of Defence's management of its capability investment priorities. The objective of this audit is to assess the effectiveness of Defence's management of its capability investment priorities through the Integrated Investment Program since 2024. The ANAO proposes to examine:

- Has Defence established fit for purpose enterprise level governance, control and decision making arrangements to manage its capability investments?
- Is Defence delivering on its capability investment priorities? This includes reviewing Defence major equipment acquisition projects with respect to agreed cost, scope and schedule. In doing so, the ANAO will draw upon data that is used for Defence's performance statement performance measure 6.1 to report on the aggregate analysis across major acquisition projects under this measure, by domain, and highlight performance against Government second pass approval; and provide dashboards and analysis of selected major projects, including projects that have been reported in the 2024–25 Defence Major Projects Report.

The ANAO is currently finalising a performance audit on Defence's Collins Class Life of Type Extension – planning and implementation. The objective of this audit is to assess the effectiveness to date of Defence's planning and implementation of the Collins Class Life of Type Extension.

The 2026–27 AAWP contains a number of potential audit topics focussing on Defence acquisitions and sustainment:

- o MQ-4C Triton aircraft;
- o General purpose frigates;
- o MQ-28A Ghost Bats;
- o MC-55A Peregrine aircrafts; and
- o Enhanced Defence High Frequency Communications System.

Also being considered is the management of the planning of the Henderson Defence precinct considered given its role in future AUKUS arrangements, and the establishment of the Defence Delivery Agency given the government's announcements to create the agency to strengthen Defence acquisitions and sustainment.

Performance statements

In its Annual Performance Statements, Defence includes a measure on which it reports on its performance on delivery of future capability against scope, cost, and schedule against scope, cost and milestones that have been amended by government decisions (performance measure 6.1). The performance measure for each is set at 80 per cent.

Defence's performance statements were audited by the ANAO for the first time in 2024-25 to a reasonable assurance level. Audit reports of performance statements are tabled by the Minister for Finance. The ANAO tables a report on performance statements audits results, the latest one being Performance Statements of Major Australian Government Entities — Outcomes from the 2024–25 Audit Program.

Financial statements

The ANAO prepares two reports annually that provide insights at a point in time to the financial statements risks, governance arrangements and internal control frameworks of Australian Government entities, drawing on information collected during our audits. The Auditor-General annually audits Defence's financial statements and the most recent results are reported in Audits of the Financial Statements of Australian Government Entities for the Period Ended 30 June 2025.