

Management of the Australian Public Service's Workforce Response to COVID-19

Australian Public Service Commission

Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

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Canberra ACT

1 December 2020

Dear Mr President
Dear Mr Speaker

In accordance with the authority contained in the *Auditor-General Act 1997*, I have undertaken an independent performance audit in the Australian Public Service Commission and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. The report is titled *Management of the Australian Public Service's Workforce Response to COVID-19*. I present the report of this audit to the Parliament.

Following its presentation and receipt, the report will be placed on the Australian National Audit Office's website — <http://www.anao.gov.au>.

Yours sincerely



Grant Hehir
Auditor-General

The Honourable the President of the Senate
The Honourable the Speaker of the House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT

AUDITING FOR AUSTRALIA

The Auditor-General is head of the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO). The ANAO assists the Auditor-General to carry out his duties under the *Auditor-General Act 1997* to undertake performance audits, financial statement audits and assurance reviews of Commonwealth public sector bodies and to provide independent reports and advice for the Parliament, the Australian Government and the community. The aim is to improve Commonwealth public sector administration and accountability.

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Audit snapshot

Auditor-General Report No.20 2020–21

Management of the Australian Public Service's Workforce Response to COVID-19



Why did we do this audit?

- ▶ This audit is one of five performance audits conducted under phase one of the ANAO's multi-year strategy that focuses on the effective, efficient, economical and ethical delivery of the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ▶ To support the Government's COVID-19 priorities, the Australian Public Service (APS) needed to quickly adapt its workplace practices and deploy resources to priority areas, while continuing business-as-usual activities.



What did we find?

- ▶ Management of the APS workforce in implementing the Australian Government's COVID-19 priorities was effective.
- ▶ Arrangements established by APSC and the COO Committee to oversee and monitor the workforce response were largely appropriate.
- ▶ Management of efforts to position the APS workforce to respond, through deployment of staff to critical functions and provision of guidance on workforce measures, was effective.



Key facts

- ▶ As at 6 October 2020, the Australian Government had announced \$507 billion in overall economic support in response to the pandemic.
- ▶ The APS workforce response was primarily managed by the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC), through two cross-agency taskforces, and the Chief Operating Officers (COO) Committee.



What did we recommend?

- ▶ The Auditor-General made no recommendations but identified key messages for Australian Government entities relating to governance, risk management and policy implementation.

40

Number of meetings conducted by the COO Committee from February to September 2020.

2,165

Number of APS staff deployed to Services Australia to assist with its critical COVID-19 response functions.

42

Number of APS-wide guidance products disseminated by APSC through its website and GovTEAMS (to 30 June 2020).

Summary

Background

1. Since its emergence in late 2019, coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has become a global pandemic that is impacting on human health and national economies. From February 2020 the Australian Government commenced the introduction of a range of policies and measures in response to the emergence of COVID-19 that included:

- travel restrictions and international border control and quarantine arrangements;
- delivery of substantial economic stimulus, including financial support for affected individuals, businesses and communities; and
- support for essential services and procurement of critical medical supplies.

2. From the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia, the Australian Public Service (APS) workforce had to adapt within a short timeframe to a new operating environment and position itself to handle a surge in demand for government services. Governance of the APS workforce response to COVID-19 has been the responsibility of the Secretaries Board, Chief Operating Officers (COO) Committee, APS Commissioner and agency heads. The Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) have also played central roles in managing the APS's workforce response over the pandemic period.

Rationale for undertaking the audit

3. The COVID-19 pandemic and the pace and scale of the Australian Government's response impacts on the risk environment faced by the Australian public sector. This audit is one of five performance audits conducted under phase one of the ANAO's multi-year strategy that will focus on the effective, efficient, economical and ethical delivery of the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹

4. To support the Australian Government's COVID-19 priorities, the APS needed to quickly adapt its workplace practices and deploy resources to priority areas, while continuing to deliver business-as-usual activities. The ANAO undertook this audit of the management of the APS workforce response to provide assurance to Parliament that arrangements are sound and support the government's COVID-19 response. The audit also contributes to the identification of lessons and good practices that could be applied in future crisis responses.

Audit objective and criteria

5. The audit objective was to assess the effectiveness of the management of the APS workforce in implementing the Australian Government's COVID-19 priorities. To form a conclusion against the objective, the ANAO adopted the following high-level audit criteria:

- Were appropriate arrangements established to oversee and monitor the APS's workforce response to COVID-19?
- Were efforts to position the APS workforce to respond to COVID-19 managed effectively?

1 Further details on the ANAO's COVID-19 multi-year audit strategy can be found at: <https://www.anao.gov.au/work-program/covid-19>.

Conclusion

6. Management of the APS workforce in implementing the Australian Government's COVID-19 priorities was effective.

7. Arrangements established to oversee and monitor the APS's workforce response to COVID-19 were appropriate. As a whole-of-government framework for managing the APS workforce in a crisis was not in place prior to COVID-19, planning was conducted in flight and risks were managed reactively. APSC established largely appropriate arrangements to oversee, monitor and report on the work of its cross-agency taskforces. Further, the COO Committee provided appropriate oversight for the response, including appropriate monitoring of actions it initiated.

8. Management of efforts to position the APS workforce to respond to COVID-19 was effective. APSC's Workforce Management Taskforce deployed 2,240 staff to other agencies, mostly to Services Australia, to meet critical needs. Guidance on COVID-19 workforce measures was largely effective, and various initiatives are underway to capture lessons learned from the response to inform planning for future operations.

Supporting findings

Oversight and monitoring arrangements

9. Governance arrangements established for the APS workforce response to COVID-19 were fit for purpose. Arrangements established by APSC to oversee the work of its cross-agency COVID-19 taskforces were largely appropriate. After being established by the Secretaries Board in February 2020, the COO Committee actively oversaw the APS response, providing a forum for agencies to agree on coordinated approaches and establish working groups to progress key matters.

10. A whole-of-government risk assessment for managing the APS workforce in a crisis had not been conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, key workforce risks from COVID-19 were largely managed reactively. The COO Committee identified the need for an APS-wide risk assessment in early April 2020, but this work has not been conducted. APSC did not consider operational risks in establishing its two cross-agency taskforces. APSC updated its enterprise risk register to include consideration of shared risks to the APS in November 2020.

11. Appropriate arrangements were established for monitoring the APS workforce response to COVID-19 and advising the Government on implementation issues. APSC's reporting to the COO Committee and Government on its cross-agency taskforces was appropriate and included discussion of emerging issues. The COO Committee's monitoring of the response was largely effective, given the environment in which it was operating, and it provided regular reporting to the Secretaries Board.

Positioning the workforce to respond

12. APSC's Workforce Management Taskforce effectively facilitated the deployment of 2,165 staff to Services Australia to meet a critical Government priority, as well as 75 staff to three other agencies. The deployment process was impacted by the absence of an existing framework for

large-scale APS deployments and the challenges of identifying critical functions and available staff in the middle of a crisis.

13. Guidance provided by the APSC COVID-19 Taskforce to agencies on COVID-19 workforce measures was largely effective. Feedback from agencies suggests it was not always timely and there were issues with version control and consistency.

14. APSC and the COO Committee have commenced a number of initiatives to capture lessons from the APS workforce response to COVID-19. Planning for future operations has commenced and there are indications that planning is being informed by lessons learned.

Summary of entity responses

15. APSC's and PM&C's summary responses to the report are provided below and their full responses are at Appendix 1.

Australian Public Service Commission

The Australian Public Service Commission welcomes the draft report and its findings. The Australian Public Service has made a significant contribution to the COVID-19 pandemic response and it is pleasing to receive confirmation that the management of the workforce during this challenging period was effective.

The Commission also welcomes and supports the report's key messages for all Australian Government entities relating to governance, risk management and policy implementation. These key messages will help to position the Australian Public Service to continue to respond effectively to future crises.

Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) welcomes the performance audit *Management of the Australian Public Service's Workforce Response to COVID-19* (the audit).

PM&C agrees with the conclusions and supporting findings made in the Audit. In particular, PM&C notes that the: management of the Australian Public Service (APS) workforce in implementing the Australian Government's COVID-19 priorities was effective; the arrangements established to oversee and monitor the APS's workforce response to COVID-19 were appropriate; and the management of the APS workforce in implementing the Australian Government's COVID-19 priorities was effective.

While not mentioned in detail in the audit, PM&C observes that the Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Mr Philip Gaetjens, and the Australian Public Service Commissioner, Mr Peter Woolcott AO, paid considerable attention to maintaining engagement with the APS workforce, including through four open letters to APS staff and four virtual APS200 events, with a fifth scheduled later in November 2020. PM&C considers this focus on continued engagement also contributed to the overall success of the workforce response.

Key messages from this audit for all Australian Government entities

16. Below is a summary of key messages, including instances of good practice, which have been identified in this audit and may be relevant for the operations of other Australian Government entities.

Governance

- In a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, entities involved in the response should have clarity about roles and responsibilities and follow processes consistent with statutory requirements. Accordingly, there would be value in whole-of-government crisis management frameworks, plans and arrangements including consideration of APS-wide operational management matters, such as roles and responsibilities for identifying critical functions, mobilising the APS workforce and issuing APS-wide directions.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to consider workforce risks at an APS-wide level. Governance bodies such as the Secretaries Board and COO Committee provide a mechanism for entities to work together more effectively on managing shared risks.
- When establishing working groups, governance committees should provide clear direction about the scope of proposed work, including specifying outputs and delivery timeframes. It is also good practice for working groups to establish terms of reference (or equivalent) outlining their scope, operating processes and reporting arrangements. Governance committees should monitor the operation of working groups and stand down groups when they are no longer needed.
- To effectively monitor actions initiated by governance bodies, secretariats should adopt a disciplined approach to: clearly and comprehensively recording decisions and actions, including deliverables and timeframes; assigning responsibility for actions; following up with responsible parties; and recording reasons for the closure of actions, including when not completed.
- As APSC demonstrated through the COVID-19 response, entities should maintain an appropriate level of engagement with responsible ministers during a crisis. Frequent briefing that outlines activities, progress and emerging issues enables the Government to take an informed and responsive approach to crisis management. Briefings can be provided in various forms, such as written submissions and meetings, and should be supported by appropriate data.

Policy/program implementation

- Planning in a crisis is difficult due to the imperative to commence implementation as soon as possible. In such circumstances, planning documentation does not need to be elaborate. It is more important to apply a structured process to planning key aspects of the project (such as governance, risk and stakeholder engagement).
- In situations where urgent information is required at a whole-of-government level, invest time up front to develop clear guidance and templates, including defining key concepts and providing criteria for applying them. In setting deadlines, consider the trade-off between haste and data quality. Data gathered in short timeframes offers limited value if it is inconsistent and of poor quality.

- Where entities are producing public materials, it is important to develop clear protocols for review, clearance and updates to help maintain consistency, accuracy and quality. If staff have moved into different roles in response to a crisis, delineating roles and responsibilities and establishing effective lines of internal communications can reduce the risk of inconsistencies or duplication.
- Where timely communication and access to information is critical, having a clear strategy for dissemination, including identifying and addressing potential barriers for access, can help ensure that information is reaching the intended audience in a timely manner. In a crisis, maintaining proactive communication with entities as central guidance is developed can help manage uncertainty and ensure entities are aware of key developments.

Audit findings

1. Background

Introduction

1.1 Since its emergence in late 2019, coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has become a global pandemic that is impacting on human health and national economies. On 21 January 2020 the Australian Government listed COVID-19 as a disease of pandemic potential under the *Biosecurity Act 2015*.² The World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 to be a 'public health emergency of international concern' on 30 January 2020.

1.2 From February 2020 the Australian Government commenced the introduction of a range of policies and measures in response to the emergence of COVID-19. On 18 March 2020, in response to the pandemic in Australia, the Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia declared that a human biosecurity emergency exists.³

1.3 The Australian Government's health and economic response has included:

- travel restrictions and international border control and quarantine arrangements;
- delivery of substantial economic stimulus, including financial support for affected individuals, businesses and communities; and
- support for essential services and procurement of critical medical supplies.

1.4 With the release of the 2020–21 Budget on 6 October 2020, the Australian Government reported it had committed \$507 billion in overall support since the onset of the pandemic, including \$272 billion over five years (2019–20 to 2023–24) in direct economic and health support.

1.5 COVID-19 has had a major impact on the operation of the Australian Public Service (APS), which needed to deploy staff on a large scale to support critical functions and quickly adapt to operating in a COVID-safe environment.

Australian Public Service workforce management

1.6 The *Public Service Act 1999* (PS Act) establishes the legal framework within which the APS operates. Under section 9 of the PS Act, the APS consists of:

- Agency heads — defined as the secretary of a department of state or the head of an executive agency (for example, Bureau of Meteorology) or statutory agency (for example, Murray-Darling Basin Authority)⁴; and
- APS employees — defined as a person engaged under section 22 by an agency head, or under section 72 by a written determination of the APS Commissioner.⁵

2 *Biosecurity (Listed Human Diseases) Amendment Determination 2020*, 21 January 2020.

3 *Biosecurity (Human Biosecurity Emergency) (Human Coronavirus with Pandemic Potential) Declaration 2020*, 18 March 2020.

4 A full list of Commonwealth entities and companies is available at: <https://www.finance.gov.au/government/managing-commonwealth-resources/structure-australian-government-public-sector/pgpa-act-flipchart-list>.

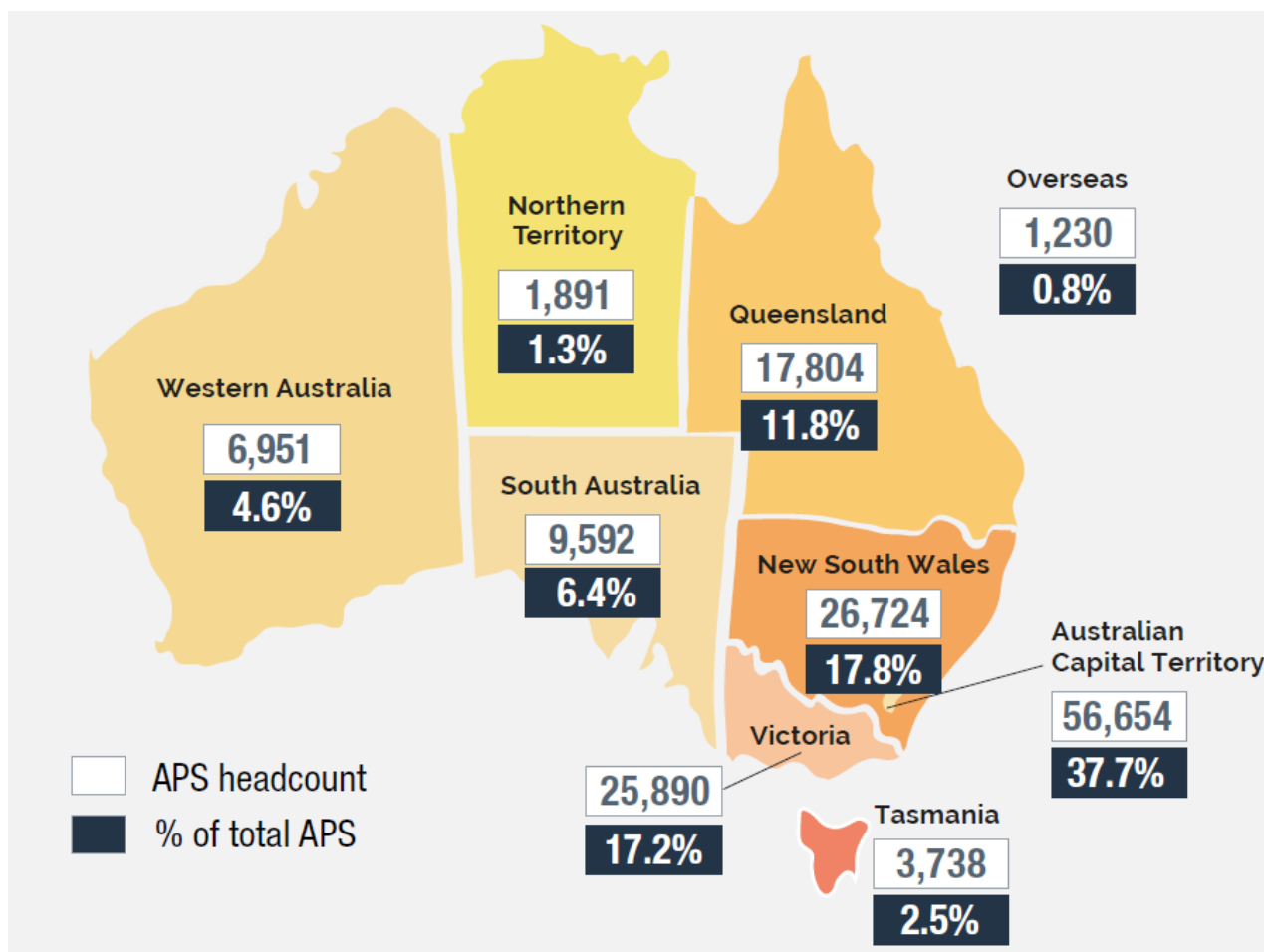
5 Some employees of Commonwealth-owned companies, statutory authorities, the Australian Defence Force, and government business enterprises are not employed under the PS Act.

1.7 As at 30 June 2020, there were 150,474 employees in the APS.

- 87.8 per cent (132,101) were ongoing; and
- 12.2 per cent (18,373) were non-ongoing, comprising:
 - 7,755 employed for a specified term or task; and
 - 10,618 employed on an irregular or intermittent basis (casuals).

1.8 Figure 1.1 provides an overview of the geographical distribution of APS employees.

Figure 1.1: Distribution of APS employees by Australian state and territory and overseas, as at 30 June 2020^a



Note a: Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding.

Source: Australian Public Service Commission, *APS Employment Data — 30 June 2020 release*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2020, p. 2.

Agency heads

1.9 Under section 20 of the PS Act, an agency head, on behalf of the Commonwealth, has the rights, duties and powers of an employer in respect of APS employees in his or her agency. Agency heads are also subject to the duties of accountable authorities under the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013*. Departmental secretaries have additional roles and responsibilities under section 57 of the PS Act, including:

- managing the affairs of the department efficiently, effectively, economically and ethically, and in a way that is not inconsistent the interests of the APS as a whole;
- providing leadership, strategic direction and a focus on results; and
- ensuring that the Minister's portfolio has a strong strategic policy capability that can consider complex, whole-of-government issues.

1.10 Under section 21 of the PS Act, the Prime Minister may also issue general directions to agency heads relating to the management and leadership of APS employees. Such directions are non-disallowable legislative instruments.

APS Commissioner

1.11 Section 41 of the PS Act outlines the APS Commissioner's functions, which include:

- strengthening the professionalism of the APS and facilitating continuous improvement in workforce management in the APS;
- monitoring, reviewing and reporting on APS capabilities within and between agencies to promote high standards of accountability, effectiveness and performance;
- leading the thinking about, providing advice on and driving reforms to workforce management policies so that the APS is ready for future demands;
- developing, reviewing and evaluating workforce management policies and practices;
- partnering with secretaries in the stewardship of the APS;
- providing advice and assistance to agencies on public service matters; and
- such other functions as the Prime Minister, by legislative instrument, directs the Commissioner to perform.

1.12 The Commissioner is supported by the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC), which is a non-corporate Commonwealth entity within the Prime Minister and Cabinet portfolio.

Secretaries Board and Chief Operating Officers Committee

1.13 The Secretaries Board serves as the principal governance forum for the APS. Established under section 64 of the PS Act, it is chaired by the Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) and comprises the secretaries of all departments of state, APS Commissioner and Director-General of National Intelligence. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Commissioner of Taxation and Chief Executive Officers of Services Australia and Digital Transformation Agency have participated in the Board as ex-officio members.

1.14 The Secretaries Board's functions under section 64 of the PS Act are to:

- take responsibility for the stewardship of the APS and for developing and implementing strategies to improve the APS;
- identify strategic priorities for the APS and consider issues that affect the APS;
- set an annual work program, and direct sub-committees to develop strategies to address APS-wide issues and make recommendations to the Secretaries Board;
- draw together advice from senior government, business and community leaders; and
- work collaboratively and model leadership behaviours.

1.15 In February 2020 the Secretaries Board established a sub-committee, the Chief Operating Officers (COO) Committee, which is responsible for coordinating and providing advice on whole-of-government operational and implementation matters. At commencement the COO Committee comprised Deputy Secretaries and COOs from all departments of state, APSC, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Taxation Office, Digital Transformation Agency, Office of National Intelligence and Services Australia. The Committee's membership was expanded to include the Department of Parliamentary Services, National Disability Insurance Agency and National Indigenous Australians Agency from April 2020.

Australian Public Service workforce response to COVID-19

1.16 From the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia in early 2020, the APS workforce had to adapt within a short timeframe to a new operating environment and position itself to handle a surge in demand for government services.

1.17 Governance of the APS workforce response to COVID-19 has been the responsibility of the Secretaries Board, COO Committee, APS Commissioner and agency heads. APSC and PM&C also played central roles in managing the APS's workforce response over this period.

1.18 APSC established two cross-agency taskforces, overseen by the APS Commissioner, to progress key aspects of the APS workforce response:

- the APSC COVID-19 ('single source of truth') Taskforce, which provided consolidated guidance on workforce measures to APS agencies and staff; and
- the Workforce Management Taskforce, which facilitated the deployment of APS employees to support critical functions.

1.19 PM&C provided secretariat services to the Secretaries Board and COO Committee, the governance bodies responsible for oversight of the APS throughout the pandemic.

APSC COVID-19 Taskforce

1.20 APSC issued its first circular on COVID-19 on 31 January 2020 on leave arrangements for APS staff diagnosed with COVID-19. On 11 March 2020, after discussion at the COO Committee about the need for a 'single source of truth' for APS COVID-19 information, APSC established its COVID-19 Taskforce to fulfil this role. The Taskforce was led by an APSC Senior Executive Service (SES) Band 1 officer, and comprised up to 13 staff, including staff seconded from Department of Defence, Department of Home Affairs and PM&C.

1.21 Between March and June 2020 the APSC COVID-19 Taskforce issued 42 guidance products for APS agencies and staff, responded to agency enquiries and disseminated a range of other information. A list of the Taskforce's guidance products is at Appendix 2.

Workforce Management Taskforce

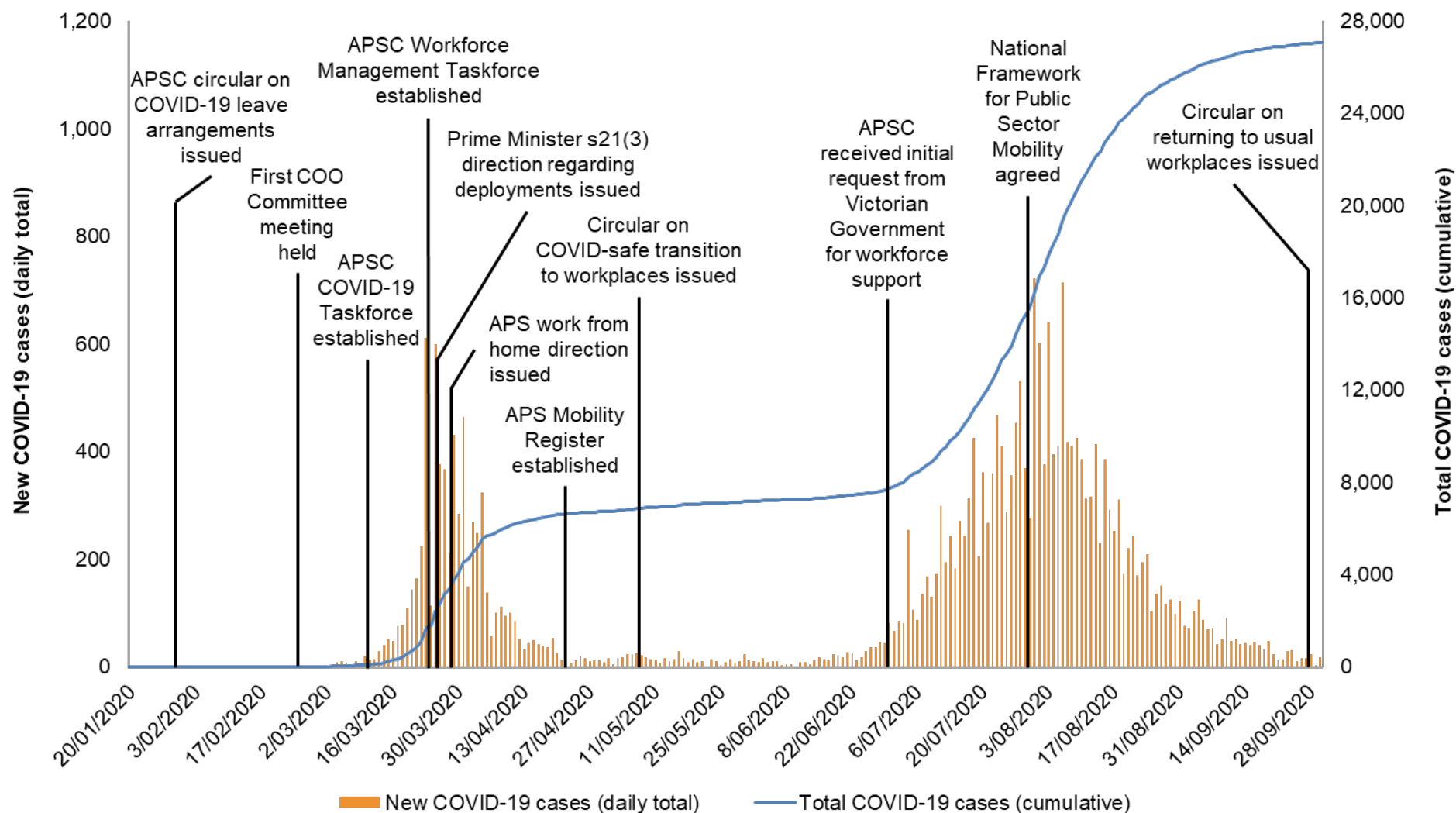
1.22 The APS Commissioner stood up the Workforce Management Taskforce on 24 March 2020 to coordinate the deployment of APS staff to critical functions. The Taskforce was led by an SES Band 2 officer on temporary transfer to APSC from the Australian Taxation Office and comprised up to nine staff, mostly from within APSC.

1.23 On 26 March 2020 the Prime Minister issued a direction to agency heads, under section 21 of the PS Act, requiring information to be provided to the Taskforce on critical functions and staff available for deployment (see Appendix 3).⁶ From late March to August 2020, the Taskforce facilitated deployment of 2,240 staff to other APS agencies to support the Government's COVID-19 response, including 2,165 staff to Services Australia to assist with providing support to affected individuals and households.

1.24 Figure 1.2 provides a timeline of key stages in the APS workforce response to COVID-19, set against a graph of daily and cumulative COVID-19 cases within Australia.

6 *Prime Minister's direction under subsection 21(1) – 2020 (No. 1)*, legislative instrument, 26 March 2020, available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2020L00326> [accessed 2 September 2020].

Figure 1.2: Timeline of APS workforce response to COVID-19 (with Australian daily and cumulative COVID-19 case totals)



Source: ANAO analysis. COVID-19 case data from: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus/country/australia?country=~AUS> [accessed 16 October 2020].

Rationale for undertaking the audit

1.25 The COVID-19 pandemic and the pace and scale of the Australian Government's response impacts on the risk environment faced by the Australian public sector. This audit is one of five performance audits conducted under phase one of the ANAO's multi-year strategy that will focus on the effective, efficient, economical and ethical delivery of the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷

1.26 To support the Australian Government's COVID-19 priorities, the APS needed to quickly adapt its workplace practices and deploy resources to priority areas, while continuing to deliver business-as-usual activities. The ANAO undertook this audit of the management of the APS workforce response to provide assurance to Parliament that arrangements are sound and support the government's COVID-19 response. The audit also contributes to the identification of lessons and good practices that could be applied in future crisis responses.

Audit approach

Audit objective, criteria and scope

1.27 The audit objective was to assess the effectiveness of the management of the APS workforce in implementing the Australian Government's COVID-19 priorities. To form a conclusion against the objective, the ANAO adopted the following high-level audit criteria:

- Were appropriate arrangements established to oversee and monitor the APS's workforce response to COVID-19?
- Were efforts to position the APS workforce to respond to COVID-19 managed effectively?

1.28 The audit did not examine the design and implementation of specific COVID-19 response measures, coordination of the policy response or communication with individuals, businesses and the broader community.

Audit methodology

1.29 The audit methodology involved:

- reviewing governance arrangements for the APS workforce response to COVID-19;
- analysing governance body meeting papers, minutes and other documents and agency documentation;
- interviewing officials from relevant agencies; and
- seeking and analysing representations from other agencies on the effectiveness of the management of the workforce response, including one submission received through the ANAO's website.

1.30 The audit was conducted in accordance with the ANAO Auditing Standards at a cost to the ANAO of approximately \$435,000.

1.31 The audit team was Daniel Whyte, Megan Beven, Alicia Vaughan, Se Eun Lee, Lily Engelbrethsen and Deborah Jackson.

⁷ Further details on the ANAO's COVID-19 multi-year audit strategy can be found at: <https://www.anao.gov.au/work-program/covid-19>.

2. Oversight and monitoring arrangements

Areas examined

This chapter examines the appropriateness of arrangements established to oversee and monitor the Australian Public Service (APS) workforce response to COVID-19, focussing on the operation of the Secretaries Board, Chief Operating Officers (COO) Committee and APS Commissioner, and support provided by the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C).

Conclusion

Arrangements established to oversee and monitor the APS's workforce response to COVID-19 were appropriate. As a whole-of-government framework for managing the APS workforce in a crisis was not in place prior to COVID-19, planning was conducted in flight and risks were managed reactively. APSC established largely appropriate arrangements to oversee, monitor and report on the work of its cross-agency taskforces. Further, the COO Committee provided appropriate oversight for the response, including appropriate monitoring of actions it initiated.

Areas for improvement

The ANAO made suggestions relating to: updating whole-of-government crisis management frameworks to include APS operational matters; and the COO Committee's management of working groups.

2.1 Good governance, which includes appropriate oversight and monitoring, is a critical component of sound public administration. It is especially necessary in a crisis, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, when governments and public service agencies need to respond promptly and decisively to emerging threats. To assess the appropriateness of oversight and monitoring of the APS workforce response to COVID-19, the ANAO examined whether:

- fit for purpose governance arrangements were established;
- key workforce risks were appropriately identified and managed; and
- appropriate arrangements were established to monitor the workforce response and advise the government on implementation issues.

Were fit for purpose governance arrangements established?

Governance arrangements established for the APS workforce response to COVID-19 were fit for purpose. Arrangements established by APSC to oversee the work of its cross-agency COVID-19 taskforces were largely appropriate. After being established by the Secretaries Board in February 2020, the COO Committee actively oversaw the APS response, providing a forum for agencies to agree on coordinated approaches and establish working groups to progress key matters.

2.2 As outlined in Chapter 1, governance of the APS workforce response to COVID-19 was the responsibility of the Secretaries Board, COO Committee, APS Commissioner and agency heads. In addition, APSC established two cross-agency taskforces to progress key aspects of the response: the APSC COVID-19 ('single source of truth') Taskforce and Workforce Management Taskforce.

- 2.3 To assess whether governance arrangements were fit for purpose, the ANAO examined:
- whether a framework was in place for managing the APS workforce in a pandemic;
 - operation of the Secretaries Board and COO Committee during the pandemic;
 - governance arrangements established for APSC's cross-agency taskforces; and
 - the relationship between governance of the APS workforce response and governance arrangements for the government's COVID-19 response.

Framework for managing the APS workforce in a pandemic

2.4 PM&C's 2017 *Australian Government Crisis Management Framework* sets out Australian Government arrangements for managing crises across four phases: prevention, preparedness, response and recovery. It also outlines standing governance arrangements for hazard-specific crisis responses. National crisis response plans and arrangements developed by Australian Government agencies are required to reflect the roles and responsibilities set out in the framework.

2.5 The highest-level planning document for health crises is the *National Health Emergency Response Arrangements* (November 2011), which outlines how the Australian health sector would operate in emergencies of national consequence. At the next level, there are two parallel plans for managing communicable disease incidents:

- *Emergency Response Plan for Communicable Disease Incidents of National Significance* (September 2016) — which guides the health sector response; and
- *Emergency Response Plan for Communicable Disease Incidents of National Significance: National Arrangements* (May 2018) — which guides cross-government arrangements.

In addition, following the emergence of COVID-19, the Department of Health (Health) developed a disease-specific plan, the *Australian Health Sector Emergency Response Plan for Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)* (February 2020).

2.6 These whole-of-government crisis management documents do not include information on managing the APS workforce in response to a pandemic. For example, they do not canvass arrangements such as deployment of APS staff across agencies to support critical functions or coordinating APS-wide workplace measures. Further, while many Australian Government agencies may have business continuity plans in place⁸, there is no framework for APS-wide business continuity in a crisis. Consequently, when the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in Australia, the APS workforce response needed to be planned in-flight.

2.7 There would be value in whole-of-government crisis management frameworks, plans and arrangements being updated to include consideration of APS-wide operational management matters, such as roles and responsibilities for identifying critical functions, mobilising the APS workforce and issuing APS-wide directions.

8 The Attorney-General's Department's Protective Security Policy Framework previously required non-corporate Commonwealth entities to maintain business continuity plans.

Operation of the Secretaries Board and COO Committee

Secretaries Board

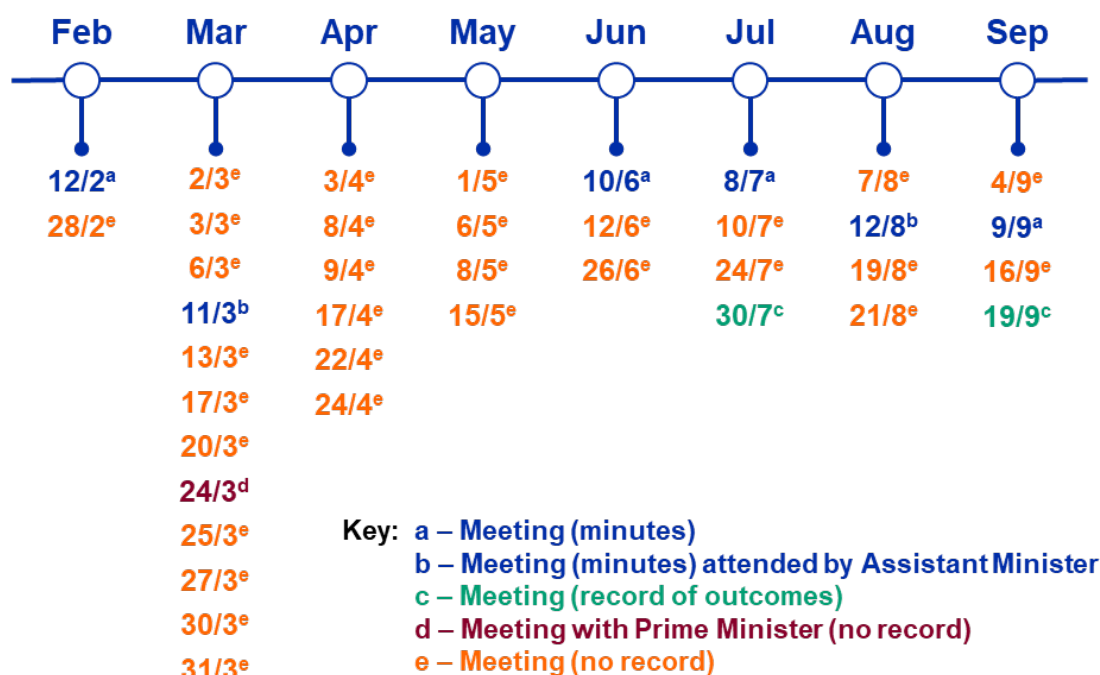
2.8 In an opening statement to a hearing of the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 on 13 May 2020, the Secretary of PM&C stated:

Steering the APS enterprise, as I call it, is the Secretaries Board, the principal service-wide governance group for the APS...

Over the last two months, I have convened the Board more frequently than normal — typically twice weekly. We discuss ways to enhance the APS's role in the Government's response to COVID-19, including implementation of cross-agency decisions arising from National Cabinet; and APS enterprise management of the APS in a COVID-safe environment, including work, health and safety and wellbeing issues.⁹

2.9 Figure 2.1 shows the frequency of Secretaries Board meetings during the pandemic. The Board met 39 times from February to September 2020. Six meetings over that period were considered 'official' meetings with agendas, meeting papers and minutes; two of which (on 11 March and 12 August) were attended by the Assistant Minister to the Prime Minister and Cabinet (Assistant Minister). In addition, the Board held a 'virtual retreat' on 30 July to discuss APS reform priorities and a strategic budget meeting on 19 September, for which outcomes were recorded. PM&C informed the ANAO that other meetings were 'downloads from the Secretary of PM&C to secretaries after National Cabinet meetings', so no official records were prepared.

Figure 2.1: Secretaries Board meetings, January to September 2020



Source: PM&C.

9 Mr Philip Gaetjens, Secretary, PM&C, opening statement tabled at public hearing of the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 in Canberra on 13 May 2020 [Internet], p. 3, available at: https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/COVID-19/COVID19/Additional_Documents?docType=Tabled%20Documents [document 13] [accessed 4 August 2020].

2.10 Analysis of meeting papers and minutes for the six minuted Secretaries Board meetings between February and September 2020 shows it considered aspects of the APS workforce response to COVID-19. Of the 41 substantive agenda items considered by the Board, eleven (27 per cent) were relevant to the APS workforce response.

- The majority of relevant agenda items (six out of eleven) related to the establishment of the COO Committee and updates from the Committee once established.
- Two items, on 12 February and 12 August, related to whole-of-government scenario planning for COVID-19.
- The other two relevant items were updates at its 10 June and 8 July meetings on APS reform, which included priority actions on implementing the government's COVID-19 recovery agenda and workforce planning and capability.¹⁰

2.11 The Secretaries Board made three relevant decisions and initiated two relevant actions between February and July 2020:

- deciding to establish the COO Committee on 12 February¹¹, to use the COO Committee as a vehicle for disseminating its decisions on 11 March and to conduct COVID-19 scenario planning on 12 August; and
- tasking the COO Committee on 8 July with developing a framework for managing deployments of APS staff and on 8 September with providing advice on agencies' progress with returning to workplaces.

2.12 Minutes of a COO Committee meeting of 10 March 2020 also indicate that the Secretaries Board saw the COO Committee as 'responsible for coordinating operational responses and business continuity for the APS' during the pandemic.¹²

COO Committee

2.13 When the Secretaries Board agreed to establish the COO Committee on 12 February 2020, it noted the importance of establishing robust terms of reference, 'including the expectation that the committee will implement Board directives, but also bring ideas forward'.

2.14 The Chair of the COO Committee rotates annually (since February 2020 it has been an SES Band 3 officer from the Department of Finance, who transferred to the Department of Defence in June 2020) and the Deputy Chair is the Deputy Public Service Commissioner. The Committee is supported by a secretariat in PM&C.

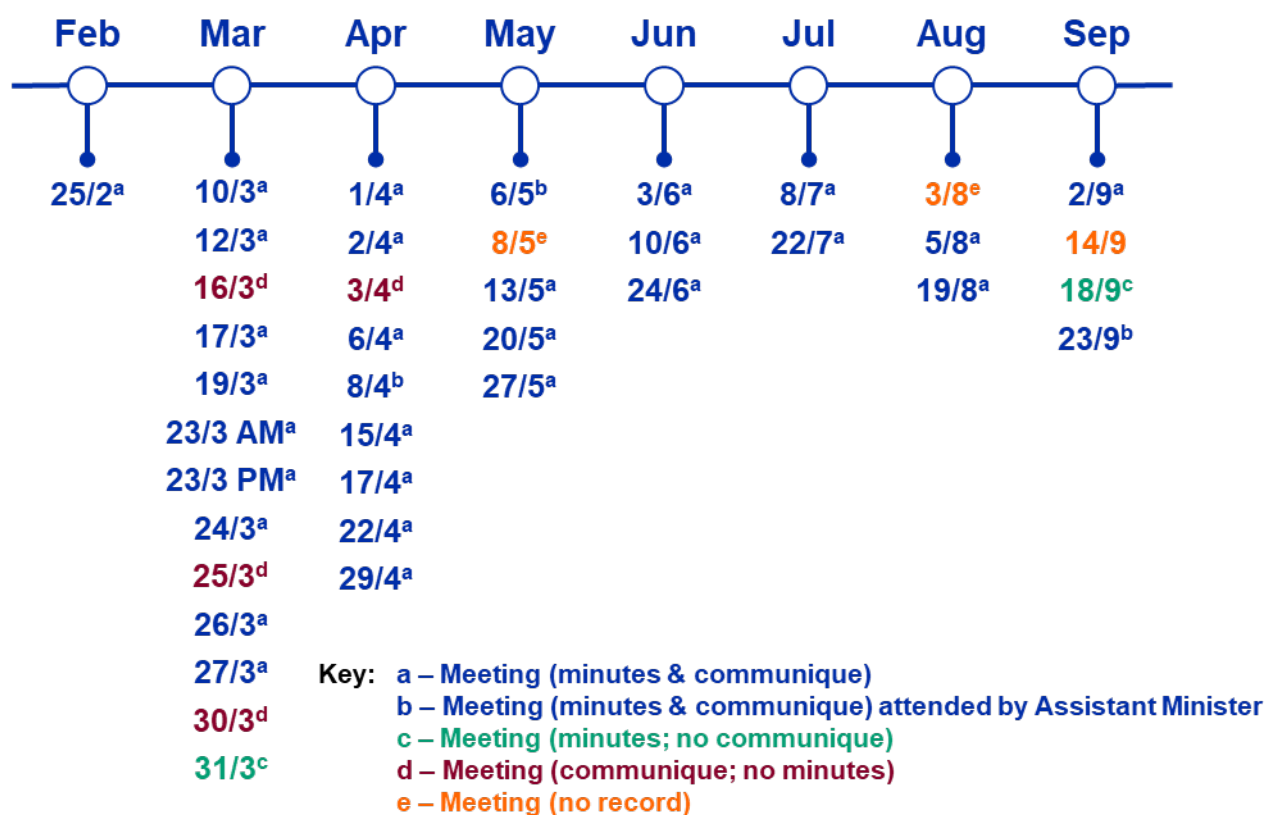
2.15 At its first meeting on 25 February 2020, the COO Committee discussed the Secretaries Board's expectations for its operations and endorsed terms of reference, which outline that the Committee is responsible for:

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- 10 The Secretaries Board is overseeing a program of APS reform activities in response to a review of the APS, led by Mr David Thodey AO, which reported to the Government in September 2019. The APS reform program is outlined in PM&C, *Delivering for Australians. A world-class Australian Public Service: The Government's APS reform agenda* [Internet], Commonwealth of Australia, 2019, available at: <https://pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/delivering-for-australians.pdf> [accessed 15 October 2020].
- 11 Secretaries Board members discussed establishing a COO Committee in January 2020 and a preliminary meeting of COOs was held on 22 January 2020 to discuss air quality issues resulting from bushfires. The Board formally established the Committee the following month at its first meeting of 2020.
- 12 There is no record in Secretaries Board meeting minutes of this decision.

- managing whole-of-government operational and implementation matters; and
- driving delivery of agreed initiatives under the Government's APS reform agenda, in line with the direction set by the Secretaries Board.

2.16 The Committee's terms of reference also state it will meet monthly to progress regular business, and as required to respond to emerging issues with APS-wide operational implications. Due to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic as an issue with APS-wide operational implications, the Committee met 40 times from February to September 2020 (see Figure 2.2). Three meetings (on 8 April, 6 May and 23 September) were attended by the Assistant Minister. The Committee's secretariat within PM&C prepared formal minutes and/or a communique for most meetings.

Figure 2.2: COO Committee meetings, February to September 2020

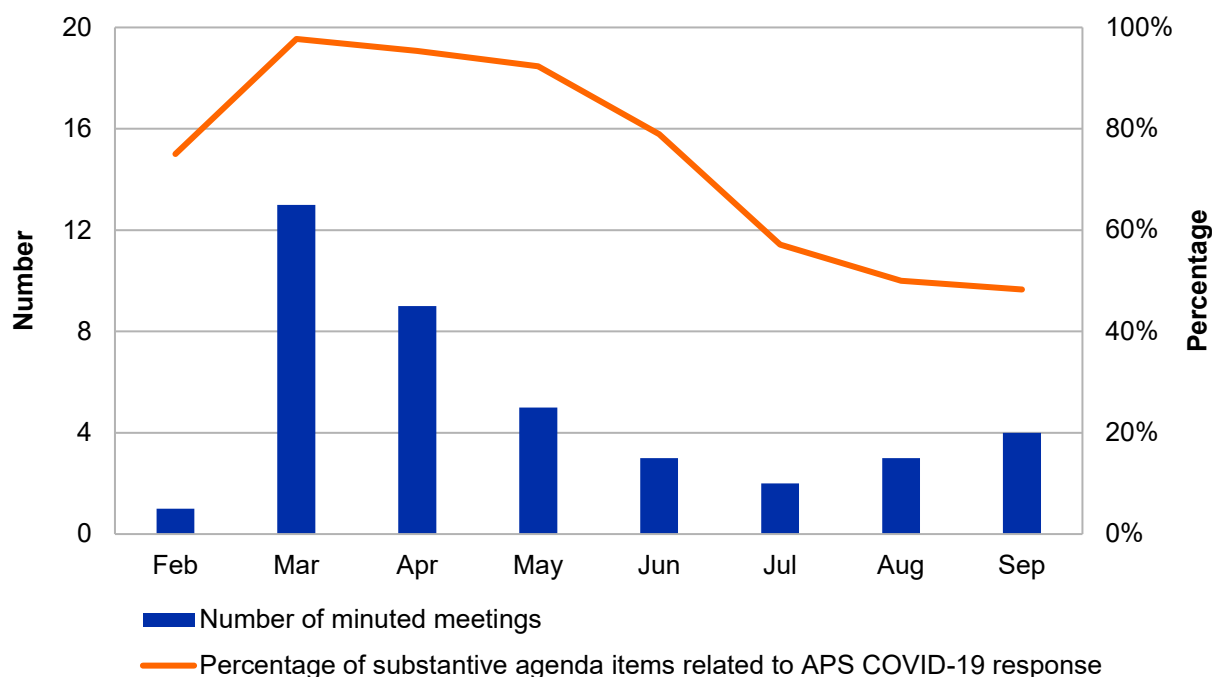


Source: ANAO analysis of COO Committee records.

2.17 Smaller governance groups were also established: a 'tiny group' or 'troika', comprising the Chair, Deputy Chair and a PM&C Deputy Secretary; and a 'small group', which comprised the tiny group and representatives from Health, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), Department of Home Affairs (Home Affairs) and Department of Finance. These groups met on a daily basis during the early stages of the pandemic.

2.18 Over subsequent months, the APS workforce response to COVID-19 was the COO Committee's primary focus. Analysis of Committee meeting papers and minutes show its agenda was dominated by items relating to the APS workforce response over this period (see Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3: COO Committee oversight of APS workforce response to COVID-19, February to September 2020



Source: ANAO analysis of COO Committee records.

2.19 Like the Secretaries Board, the COO Committee does not have statutory decision-making power for APS workforce management. Agency heads are responsible for workforce management under the *Public Service Act 1999* (PS Act), with the Prime Minister and APS Commissioner able to make directions to agency heads relating to workforce matters. Accordingly, the COO Committee played an oversight and coordination role for the APS workforce response to COVID-19, providing advice to the APS Commissioner on APS-wide guidance, and allowing agencies to agree common positions, share information and coordinate operational responses.

2.20 Examples of matters discussed at the COO Committee that were relevant to the APS workforce response include:

- agreeing common positions on APS-wide domestic travel, paying casual APS employees miscellaneous leave for enforced quarantine or sick leave if infected with COVID-19, and not paying APS employees a working from home allowance;
- agreeing in late February 2020 to establish a 'single source of truth' for APS guidance on COVID-19 (which later became the APSC COVID-19 Taskforce's role), and to APSC coordinating responses to media enquiries; and
- agreeing to establish working groups to consider aspects of the APS workforce response and to task them with new activities.

COVID-19 working groups established by the COO Committee

2.21 Between March and June 2020 the COO Committee established eleven cross-agency working groups to advise the Committee on various topics relating to the APS workforce response, eight of which remained ongoing as at September 2020 (see Table 2.1). Two working groups developed terms of reference that were provided to the Committee.

Table 2.1: Working groups established by the COO Committee

Name	Date established	Status (as at September 2020)	Purpose	Terms of reference?
Critical Functions Working Group	10 March 2020	Ceased 24 March 2020	Identify critical APS functions and undertake planning for different COVID-19 scenarios	✗
Chief Information Officers Working Group	10 March 2020	Ongoing	Provide advice on information technology and communications related issues, such as flexible work arrangements	✗
Public-facing Activities Working Group	10 March 2020	Ceased 19 March 2020	Identify publicly-facing activities and develop advice for agencies on managing risks	✗
Human Resources Working Group	26 March 2020	Ongoing	Provide advice on universal, APS-wide human resource issues such as leave arrangements	✓
Maintaining Staff Connections Working Group	31 March 2020	Ceased 20 May 2020	Provide advice on maintaining morale while staff work from home and on enhancing work and social interaction	✗
Assurance Working Group	31 March 2020	Ongoing	Identify and mitigate gaps in agencies' assurance efforts	✓
Transitioning from Crisis to the 'New Normal' Working Group	3 April 2020	Ongoing	Look ahead three to six months and consider measures needed to maintain APS workforce levels and sustain productivity	✗
Risk Working Group	3 April 2020	Ongoing	Identify APS-wide workplace health and safety, cyber-security, security, human resource, financial and governance risks and mitigation strategies	✗
Planning for the Recovery Phase Working Group	3 April 2020	Ongoing	Frame what the recovery phase looks like for the APS, informed by the broader international and economic context	✗
Lessons Learned Working Group	3 April 2020	Ongoing	Review lessons learned to inform and embed improvements post-COVID	✗
Productivity Working Group	3 June 2020	Ongoing	Gain an understanding of the impacts of COVID-19 on workforce productivity across the APS	✗

Source: ANAO analysis.

COO Committee governance lessons

2.22 The Lessons Learned Working Group presented a paper to the COO Committee in July 2020 on lessons learned from a survey of Committee members conducted from May to June 2020 and review of Committee meeting minutes. Themes identified in the paper in relation to the COO Committee's operations during the COVID-19 pandemic are outlined in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2: Themes identified in the COO Committee's lessons learned review

What worked well?	What didn't work well?	What would be useful to start or improve?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Facilitation of a consistent approach• Collaboration and collegiality of members• Communication to keep members up-to-date	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Insufficient time to consider papers and have fulsome discussions• Information overload• Working group operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shifting to a broader, post-COVID agenda• New meeting processes• Broader engagement with other agencies and stakeholders

Source: Paper for COO Committee meeting of 8 July 2020.

2.23 Working group operations were identified in the paper as an area that 'didn't work well'. Members noted in survey responses that working groups overlapped in focus, suffered scope creep and would have benefited from stronger direction. The paper included various recommendations to the Committee, including the following in relating to working groups:

- Review outstanding papers and/or comebacks to the Committee and ensure these are either delivered or stood down.
- Close the loop on the Strategic Working Groups Refresh to re-align purpose, scope, and membership with current requirements. Provide the refreshed groups with clear direction and expectations on deliverables and timeframes. Review regularly.

2.24 The COO Committee endorsed the paper, including the recommendations, although it did not agree to next steps at that time or report the lesson learned to the Secretaries Board. In September 2020 the COO Committee agreed to develop a strategic work program for the next three to six months. PM&C informed the ANAO that the strategic planning process would include a stocktake of previous working groups, which would be refreshed as required.

2.25 Going forward, the COO Committee should: provide clear direction about the scope of proposed work when establishing working groups, including specifying outputs and delivery timeframes; monitor the operation of working groups; and stand down groups when they are no longer needed. Working groups should also establish terms of reference (or equivalent) outlining their scope, operating processes and reporting arrangements.

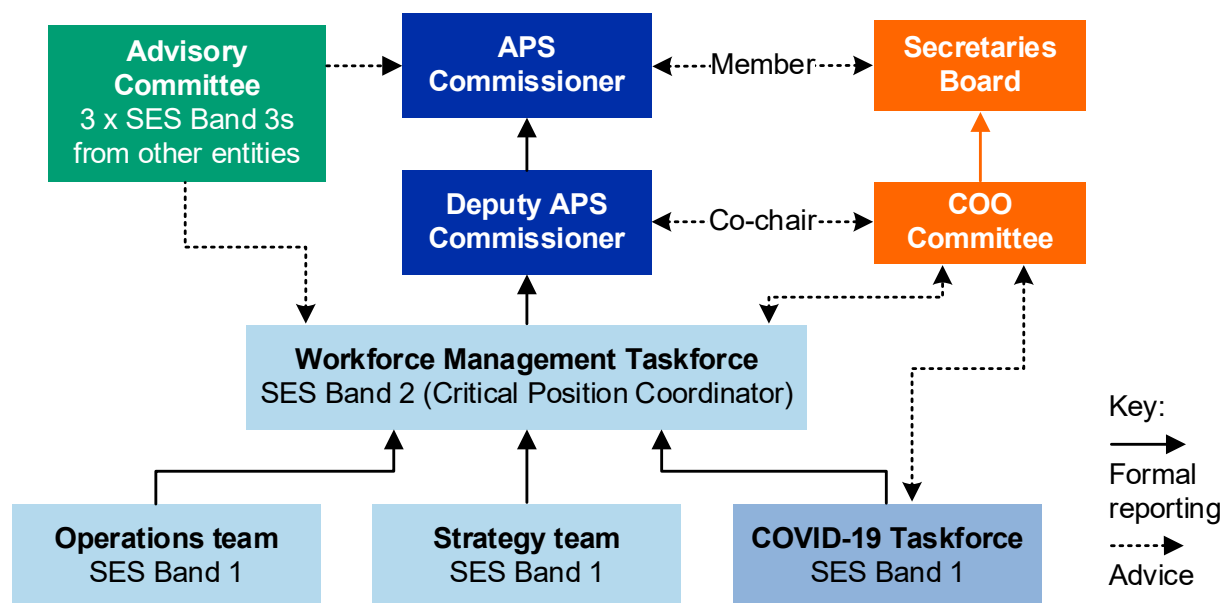
Governance arrangements for APSC's COVID-19 taskforces

2.26 On 25 February 2020 the COO Committee agreed it would be beneficial if there was a single source for any future messaging to ensure consistency across the APS and tasked Health with leading this work. At its next meeting on 10 March 2020 the COO Committee noted APSC would establish a taskforce to provide a 'single source of truth for APS-related information concerning the COVID-19 response' and requested nominations for the taskforce. APSC stood up its COVID-19 Taskforce the following day, led by an APSC Senior Executive Service (SES) Band 1 officer.

2.27 On 19 March 2020 the COO Committee tasked an SES Band 2 officer from the Australian Taxation Office with the role of Critical Position Coordinator to coordinate deployments of APS employees for critical functions. The following week the Critical Position Coordinator transferred to APSC to lead the Workforce Management Taskforce, which the APS Commissioner stood up on 24 March 2020 to: ‘rapidly deploy the APS workforce to the most critical government functions; and ensure APS employees able to work are assigned meaningful work’. APSC established an advisory committee for the taskforce comprised of three SES Band 3 officers from DFAT, Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources and Department of Social Services.

2.28 The governance structure for APSC’s two taskforces from April to May 2020 is depicted at Figure 2.4. The taskforces were also supported by other business areas within APSC. The structure and reporting arrangements evolved over time, and both taskforces transitioned into APSC’s business as usual structure in July 2020. The operation of both taskforces is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Figure 2.4: APSC COVID-19 taskforces governance structure, April–May 2020^a



Note a: The governance structure changed over time and the COVID-19 Taskforce did not always report through the Critical Position Coordinator. April–May 2020 represented the peak period of operation for both taskforces.

Source: ANAO analysis.

Committee oversight

2.29 The Workforce Management Taskforce’s SES Band 3 Advisory Committee met 25 times between 25 March and 26 June 2020, after which it entered a ‘watching brief’ phase. Records of its meetings indicate it discussed emerging issues relating to the APS COVID-19 workforce response and deployment of APS staff to Services Australia, including:

- on-boarding deployed APS staff at Services Australia;
- workplace health and safety at Services Australia call centres;
- industrial relations implications of deploying APS staff on a non-voluntary basis;
- messaging from agencies on the voluntary nature of deployments;
- modelling critical functions and agency interpretations of what is critical; and

- keeping APS casual staff engaged with declining workloads in some agencies.

2.30 The COVID-19 Taskforce committed on 19 March 2020 to consult the COO Committee when updating guidance if it involved a change to APS workforce policies, and both taskforces provided regular updates to the Committee.

2.31 APSC established appropriate governance arrangements for the two taskforces that were consistent with the APS Commissioner's responsibilities under the PS Act. As the COO Committee does not have decision-making power (see paragraph 2.19) it played an advisory role, with the APS Commissioner responsible for decisions relating to the taskforces. The establishment of these arrangements supported accountability and ensured clarity of roles and responsibilities for the pandemic response.

Taskforce planning

2.32 APSC developed some planning documentation to guide the work of its taskforces.

- When the COVID-19 Taskforce was established, APSC held a planning meeting and developed an initial outline document, which included a purpose, proposed activities and outputs, and estimate of required resourcing. The taskforce initially tried to establish a 'Kanban' system for managing its work¹³, but noted that it was 'overtaken by events'.
- For the Workforce Management Taskforce, the Critical Position Coordinator provided a short PowerPoint presentation to the COO Committee outlining the taskforce's intent, key elements of its approach, its governance structure, work underway and next steps.

2.33 As noted at paragraph 2.6, no overarching framework was in place for APS-wide business continuity, so planning for the APS workforce response was largely conducted in-flight. APSC informed the ANAO that planning was difficult due to the unpredictability and pace of events in the early phase of the pandemic.

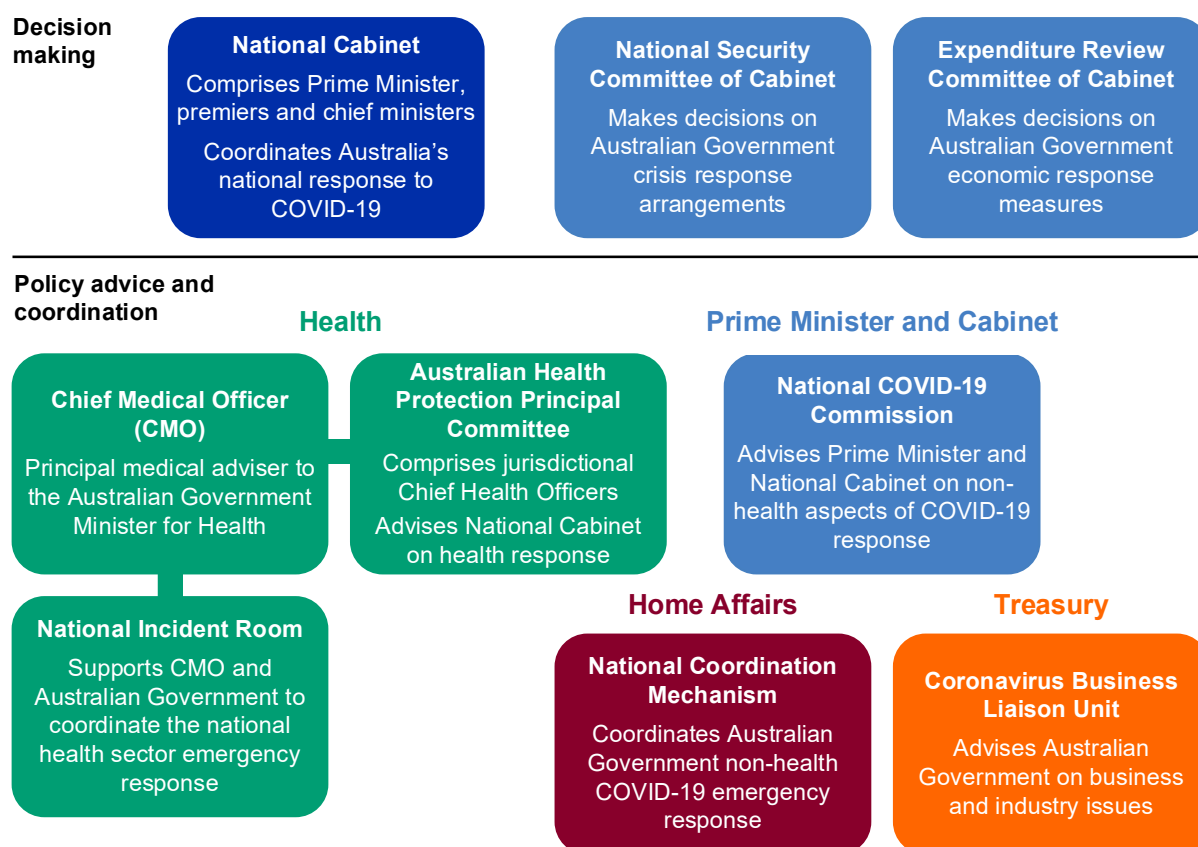
2.34 Planning in a crisis can be difficult due to the imperative to commence implementation as soon as possible. In such circumstances, planning documentation does not need to be elaborate. It is more important to apply a structured process to planning key aspects of the project (such as governance, risk and stakeholder engagement).

2.35 PM&C presented a paper to the COO Committee on 2 September 2020 outlining a project it is undertaking to develop a toolkit for scoping, setting up and running taskforces. The project, due to be completed by November 2020, has the potential to assist future taskforces to plan more effectively in challenging circumstances.

Relationship between APS workforce response and the Australian Government's COVID-19 response

2.36 Governance arrangements for the Australian Government's COVID-19 response are depicted in Figure 2.5. These arrangements differ from the standing arrangements outlined in the *Australian Government Crisis Management Framework*. The framework states that special purpose or temporary response mechanisms may be appropriate in some cases, noting the importance of 'clear lines for information sharing, decision making and accountability'.

13 Kanban is a project management method used in manufacturing and software development.

Figure 2.5: Governance of the Australian Government's COVID-19 response

Source: ANAO analysis of PM&C documents.

2.37 While no formal reporting lines were established between the Secretaries Board, COO Committee and APSC taskforces and bodies responsible for policy advice and coordination for the national COVID-19 response, adequate communication and information sharing occurred.

- The COO Committee received briefings from Health's Deputy Chief Medical Officer or Principal Medical Advisor at regular intervals (on 10 March, 31 March, 22 April, 6 May, 20 May, 3 June, 8 July, 5 August and 2 September 2020).
- Members of the Committee and APSC's taskforces received the National Incident Room's daily whole-of-government talking points on the COVID-19 response.
- Minutes of the COO Committee's 11 March 2020 meeting state its role would not overlap with that of the National Coordination Mechanism in Home Affairs, which had been established the week before. There is evidence the Committee engaged with the National Coordination Mechanism through the Home Affairs COO for advice on COVID-19 measures.
- In late March 2020 APSC noted in a minute to the Secretaries Board and information provided to its Minister's office that the Workforce Management Taskforce would work closely with the National COVID-19 Commission. While the Taskforce was involved in deploying staff to the Commission, the proposed working relationship did not eventuate as the focus of the two bodies did not require it.

Were key workforce risks appropriately identified and managed?

A whole-of-government risk assessment for managing the APS workforce in a crisis had not been conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, key workforce risks from COVID-19 were largely managed reactively. The COO Committee identified the need for an APS-wide risk assessment in early April 2020, but this work has not been conducted. APSC did not consider operational risks in establishing its two cross-agency taskforces. APSC updated its enterprise risk register to include consideration of shared risks to the APS in November 2020.

2.38 Section 16 of the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* (PGPA Act) provides that accountable authorities of Commonwealth entities must establish and maintain appropriate systems of risk oversight and management. The 2014 *Commonwealth Risk Management Policy* outlines additional requirements for non-corporate Commonwealth entities, including that entities 'implement arrangements to understand and contribute to the management of shared risks'.¹⁴

2.39 The Secretaries Board is responsible under the PS Act for identifying strategic priorities for the APS and considering issues that affect the APS. The Board and sub-committees such as the COO Committee provide potential mechanisms for agencies to understand and manage APS-wide risks at a strategic level.

2.40 At an individual agency level, APSC was responsible for managing risks associated with the operation of its COVID-19 Taskforce and Workforce Management Taskforce in accordance with the requirements of the PGPA Act and *Commonwealth Risk Management Policy*.

2.41 To assess whether risks were appropriately identified and managed, the ANAO examined:

- whether the Secretaries Board and COO Committee considered APS-wide workforce risks from COVID-19 at a strategic level; and
- APSC's management of risks associated with its cross-agency taskforces.

Secretaries Board and COO Committee consideration of APS-wide risks

2.42 As outlined at paragraph 2.6, there was no overarching framework in place for APS-wide business continuity prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, a whole-of-government plan for managing APS workforce risks in such a crisis had not been developed.

2.43 In late 2019 and early 2020 bushfires affected large areas of Australia causing air quality issues, including in Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney (where most APS staff are based). The COO Network (a precursor to the COO Committee) discussed lessons learned from the APS's role in the bushfires at a meeting on 22 January 2020, including identifying the need to establish a standing incident management team to lead the APS in a crisis and for one agency to take the lead on disseminating consistent information. It also received a briefing from the Chief Medical Officer on the emerging COVID-19 threat.

2.44 The Secretaries Board was alerted to the cross-government risks of COVID-19 on 12 February 2020 (its first meeting of 2020) through a joint paper from the secretaries of Health

¹⁴ Department of Finance, *Commonwealth Risk Management Policy*, Commonwealth of Australia, 1 July 2014, p. 16.

and Home Affairs. The paper outlined the need for awareness of COVID-19 across senior levels of the APS, to ensure disaster and business continuity plans were joined up, and asked the Board to endorse whole-of-government scenario planning. Minutes of the meeting do not record the Board's endorsement.¹⁵

2.45 Messaging conveyed from the PM&C Secretary at the COO Committee's first official meeting on 25 February 2020 included statements that: the Secretaries Board sees the Committee as 'running the operations of the APS enterprise'; the Committee 'should be action-oriented in managing enterprise-wide risks'; and it has 'the full support of the Board and should proceed with confidence'. In line with this direction, from late February to April 2020, the COO Committee initiated various actions in response to emerging APS-wide workforce risks (see Box 1). As it was reacting to risks in an unfolding crisis, some actions did not progress as intended.

Box 1: Examples of COO Committee actions responding to emerging risks

Establishing a 'single source of truth'

Recognising the need for consistent APS-wide information in a crisis, on 25 February 2020 the COO Committee tasked Health, with support from DFAT and Home Affairs, to establish a single source of truth for the APS on COVID-19. From 11 March 2020 the APSC COVID-19 Taskforce took over this role, issuing 42 guidance products and disseminating a range of other information.

Identifying critical functions and modelling pandemic scenarios

With potential for widespread infections, the COO Committee established a working group on 10 March 2020 to identify critical APS functions and model pandemic scenarios. The group developed an initial paper, which outlined high-level preliminary observations, and started work on a more detailed paper to identify critical functions and resourcing requirements. This work transitioned to APSC's Workforce Management Taskforce after it was established on 24 March 2020 (discussed in more detail in Chapter 3).

Commissioning advice on public-facing activities and maintaining staff connections

The Committee established working groups on 10 March 2020 to provide advice on risks for public-facing agencies and on 31 March 2020 to provide advice on maintaining staff connections and morale while working from home. Both groups facilitated information-sharing between agencies.

Other actions

The Committee oversaw the establishment of a COVID-19 hotline to provide support to APS human resources staff in managing staff mental health issues. It also reviewed and disseminated documents prepared by the Attorney-General's Department and Australian Federal Police COVID-19 counter fraud taskforce.

Risk and assurance working groups

2.46 On 31 March 2020 the COO Committee established an Assurance Working Group to identify fit for purpose governance and assurance principles for agencies in the COVID-19 environment. The

¹⁵ The Secretaries Board agreed to conduct a scenario planning exercise in August 2020.

group developed reference papers for dissemination across the APS covering five focus areas: citizen experience; decision-making and governance; fraud and integrity; cross-agency risk and assurance; and preparing for a potential ANAO audit.

2.47 In April 2020 the COO Committee noted that it was ‘carrying a high degree of risk across a number of areas’ and tasked the Secretariat with establishing a Risk Working Group to develop a paper on risks and mitigations in areas such as cyber, security, human resources, financial, and governance. The Risk Working Group reported back to the COO Committee on 3 May 2020 with a paper that canvassed ‘how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the [APS] approach to identifying and managing risk, and the lessons learned’.

2.48 While the papers prepared by both working groups contain useful insights and analysis, neither group conducted structured analysis of shared APS-wide risks from COVID-19 with the aim of identifying opportunities to strengthen existing controls or establish mitigation strategies. The Risk Working Group’s paper noted there would be benefit in conducting a whole-of-government exercise to identify new common and shared risks at an appropriate time. On 18 September 2020 the COO Committee held a strategic planning workshop, at which it discussed proposals to develop APS-wide crisis management and risk assessment approaches.

2.49 The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to consider workforce risks at an APS-wide level. Governance bodies such as the Secretaries Board and COO Committee provide a mechanism for agencies to work together more effectively on managing shared risks. Accordingly, it is appropriate that these bodies undertake work to examine common and shared risks emerging from the crisis.

APSC’s management of cross-agency taskforce risks

2.50 APSC refreshed its agency-level risk management framework in early 2020, following internal reviews that found shortcomings with its previous framework and risk culture, including:

- little evidence of groups managing risk plans or registers to ensure an effective process for analysing and treating risks at an operational level; and
- little practical awareness of how to identify and manage shared risks (which was noted in the review as a problem across government due to the unwillingness of agencies to proactively discuss and ‘own’ elements of risk).

2.51 APSC released a revised risk framework in March 2020 and risk assessment handbook in April. The new framework states that operational level risk assessments are to be undertaken when ‘major new projects are proposed or commenced’.¹⁶

2.52 Neither the COVID-19 Taskforce nor the Workforce Management Taskforce conducted a structured risk assessment at commencement in line with APSC’s risk framework. Further, APSC did not brief its Audit and Risk Committee on risks relevant to its taskforces.

2.53 APSC’s cross-agency taskforces proactively managed some risks, and briefing to the Government included commentary on risks and emerging issues.

16 APSC’s previous risk management framework required risk assessment to be undertaken and documented when establishing a taskforce.

- For example, continuing the Critical Functions Working Group's scenario planning task, the Workforce Management Taskforce conducted worst-case scenario pandemic modelling for the APS. It provided preliminary findings to the Assistant Minister to the Prime Minister and Cabinet on 22 April 2020 and COO Committee on 29 April 2020, noting workforce availability 'should be manageable within the existing resources across the system and with a strong focus on resource mobilisation to critical functions'.
- Further, the APSC COVID-19 Taskforce released APS-wide guidance on 'preparing for a COVID-safe transition for APS workforces' on 8 May 2020, the same day National Cabinet agreed a three-step plan to remove the restrictions in place at that time.

2.54 However, due to the rapidly developing nature of the pandemic and the absence of an existing APS-wide risk management plan, other risks were managed reactively after issues emerged and were brought to the attention of the taskforces. In some cases, APSC's taskforces were slow to identify and respond to emerging risks. For example, arrangements for APS staff deployments established on 31 March 2020 relied on home agencies continuing to pay their staff while seconded to other agencies. Potential issues with agencies paying seconded staff from a special account or special appropriation¹⁷ were not raised with agencies until 30 April 2020, a month after staff were first deployed through the Taskforce.

2.55 APSC advised the ANAO that responsibility for managing workforce risks sat with individual agencies and there were no mechanisms in place for APS-wide risk assessment. Nevertheless, APSC should have assessed the operational risks of its taskforces in line with its risk management framework. Further, as the agency responsible for advising agencies on APS workforce management, it could play a stronger role in identifying and managing shared risks.

2.56 APSC's *Corporate Plan 2020–21*, published in August 2020, outlines four enterprise risks:

1. Failure to meet our statutory obligations under the Public Service Act
2. Data integrity
3. Failure to deliver on key outcomes and to be a valued, credible and trusted partner to APS agencies
4. Inability to attract, develop and retain required workforce capabilities.¹⁸

2.57 These risks are supported by an enterprise risk register, which outlines causes, consequences and controls for each risk. While risks one and three relate to APSC's role in APS workforce management, its analysis of risks in the register focussed on internal operations and did not include consideration of shared risks to the APS as a whole. APSC updated the risk register in November 2020 to include an additional enterprise risk: 'Failure to effectively co-ordinate workforce risks across the APS'.

17 Legislation establishing special accounts and special appropriations generally outline the purposes for which expenditure can occur, which may limit the capacity of agencies to pay seconded staff from these sources.

18 APSC, 'Risk oversight and management', in *Corporate Plan 2020–21* [Internet], August 2020, available at: <https://www.apsc.gov.au/risk-oversight-and-management-1> [accessed 16 October 2020].

Were appropriate arrangements established to monitor the workforce response and advise the Government on implementation issues?

Appropriate arrangements were established for monitoring the APS workforce response to COVID-19 and advising the Government on implementation issues. APSC's reporting to the COO Committee and Government on its cross-agency taskforces was appropriate and included discussion of emerging issues. The COO Committee's monitoring of the response was largely effective, given the environment in which it was operating, and it provided regular reporting to the Secretaries Board.

2.58 Monitoring and reporting are essential in a crisis to ensure key initiatives are delivered as intended, and to identify and escalate any issues early. Section 19 of the PGPA Act requires that accountable authorities keep the responsible Minister informed of the activities of the entity and notify the Minister of any significant decisions or issues. This should include the provision of any reports, documents and information as the Minister requires.

2.59 To assess whether appropriate arrangements were established to monitor the workforce response and advise the Government on implementation issues, the ANAO examined:

- the COO Committee's monitoring of actions and reporting to the Secretaries Board; and
- APSC's reporting on the work of its taskforces and any associated implementation issues to the Government and COO Committee.

COO Committee monitoring and reporting

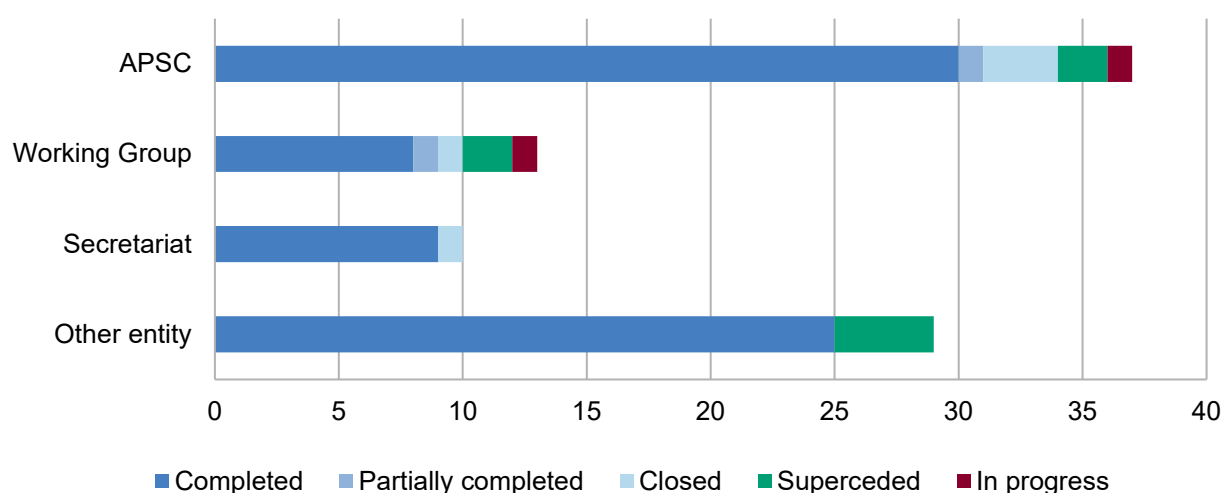
Monitoring of key actions

2.60 Actions initiated by the COO Committee were generally recorded in meeting minutes. The Committee secretariat also maintained an 'actions tracker' document from March to May 2020 to record actions that required follow-up, including some actions initiated outside of meetings. The tracker included start and end dates, responsibilities, status and notes.

2.61 The COO Committee secretariat monitored progress and outputs and contacted responsible parties when actions were overdue. An 'outstanding actions' item was included on the agenda for five of the seven COO Committee meetings from 17 to 31 March 2020. Follow-up of actions was less systematic after this date, particularly from mid-May 2020 when the secretariat ceased using the tracker to monitor actions.

2.62 Based on review of COO Committee meeting minutes, the actions tracker and other documentation, the ANAO identified 89 unique actions initiated from February to July 2020 that were material to the APS's workforce response to COVID-19.¹⁹ Figure 2.6 provides a breakdown of the status of these actions.

19 This excluded actions not related to the COVID-19 response, administrative actions, or actions that were sub-components of other actions. Examples of administrative actions included: invitations for Committee members to provide feedback on a particular paper or initiative; scheduling of future discussions or agenda items; or requests to circulate public or supplementary information.

Figure 2.6: Status of COO Committee actions

Source: ANAO analysis.

2.63 Actions generally had clear accountabilities assigned. The majority (83 per cent) of actions were fully or partially implemented. Some actions were closed without being completed due to being overtaken by events (6 per cent); or were superseded by other actions (9 per cent). As at September 2020, two actions (2 per cent) remained in progress.

2.64 Documentation of actions was not always consistent, with 31 per cent of material actions recorded in meeting minutes and not the actions tracker, 18 per cent recorded in the tracker and not minutes, and 51 per cent documented in both. Consequently, the actions tracker did not represent a consolidated record of all material actions initiated by the Committee. In addition, actions and decisions were not always clearly articulated.

Reporting to the Secretaries Board

2.65 The COO Committee provided updates to the Secretaries Board, commencing in March 2020. From mid-March to mid-May 2020, the Chair of the Committee provided six email updates to Secretaries Board members. The Chair also provided verbal updates at Secretaries Board meetings on 11 March and 10 June 2020, and verbal updates accompanied by meeting papers on 8 July and 12 August 2020.

2.66 Information contained in the updates and meeting papers included the COO Committee's:

- meeting frequency;
- key focus areas, working groups, initiatives and outputs; and
- the approach to identifying and sustaining critical functions.

2.67 While reporting provided a concise snapshot of the COO Committee's activities, it did not consistently include details of outcomes. For example, where the COO Committee agreed common positions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it only reported this to the Secretaries Board on one occasion — when it agreed to minimise non-essential domestic travel.²⁰ Further, the Committee's reports did not raise any risks or issues related to the APS workforce response.

²⁰ Common positions not reported to the Board included: leave arrangements for casual employees; retention of casual employees; continuation of recruitment; and not introducing 'working from home' allowances.

2.68 APSC and PM&C advised the ANAO that COOs also individually keep their secretaries or agency heads up-to-date. In addition, the COO Committee received positive feedback from the Secretaries Board on its performance.

Other communication activities

2.69 In addition to reporting to the Secretaries Board, the COO Committee provided regular communications to Committee members and the wider APS.

2.70 The COO Committee secretariat circulated a daily bulletin to Committee members from mid-March to late May 2020 and weekly bulletins thereafter. These bulletins included daily messages and key action items for all COOs; for example, requesting feedback on draft documents or circulation of messages to portfolio agencies. Daily bulletins included a copy of the actions tracker until mid-May 2020. The bulletins also included communiques summarising key messages from COO Committee meetings for a broader APS audience. In addition, the Committee published APS-wide newsletters, 'Connecting Us', for the purpose of 'sharing stories of success and highlighting useful resources'.²¹

2.71 The COO Committee's review of lessons learned (discussed in paragraph 2.22) identified its communications were 'effective and helpful', for example 'in keeping executives and portfolio agencies updated'. However, the report also noted 'information overload' as a 'strong theme' in the review, with members reporting that there was 'a lot of information sent' and documents were 'sometimes distributed more than once and actions spread across multiple emails'.

APSC reporting to the Government and COO Committee

Reporting of implementation issues to the Prime Minister and Assistant Minister

2.72 Under the current ministerial arrangements, responsibility for the APS sits with the Prime Minister and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Public Service and Cabinet (Minister Assisting). On 6 April 2020, due to competing pressures from the COVID-19 pandemic on the Minister Assisting, who was also the Minister for Health, responsibility for public service matters was temporarily transferred to the Assistant Minister to the Prime Minister and Cabinet (Assistant Minister).

2.73 From March to August 2020, APSC provided 41 submissions to the Prime Minister, Minister Assisting and/or Assistant Minister in relation to the APS workforce response to COVID-19. Submissions included advice on emerging risks and issues, including handling strategies, focussed largely on supporting critical functions through redeployment, protecting employee health, legislative compliance, workforce productivity and reputational risks. Examples of risks and issues raised in submissions include:

- the possibility of an increase in COVID-19 cases among APS employees;
- issues with the mobilisation of APS staff, such as staff not arriving as scheduled or those at high-risk from COVID-19 being unable to attend the workplace;
- potential impacts of school closures on the APS;

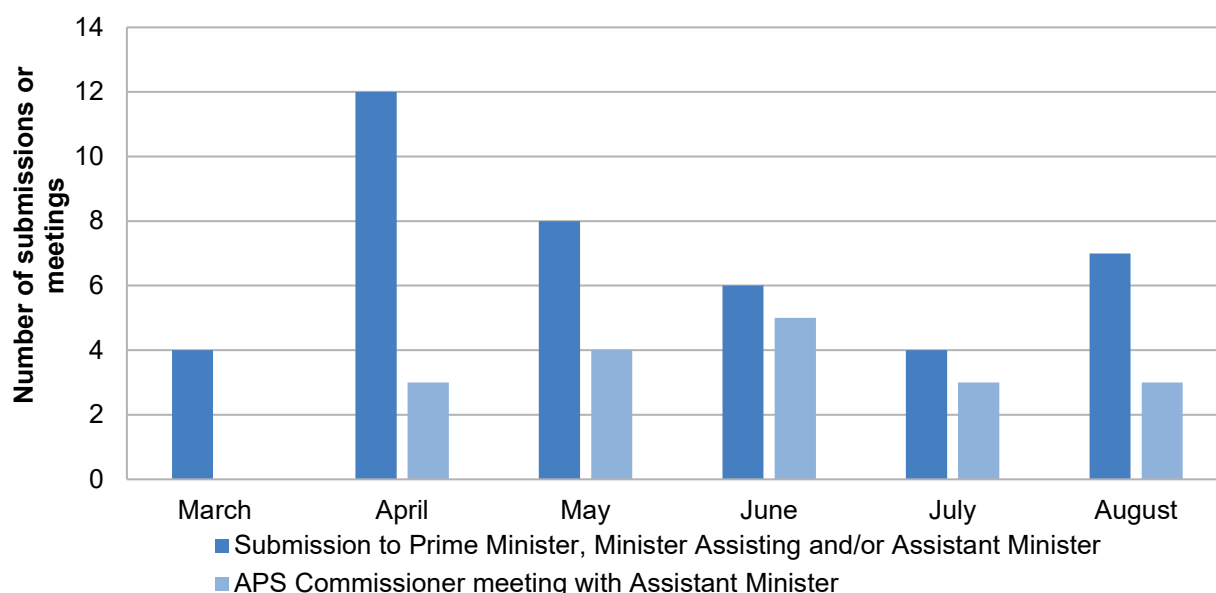
21 COO Committee, *Connecting Us Edition 1* [Internet], PM&C, 14 April 2020, available at: <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resource-centre> [accessed 28 September 2020].

- legal risks relating to the deployment of APS staff to assist with the Victorian COVID-19 response; and
- impacts of a wage increase deferral on APS productivity and public perceptions.

2.74 Many of the submissions (21 out of 41) also included dashboards prepared by APSC, which presented a statistical profile of the APS workforce, including deployments and other COVID-19 impacts. Dashboards were generally provided at least once a week, commencing in April 2020.

2.75 In addition to written submissions, the APS Commissioner met with the Assistant Minister regularly from early April 2020, usually on a weekly or fortnightly basis. Standing meeting topics included the APS wage increase deferral, redeployment and return to workplaces.

Figure 2.7: APSC briefing to the Prime Minister, Minister Assisting and Assistant Minister, March–August 2020



Source: ANAO analysis of APSC internal records.

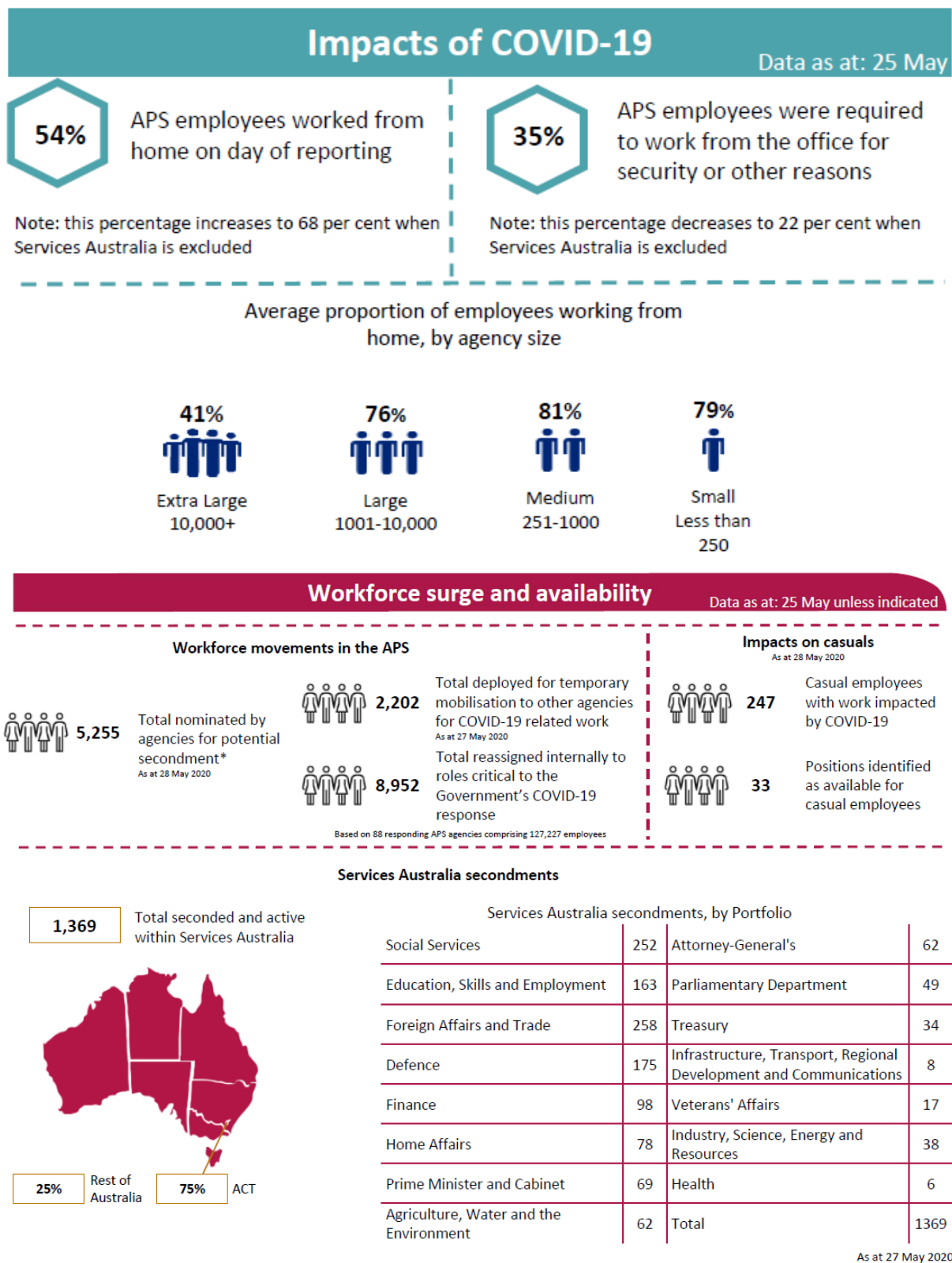
2.76 APSC maintained an appropriate level of engagement with responsible ministers through the COVID-19 response. It provided frequent briefings that outlined activities, progress and emerging issues.

Dashboard reporting

2.77 As noted at paragraph 2.74, APSC prepared regular dashboards, which were circulated to the Prime Minister, Assistant Minister and COO Committee on a weekly basis from April 2020. Dashboards provided details of the numbers of staff in critical functions, nominations for redeployments and actual redeployments. Dashboards often also included statistics on COVID-19 cases in the APS²² and the proportion of employees working from home. Extracts of key components of the dashboard are shown at Figure 2.8.

22 Numbers of confirmed cases, current cases, employees recovered, employees hospitalised and employees deceased. From late March 2020, when the first dashboards were prepared, the number of confirmed cases ranged from 10 to 80.

Figure 2.8: Extracts from APSC's COVID-19 APS Dashboard, as at 25-28 May 2020^a



Note a: The dashboard included a disclaimer that the data is indicative and should be interpreted with care because some agencies could only provide estimates and others did not respond. In addition, APSC noted that the dashboard captured information from agencies operating under the PS Act.

Source: APSC.

2.78 APSC refined its dashboards over time and introduced data of interest to the Assistant Minister. For example, following the Assistant Minister's advice in late April 2020 of the Government's desire to retain casual APS staff, data on the impact of COVID-19 on casual staff was included in dashboards from mid-May to June.

2.79 Data presented in the dashboards was obtained directly from agencies, including through surveys. Completeness of the data varied from week to week depending on agency response rates, which led to some inconsistencies in reporting.²³ In addition, data presented in a single dashboard was collected on different dates, sometimes up to a month apart, making comparison difficult.

2.80 Recognising these issues, APSC noted in dashboards from mid-May 2020 that data was 'indicative' and should be 'interpreted with care', and highlighted 'as at' dates. In August 2020 APSC advised the Assistant Minister that agencies were engaging with survey questions 'in different ways and consistent, reliable statistics [were] not yet available'. APSC undertook to work with agencies in the following weeks to resolve this. As at September 2020 APSC advised that work to facilitate better data inputs from agencies remained underway.

Reporting to COO Committee

2.81 As noted in paragraph 2.30, APSC's cross-agency taskforces provided regular updates to the COO Committee at its meetings. They also disseminated reporting and guidance to the Committee through daily and weekly bulletins.

- From its establishment on 24 March 2020 until late April, the Workforce Management Taskforce provided updates at all but one COO Committee meeting. Reporting included circulation of the workforce dashboards.
- The COVID-19 Taskforce regularly updated the COO Committee on its activities and kept the Committee informed of any new or revised guidance through daily and weekly bulletins, which included links to relevant documents in its GovTEAMS community.

23 For example, the number of 'confirmed cases' and 'employees recovered', which were intended to be cumulative totals, decreased by five and six respectively between 9 June and 15 June 2020. APSC advised the ANAO it was targeting an agency response rate of 75 per cent to show general trends. From March to August 2020, surveys achieved an average response rate of around 83 per cent, with a range of 72 to 93 per cent and most departments and larger agencies responded each week.

3. Positioning the workforce to respond

Areas examined

This chapter examines whether the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) and Chief Operating Officers (COO) Committee effectively managed efforts to position the APS workforce to respond to COVID-19.

Conclusion

Management of efforts to position the APS workforce to respond to COVID-19 was effective. APSC's Workforce Management Taskforce deployed 2,240 staff to other agencies, mostly to Services Australia, to meet critical needs. Guidance on COVID-19 workforce measures was largely effective, and various initiatives are underway to capture lessons learned from the response to inform planning for future operations.

Area for improvement

The ANAO made a suggestion regarding developing protocols for managing future surge workforce requirements.

3.1 Effective management of resources is critical to ensuring the successful delivery of government priorities. Misalignment between resources and needs, especially in a crisis period requiring rapid mobilisation, creates significant risks to the delivery of expected outcomes. To assess the effectiveness of efforts to position the APS workforce to respond to COVID-19, the ANAO examined whether:

- resources were deployed effectively to support the Government's COVID-19 priorities;
- effective and timely guidance was provided to agencies on COVID-19 workforce measures; and
- processes have been put in place to capture lessons learned from the response and plan a phased transition for future operations.

Were resources deployed effectively to support the Government's COVID-19 priorities?

APSC's Workforce Management Taskforce effectively facilitated the deployment of 2,165 staff to Services Australia to meet a critical Government priority, as well as 75 staff to three other agencies. The deployment process was impacted by the absence of an existing framework for large-scale APS deployments and the challenges of identifying critical functions and available staff in the middle of a crisis.

3.2 The *Public Service Act 1999* (PS Act) sets out a vision of the APS as efficient and effective in serving the Government, Parliament and Australian public. In April 2020 the Prime Minister stated: 'At this time, the focus of all agencies, departments and employees is on delivering the critical functions, services and needs that Australians rely on'.²⁴

24 Prime Minister, *Media Release: Transfer of Ministerial Responsibility* [Internet], 6 April 2020, available at: <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/transfer-ministerial-responsibility> [accessed 27 July 2020].

3.3 On 24 March 2020, following discussion at the COO Committee, the APS Commissioner established the Workforce Management Taskforce to: ensure the APS had the workforce capacity to deliver the critical functions of Government during the pandemic; and facilitate the deployment of APS staff to support critical functions.

3.4 To assess whether resources have been deployed effectively to support the Government's COVID-19 priorities, the ANAO examined:

- work undertaken by the COO Committee and Workforce Management Taskforce to understand the APS workforce's capacity to deliver critical government functions; and
- the Workforce Management Taskforce's deployment of the APS workforce between agencies to assist the continued delivery of services to the Australian public.

Understanding the APS workforce's capacity to deliver critical functions

3.5 After the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the COO Committee and APSC's Workforce Management Taskforce initiated three key activities to understand the APS workforce's capacity to deliver critical functions:

- establishing the Critical Functions Working Group to identify critical APS functions and model pandemic scenarios;
- requesting information on critical functions and available APS staff through a direction from the Prime Minister to agency heads; and
- undertaking 'worst-case scenario' modelling of COVID-19 impacts on the APS workforce.

Critical Functions Working Group

3.6 As discussed in Chapter 2, identifying and managing critical government functions during the COVID-19 pandemic was an initial priority for the COO Committee, and it established the Critical Functions Working Group on 10 March 2020 to progress this work (see Box 1).

3.7 On 17 March 2020 the Working Group provided an initial paper to the COO Committee outlining high-level preliminary observations and recommending further work be done to identify critical functions and conduct scenario planning. The COO Committee agreed the Working Group should commence work to 'identify solutions to issues and challenges identified in the paper and fill in the detail of the continuity plan for whole of Government priorities'.

3.8 The Working Group started preparing a more detailed paper, outlining key services required to manage critical government functions and resourcing requirements. On 24 March 2020 the COO Committee agreed this work, which was still in progress, would transition to APSC's Workforce Management Taskforce. The Taskforce considered the Working Group's work as part of the information request initiated through the Prime Minister's direction to agency heads of 26 March 2020 (discussed below).

Prime Minister's direction to agency heads

3.9 On 25 March 2020 the APS Commissioner recommended the Prime Minister issue a direction under section 21 of the PS Act to provide authority to expedite deployment of APS staff

to critical functions and overcome potential barriers.²⁵ The following day, Thursday 26 March 2020, the Prime Minister issued a direction with the objective to:

facilitate the most efficient and effective deployment of APS employees and expertise to meet the exceptional challenge posed by COVID 19 to Australian society – a task which has become the principal focus of APS endeavour.²⁶

3.10 The direction required APS agency heads to identify critical functions and staff available for temporary deployment by no later than Monday 30 March 2020 (four calendar days after it was issued). Statutory office holders and heads of Commonwealth entities and companies not subject to the PS Act were also strongly encouraged to respond. The full text of the direction is at Appendix 3.

3.11 The APS Commissioner emailed department secretaries on Friday 27 March 2020 notifying them of the direction, noting guidance was being developed and would be shared as soon as possible. APSC circulated guidance and a spreadsheet template for providing requested information to secretaries and members of the COO Committee on Saturday 28 March 2020.

3.12 There was significant variability in the type and quality of information provided by agencies in response to the direction. Of 98 APS agencies subject to the direction, 84 agencies provided a response and 14 agencies did not.²⁷ Of the 84 that responded, APSC assessed that:

- 30 agencies submitted data correctly using the template provided;
- 39 agencies submitted data in a different format or used the template incorrectly; and
- 15 agencies provided a response but did not submit workforce data.

3.13 Approaches also varied at a portfolio level. Some departments provided a consolidated response for all portfolio agencies, whereas other portfolios provided individual responses. In some cases, both consolidated and individual agency responses were provided.

- Department of the Treasury informed APSC it would take a portfolio-based approach to the redeployment of APS staff, with the Secretary noting: 'If any of the portfolio agencies have staff available to redeploy, we are, in the first instance ensuring that they are allocated to priorities in the portfolio, particularly in Treasury and the ATO'. This was reflected in the responses from agencies within the Treasury portfolio.
- Department of Health also instituted a portfolio approach, with portfolio agencies deploying staff directly to the Department of Health.

3.14 There was confusion about which agencies were required to respond, with several agencies indicating they were unaware of the direction when followed up by APSC. There was also confusion

25 Under Section 21 of the PS Act, the Prime Minister may issue general directions in writing to Agency Heads relating to the management and leadership of APS employees. A direction issued by the Prime Minister is a non-disallowable legislative instrument.

26 *Prime Minister's direction under subsection 21(1) – 2020 (No. 1)*, legislative instrument, 26 March 2020, available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2020L00326> [accessed 2 September 2020].

27 APSC advised the ANAO that three agencies subject to the direction were not required to respond: APSC as it already had information on its own workforce, and Services Australia and Australian Taxation Office as they were considered receiving agencies. In addition to responses from APS agencies, APSC received responses from 16 non-APS agencies that had been encouraged to respond to the direction.

between requests, as the Workforce Management Taskforce had contacted agencies at the same time seeking nominations for immediate deployment to Services Australia.

3.15 A 'data update' paper dated 8 April 2020, which was provided to the head of the Workforce Management Taskforce and Deputy APS Commissioner, noted the number of nominations for deployment to Services Australia was greater than the number of available staff identified in response to the Prime Minister's direction. The paper concluded the data provided by agencies in response to the direction 'is now out of date and not a reliable source of information on surge capacity'.

3.16 The variable quality of agency responses to the direction was also discussed by the Workforce Management Taskforce's Advisory Committee on 20 April 2020, with meeting notes stating:

Use of spreadsheet didn't work. Very different types of data, most quite high level, with agencies indicating most functions are 'critical'. Critical defined in traditional way, with little reflection on redesign [of] business processes or changes in sequencing of core responsibilities to enable surge workforce.

3.17 On 22 April 2020 APSC advised the Assistant Minister to the Prime Minister and Cabinet (Assistant Minister) that, of the agencies that had responded, 84 per cent of their APS workforce was working on critical functions and unavailable for deployment.²⁸ However, given the data quality issues identified, APSC could have little assurance over the accuracy of this estimate.

Worst-case scenario modelling

3.18 In April 2020 the Workforce Management Taskforce commenced worst-case scenario modelling to forecast the potential impact of COVID-19 on the APS workforce.²⁹ The modelling was informed by information released by the Department of Health, modelling performed for the New Zealand Ministry of Health and other publications. While the worst-case scenario modelling was not predictive modelling as scenarios were not expected to eventuate, the rationale for undertaking this type of modelling, outlined in a paper to the COO Committee, was:

From a risk management point of view, modelling the worst possible health outcomes for our workforce allows us to better understand when, and to what extent (based on current understanding of the behaviour of the virus) we could face workforce availability challenges...

3.19 Based on preliminary modelling, APSC advised the Assistant Minister on 22 April 2020 and the COO Committee on 29 April 2020 that the impact of COVID-19 on 'workforce availability over the next nine months should be manageable within the existing resources across the system'.

3.20 The modelling was subsequently refined to reflect improved understanding of COVID-19 and mitigation interventions in May 2020. The modelling used workforce data for APS employees (staff not employed under the PS Act were not included). Three scenarios were modelled to understand the potential impact of COVID-19 on the APS workforce. The modelling indicated that,

28 Advice to the Assistant Minister noted this equated to approximately 77,481 of 91,981 APS employees for the responding APS agencies. APSC figures were calculated using data from the APS Employment Database (APSED), as at 31 December 2019. The APS employment data presents a statistical overview of the APS workforce employed under the PS Act, see <https://www.apsc.gov.au/aps-employment-database-apsed>.

29 This work was completed by a project team comprising APSC employees and a biostatistician seconded from the Australian Financial Security Authority.

with contact reduction, the peak for the APS could be delayed until 2021, with a maximum of 18 per cent of the APS workforce affected by the virus.

3.21 The Workforce Management Taskforce noted in a presentation on the modelling that delaying the peak within the APS would provide ‘time for preparation, planning and possible scientific/medical interventions and non-pharmaceutical interventions [for COVID-19]’. As at 28 August 2020 APSC advised the Assistant Minister there were 83 confirmed cases COVID-19 in the APS, of which 6 were current cases and 77 were cases where employees had recovered.

3.22 On 26 May 2020 the Workforce Management Taskforce held an online event to share the findings from the modelling with senior workforce planners from 12 agencies to support workforce continuity planning in the APS.

Deployment of the APS workforce to other agencies

3.23 The Workforce Management Taskforce was responsible for ‘coordinating the movement of the APS workforce across agencies during the COVID-19 pandemic’.³⁰ It was not responsible for providing resources (such as information technology, property or training) to support the deployment of the APS workforce, with such resources remaining the responsibility of individual agencies. The Taskforce’s role has included:

- establishing arrangements for the deployment of the APS workforce;
- coordinating deployments to Services Australia; and
- facilitating deployments to other Australian, state and territory government agencies.

Establishing deployment arrangements

3.24 As discussed in Chapter 2, there was no overarching framework in place for APS-wide business continuity prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, including no existing arrangements for the large-scale deployment of APS staff across agencies to support critical functions in a crisis (see paragraph 2.6). This meant APSC’s Workforce Management Taskforce needed to urgently establish arrangements for deployment during the pandemic.

3.25 In late March 2020, shortly after it was established, the Workforce Management Taskforce developed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) template with standard terms and conditions to facilitate deployment between agencies. The MoU template went through several iterations.

- It was first circulated to secretaries and COO Committee members on 28 March 2020, as an attachment to guidance on responding to the Prime Minister’s direction.
- Following negotiation with Services Australia and legal review, a revised version of the template was uploaded onto APSC’s website on 1 April 2020.
- Separate MoU templates were developed in April 2020 to facilitate deployment of staff engaged under the *Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984* and in July 2020 to facilitate deployments between APS agencies and state and territory government agencies.

3.26 MoUs were to be agreed between three parties: host agencies (agencies receiving deployed staff), home agencies (agencies from which staff were deployed) and deployed staff (or secondees).

30 APSC, *Temporary mobility as part of the surge workforce*, 29 March 2020 (updated 7 July 2020), available at: <https://www.apsc.gov.au/aps-workforce-management-frequently-asked-questions> [accessed 2 September 2020].

On 20 April 2020, to expedite deployments, APSC agreed to Services Australia gaining verbal agreement between parties to the MoU without requiring a signature.

3.27 While legislative mechanisms are available under the PS Act to deploy APS staff (see Box 2), the default position adopted by the Workforce Management Taskforce was that deployments would occur through voluntary secondment arrangements.³¹ The MOU stated that home agencies: were responsible for continuing to pay deployed staff (including superannuation, agreed allowances and workers' compensation insurance coverage); and would not seek recovery of costs.

Box 2: APS mobility under the *Public Service Act 1999*

The PS Act includes provisions that allow for the mobility of APS employees to other APS agencies and/or to state and territory governments, for example:

- under section 11A, the APS Commissioner may issue directions about employment matters relating to APS employees, including redeployment and mobility;
- section 26 provides for voluntary moves between agencies through an agreement between an agency head and APS employee; and
- under section 71, the Prime Minister may arrange with an appropriate state authority for an APS employee to perform services for the state or vice versa.

Section 25 of the PS Act also includes provisions for an agency head to 'determine the duties of an APS employee in the Agency, and the place or places at which the duties are to be performed'.

3.28 APSC internal correspondence suggests the COO Committee considered and agreed to voluntary deployments and home agencies continuing to pay for APS staff deployed. However, there is no evidence of agreement on these matters in COO Committee records.

3.29 Financial arrangements for secondments prompted a number of questions from agencies. For example, enquiries were received regarding:

- whether agencies with specific funding arrangements were able to deploy staff to undertake the work of another agency; and
- home agencies' capacity to fund deployments where casuals worked significantly more hours at the host agency than they normally would have at the home agency.

3.30 On 30 April 2020 Department of Finance (Finance) provided general advice to agencies on managing funding arrangements for deployed staff and advised agencies with specific funding arrangements, such as special accounts or special appropriations, to seek legal advice on whether deployed staff could be funded from these sources.

3.31 In addition, there were differing interpretations between agencies regarding the voluntary nature of secondments. While 'frequently asked questions' published on APSC's website indicated deployments were voluntary, a 'decision tree' developed by APSC for agencies noted that: 'Employees who are not on an approved leave type and refuse to undertake work could face actions under the Public Service Act'. On 22 July 2020 APSC advised the COO Committee that deployments

31 In some instances, APS staff could be temporarily transferred under section 26 of the PS Act or engaged under a new contract with the host agency depending on the nature of the deployment opportunity. These arrangements were to be agreed between agencies.

facilitated through the Workforce Management Taskforce were ‘essentially a voluntary exercise: the PS Act does not clearly enable agency heads to direct staff to move to a new function or work location’.

Coordinating deployments to Services Australia

3.32 The primary focus of the Workforce Management Taskforce was coordinating deployments to Services Australia, which required additional staff to manage a large increase in demand for social welfare services resulting from the economic impacts of the health response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The evolving situation meant the number of additional staff required by Services Australia changed several times in a short period.

- The first surge request from Services Australia came on 21 March 2020 for 100 staff to provide assistance with processing Jobseeker claims.
- The request was increased to 5,000 staff on 25 March 2020, and subsequently revised to 1,000 and then 2,000 as Services Australia reassessed its resourcing needs and capacity to source staff through other mechanisms (such as direct labour hire).

3.33 ANAO analysis indicates that, as at 30 September 2020, the Workforce Management Taskforce had identified 4,098 APS staff for potential deployment to Services Australia from other agencies to support COVID-19 related functions. Of these, 2,165 commenced at Services Australia between 30 March and 22 June 2020, which met Services Australia’s assessed need for APS staff.³² From May 2020 large-scale deployment of APS staff to Services Australia ceased, with APSC advising the ANAO that this was because Services Australia had on-boarded sufficient staff to meet its needs.³³

3.34 Table 3.1 lists agencies that contributed staff to Services Australia and the number of staff who were or had been deployed as at 30 September 2020. Department of Social Services contributed the largest number of staff (13.9 per cent), followed by Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (13.2 per cent) and Department of Education, Skills and Employment (13.2 per cent).

32 Due to the rapidly changing situation and the scale of deployment, there were significant data quality issues, making it difficult to determine how many staff were deployed to Services Australia at a given time. Figures in this report are based on analysis of a ‘master list’ provided to APSC by Services Australia (the latest version of which included data to 30 September 2020). APSC used this master list for its reporting; however, on occasion the figures differed from those APSC reported to its executive committee.

33 In addition to 2,165 staff from APS agencies, Services Australia also engaged staff through other mechanisms, including internal redeployment, labour hire, service delivery partners and direct engagement. Overall, over 13,000 staff commenced with Services Australia between March and September 2020.

Table 3.1: Total number of staff deployed to Services Australia, by agency^a

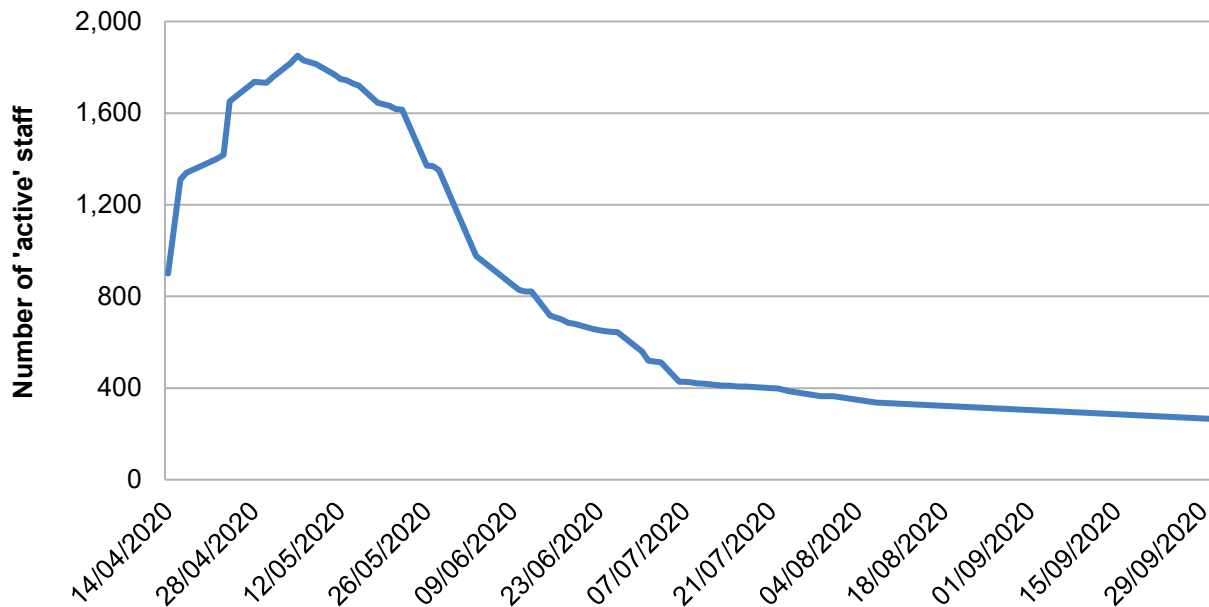
Agency	Number	Agency	Number
Non-corporate Commonwealth entities		Australian Sports Anti-Doping Authority (Sport Integrity Australia)	6
Department of Social Services	300	Australian Skills Quality Authority	5
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade	285	Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency	4
Department of Education, Skills and Employment	285	Australian Bureau of Statistics	4
Department of Defence	258	Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity	4
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications	126	Australian Communications and Media Authority	2
Department of Finance	124	Australian Transport Safety Bureau	2
Department of Home Affairs	112	Office of National Intelligence	2
Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment	111	Department of the Senate	1
Department of the Attorney-General	62	Digital Transformation Agency	1
Department of Parliamentary Services	62	Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions	1
National Indigenous Australians Agency	59	National Capital Authority	1
Australian Signals Directorate	44	Infrastructure and Project Financing Agency	1
Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources	43	Subtotal	2,097
Australian Electoral Commission	39	Corporate Commonwealth entities	
Department of Veteran's Affairs	26	National Library of Australia	13
Australian Taxation Office	26	National Film and Sound Archive	13
Australian Public Service Commission	23	National Museum of Australia	13
Royal Australian Mint	19	Australian War Memorial	12
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet	16	Hearing Australia	11
Bureau of Meteorology	13	Australian Sports Commission (Australian Institute of Sport)	5
Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman	12	Civil Aviation Safety Authority Australia	1
Australian Research Council	11	Subtotal	68
Australian Building and Construction Commission	7	Total	2,165

Note a: Deployed staff refers to staff who were on-boarded and actively undertook work and/or training. Not all on-boarded staff commenced at Services Australia. For example, some on-boarded staff disclosed they met an exclusion category (such as being in at high risk of COVID-19) or were withdrawn from the deployment by their home agency before commencing work.

Source: ANAO analysis of Services Australia data as at 30 September 2020.

3.35 As shown in Figure 3.1, the number of active deployments peaked in early May 2020. The average length of deployment to Services Australia was 40 days, with the longest deployment 123 days. The number of staff active at Services Australia decreased as home agencies began to transition staff back to workplaces in early June. Based on available data, APS 6 employees were the largest cohort of deployed APS staff, followed by the APS 5, APS 4 and Executive Level (EL) 1 cohorts (see Figure 3.2).

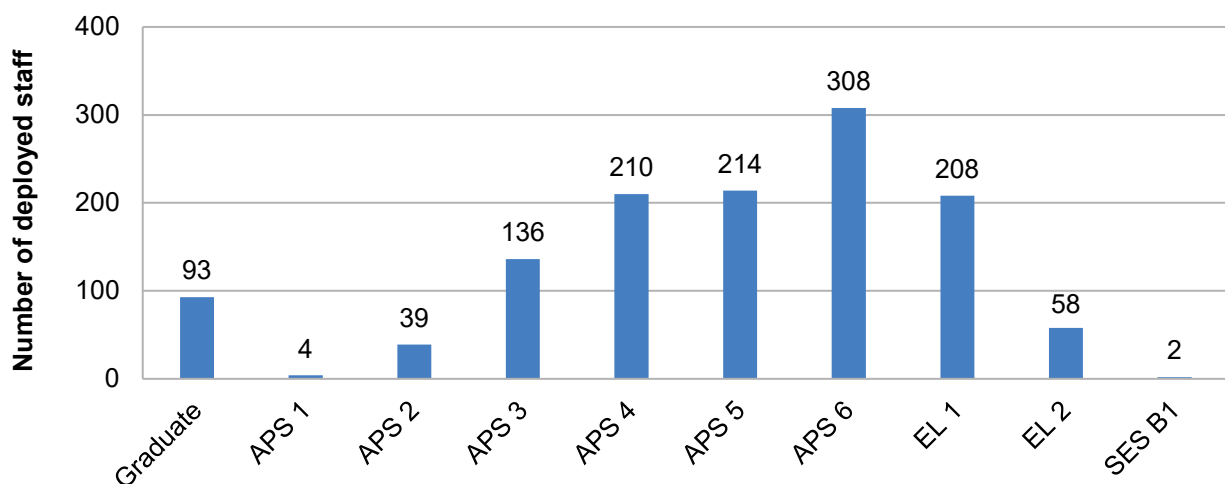
Figure 3.1: Number of deployed staff ‘active’ at Services Australia, 14 April to 30 September 2020^a



Note a: ‘Active’ refers to staff who were on-boarded and actively undertaking work or training.

Source: ANAO analysis of Services Australia data.

Figure 3.2: APS staff deployed to Services Australia, by classification level, as at 30 September 2020^a



Note a: Based on available classification data for 1,272 deployed staff. Services Australia’s data did not include classification levels for all deployed APS staff.

Source: ANAO analysis of Services Australia data.

3.36 The Workforce Management Taskforce has not sought to estimate the total cost of APS deployments to Services Australia, and it has no plan to do so.

Issues encountered with deployments

3.37 The Workforce Management Taskforce initially managed deployments by emailing Excel spreadsheets back and forth between agencies, which was time consuming and affected the accuracy and integrity of the data. In late April 2020 it launched a new digital platform, the APS Mobility Register, to streamline the deployment process. Feedback to the Taskforce from agencies indicates they appreciated the rapid setup of the register, which made it easier to keep track of staff nominations and deployment.

3.38 The deployment process encountered a number of communication and operational issues.

- Feedback from agencies suggests that there was some confusion regarding roles and responsibilities of the home agency, host agency and Workforce Management Taskforce, including who would provide what information.
- Home agencies were not made aware of key details of the deployment, such as the length of deployment, which was sometimes extended without consulting the deployed staff or their home agency.
- Staff were sometimes given very short notice of redeployment, with some being told the day prior to commencement.
- There was conflicting information regarding key matters such as payment of overtime and allowances or flex-time arrangements.
- Concerns were also raised regarding workplace health and safety, such as social distancing and hygiene arrangements for deployed staff.

3.39 The Taskforce made efforts to improve its communication and support for agencies. In addition to regular correspondence with agencies, in late April 2020 it developed two 'frequently asked questions' products: one for deployed staff on the role of the Workforce Management Taskforce; and one for agency human resources teams on pay and conditions. Agency feedback suggests, while the products were helpful, more detailed and timely guidance products would have improved the deployment process.

3.40 In addition, there were issues with rapid deployment of casual APS staff to Services Australia. Initial Workforce Management Taskforce advice suggested casual staff could be deployed and some data on available casual staff was collected through the Prime Minister's direction. However, the Taskforce and Services Australia prioritised deploying ongoing APS staff during the early stages of the deployment process. The Taskforce did not issue an APS-wide request for available casual staff until 7 May 2020.

Facilitating deployments to other Australian, state and territory government agencies

Deployments to other Australian Government agencies

3.41 While the primary focus of the Workforce Management Taskforce was on deployment of APS staff to Services Australia, it also facilitated deployment of 75 staff to three other Australian Government agencies. ANAO analysis of 33 requests received by the Taskforce from agencies other than Services Australia (requesting more than 150 staff) indicates it fully met three and partly met five, with other requests withdrawn or filled through other means.

3.42 Some agencies deployed staff to other agencies during the COVID-19 response without engaging with the Workforce Management Taskforce. The Taskforce sought to track such deployments centrally, but its data is not comprehensive. In total, APSC identified 74 staff who were deployed between other agencies without engaging with the Taskforce.

3.43 For the initial phase of the pandemic response, the Government had a clear priority to move staff to Services Australia. For future APS surge arrangements, there would be benefit in APSC developing protocols for managing competing surge requests from different agencies.

Deployments to state and territory government agencies

3.44 On 30 July 2020 the Australian, state and territory public service commissioners endorsed a National Framework for Public Sector Mobility to 'enable successful surge mobility between public sector jurisdictions'. The framework sets out the process for the management of surge requests as well as the responsibility of the 'home' and 'host' organisations in the event of a deployment.

3.45 In July and August 2020 the Workforce Management Taskforce received requests from the Victorian Government for assistance with its response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Existing mechanisms, such as secondments or bilateral agreements, could be utilised to deploy APS staff to the states and territories.³⁴ However, APSC received advice that APS staff should be deployed under section 71 of the PS Act to ensure they could lawfully undertake all activities on behalf of the Victorian Government. To enable this, on 7 August 2020 the Prime Minister delegated relevant powers to the Assistant Minister and wrote to the Premier of Victoria advising him of the decision. APSC advised the ANAO that 78 staff were deployed to the Victorian Government under this arrangement.

Was effective and timely guidance provided to agencies on COVID-19 workforce measures?

Guidance provided by the APSC COVID-19 Taskforce to agencies on COVID-19 workforce measures was largely effective. Feedback from agencies suggests it was not always timely and there were issues with version control and consistency.

3.46 In response to health advice to manage the transmission of COVID-19, Australian, state and territory governments issued enforceable directions setting out limits on international travel and public gatherings, physical distancing requirements and business restrictions. The Australian Government considered the APS to be an essential service. As a result, Australian Government agencies needed to adapt their workplace practices to ensure they could support the Government's COVID-19 priorities and continue to deliver business-as-usual activities, while mitigating risks of COVID-19 transmission to APS staff and the broader community.

3.47 The APS Commissioner has a number of statutory functions under the PS Act relating to the APS workforce (summarised at paragraph 1.11). On 11 March 2020, following discussion at the COO Committee, the Commissioner established the APSC COVID-19 Taskforce as the 'single source of truth' to provide guidance to agencies on adapting workplace practices and implementing workforce measures. The COVID-19 Taskforce operated from March to June 2020, after which

34 In July 2020 an MoU was developed to facilitate the secondment of APS staff to states and territories. This was based on the existing MoU used for facilitating deployments between Commonwealth entities.

seconded Taskforce staff returned to home agencies and COVID-19 communication transitioned to APSC's business-as-usual operations.

3.48 APSC provided four categories of guidance to agencies, which are outlined in Table 3.2. A list of guidance products developed by the COVID-19 Taskforce is at Appendix 2.

Table 3.2: Guidance and information provided by the APSC COVID-19 Taskforce, to 30 June 2020

Category	Description
Website guidance ^a	18 guidance products published on a COVID-19 resources page on APSC's website, including six circulars covering COVID-19 issues, frequently asked questions for APS staff, factsheets and infographics
GovTEAMS guidance ^b	24 APS-wide guidance products disseminated through a GovTEAMS community, including advice on flexible working arrangements, templates and standard words for COVID-19 related correspondence, and guidance on COVID-safe workplace principles
Email advice	322 email responses to agencies' enquiries, seeking advice on specific situations or clarification on existing guidance, managed through a group email inbox
Other information	Other materials disseminated through the APSC website, GovTEAMS and COO Committee, including four open letters to the APS, three media releases, around 170 resources from other agencies (such as internal communication and protocols) and links to resources from other agencies

Note a: See APSC, *Coronavirus (COVID-19)* [Internet], available at: <https://www.apsc.gov.au/coronavirus-covid-19> [accessed 3 September 2020].

Note b: GovTEAMS is a secure digital platform built for government use, which was developed by Finance and launched in January 2019.

Source: ANAO analysis.

3.49 The ANAO analysed whether effective and timely guidance has been provided to agencies on COVID-19 measures, focussing on:

- arrangements for the preparation of guidance;
- appropriateness of guidance content;
- accessibility of guidance products to their intended audiences; and
- timeliness of guidance.

Preparation of guidance

3.50 As discussed in Chapter 2, there was no overarching framework in place for APS-wide business continuity prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (see paragraph 2.6), which meant APSC had to determine guidance requirements and establish processes for preparing, reviewing and clearing guidance as the crisis emerged. Further, the APSC COVID-19 Taskforce developed limited planning documentation (see paragraph 2.32) and did not undertake structured risk assessment to identify guidance requirements (see paragraph 2.52). Accordingly, the Taskforce's preparation of guidance products was largely based on assessment of requirements as events unfolded, often in response to enquiries from agencies or issues raised in COO Committee meetings.

3.51 Gaps in guidance sometimes became evident after risks had been realised. For example, Circular 2020/1 was first issued on APSC's website on 30 January 2020 outlining leave arrangements

for APS staff diagnosed with or exposed to COVID-19. APSC did not consider preparing guidance on leave arrangements for casual APS staff until after an agency informed it on 6 March 2020 that a casual employee had been exposed to COVID-19 and needed to self-isolate. The lack of APS-wide guidance on leave arrangements for casual staff was also raised by the Community and Public Sector Union in correspondence with individual agencies from 6 March 2020 and the APS Commissioner on 11 March 2020. Following discussion at a COO Committee meeting on 12 March 2020, APSC updated Circular 2020/1 on 16 March 2020 to include information on leave arrangements for casual staff.

Review and clearance processes

3.52 While APSC developed protocols for handling media enquiries, processes for review and clearance of guidance produced by the APSC COVID-19 Taskforce varied between products, including whether products were provided to the COO Committee for review. APSC advised the ANAO that review and clearance arrangements were determined on a case-by-case basis, through discussions with the APS Commissioner about responsibilities under the PS Act, and decisions were not documented.

3.53 The ANAO found 60 per cent of guidance products had clear evidence of approval for publication or dissemination by the APS Commissioner, Deputy APS Commissioner or an appropriately senior member of the COVID-19 Taskforce.

3.54 The COVID-19 Taskforce effectively coordinated communication activities between agencies to inform the development of guidance. Where appropriate, the Taskforce worked closely with the Department of Health, Comcare, Safe Work Australia and other agencies, including through the COO Committee, when drafting guidance.

3.55 There was evidence of internal review and feedback for guidance produced by the COVID-19 Taskforce, including from relevant APSC business areas (such as the legal services team) to ensure accuracy of advice. Feedback received included comments on:

- the primary audience for the guidance material and use of appropriate language;
- consistency with government policy and other guidance materials; and
- accessibility requirements for issued guidance.

3.56 The feedback was taken into account by the Taskforce in finalising guidance.

Issues identified with guidance preparation

3.57 In April and May 2020 the APSC COVID-19 Taskforce undertook targeted consultation with officers from agency human resources teams seeking feedback on its COVID-19 advice and guidance (approaching 13 officers who most frequently contacted the Taskforce with email enquiries, of whom 10 agreed to participate). Feedback highlighted process issues relating to the preparation of guidance, from which the Taskforce identified lessons and corrective actions (see Box 3).

Box 3: Issues identified in agency feedback on APSC COVID-19 Taskforce guidance**Issue 1: Lack of version control on APSC circulars and other guidance products**

APSC noted that officers consulted 'were frustrated that they weren't able to refer back to previous advice... or quickly establish and understand what had changed when updates were made'. For example, APSC updated Circular 2020/1 several times, replacing it with a new version on its website each time.

Action taken: APSC changed its approach for Circulars 2020/5 and 2020/6, issuing them as new circulars and retaining superseded circulars on its website.

Issue 2: Conflicting advice and inconsistent language

Officers consulted provided feedback to APSC on examples of inconsistent advice, such as conflicting messaging on deployment of casuals in media talking points, Circular 2020/3 and advice from the Workforce Management Taskforce. In addition, examples of inconsistent language were raised, such as using different terms ('mobility', 'redeployment' and 'secondment') to describe deployment processes.

Action taken: APSC noted that it built stronger links between communication and policy areas to ensure consistency of advice and products.

Issue 3: Guidance not timely

Officers consulted expressed concerns about not being given prior notice of the release of guidance, receiving guidance at the same time as staff, and receiving guidance too late for the intended purpose or after they had already developed internal guidance. They also felt some information shared via the COO Committee was not received in a timely manner.

Action taken: APSC noted that, although the response to COVID-19 was initially reactive, it was able to improve consultation with agencies and provide more timely advice over time.

Issue 4: Lack of guidance on Workforce Management Taskforce deployments

APSC noted a 'common criticism shared by stakeholders was the lack of advice and information shared prior to employees being seconded'. Officers consulted noted they received guidance weeks after the deployments commenced and provided examples of inconsistent advice on employment arrangements, such as regarding payment of allowances.

Action taken: APSC noted that it established a partnership across the two taskforces with the COVID-19 taskforce assisting and providing advice on deployment policy matters.

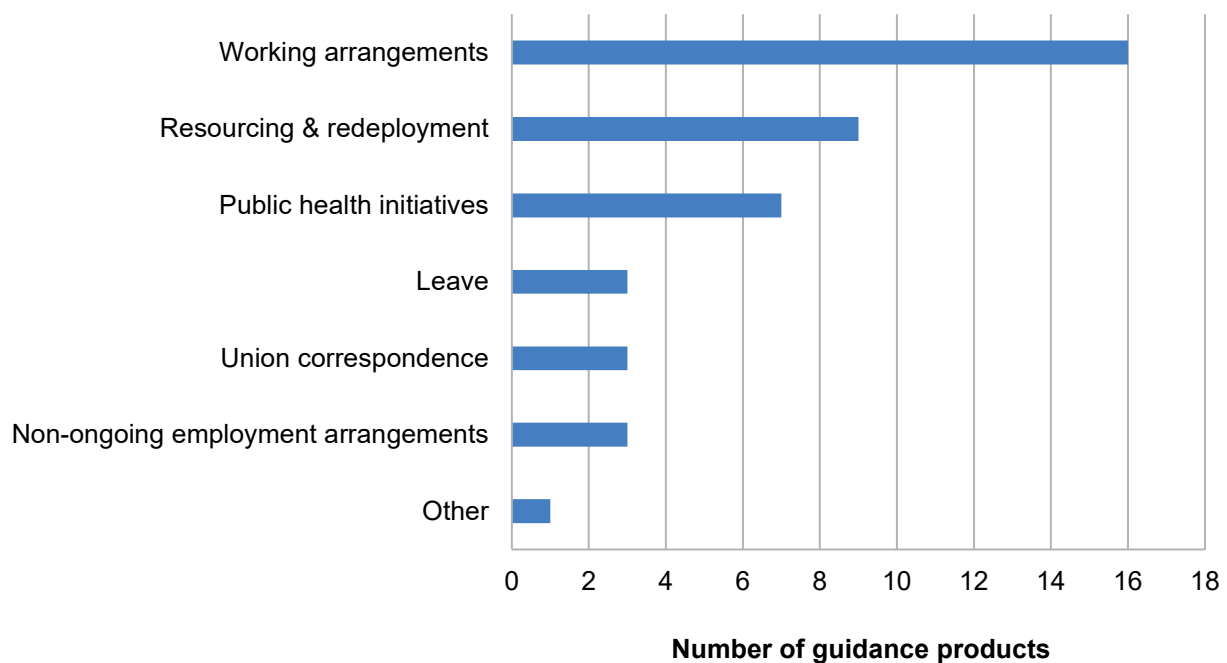
3.58 ANAO analysis of APSC email correspondence also highlighted issues with roles and responsibilities sometimes being unclear between APSC teams, including between its two taskforces. While the APSC COVID-19 Taskforce frequently managed email enquiries from agencies about redeployments, it had limited visibility of the advice the Workforce Management Taskforce was providing. APSC made efforts to improve alignment between teams, including holding regular meetings between senior members of both taskforces.

Appropriateness of guidance content

3.59 Guidance products issued on APSC’s website and GovTEAMS covered a range of topics relating to the APS workforce response to COVID-19 (see Figure 3.3).

- The most common category was working arrangements (16 of 42 products, or 38 per cent), which included advice on flexible work and working from home, implementing COVID-safe principles in offices and transitioning back to workplaces after the easing of restrictions.
- This was followed by guidance on APS COVID-19 resourcing matters (9 of 42 products, or 21 per cent), including those relating to identifying critical functions and staff, and the redeployment process.

Figure 3.3: Analysis of APSC guidance products by category

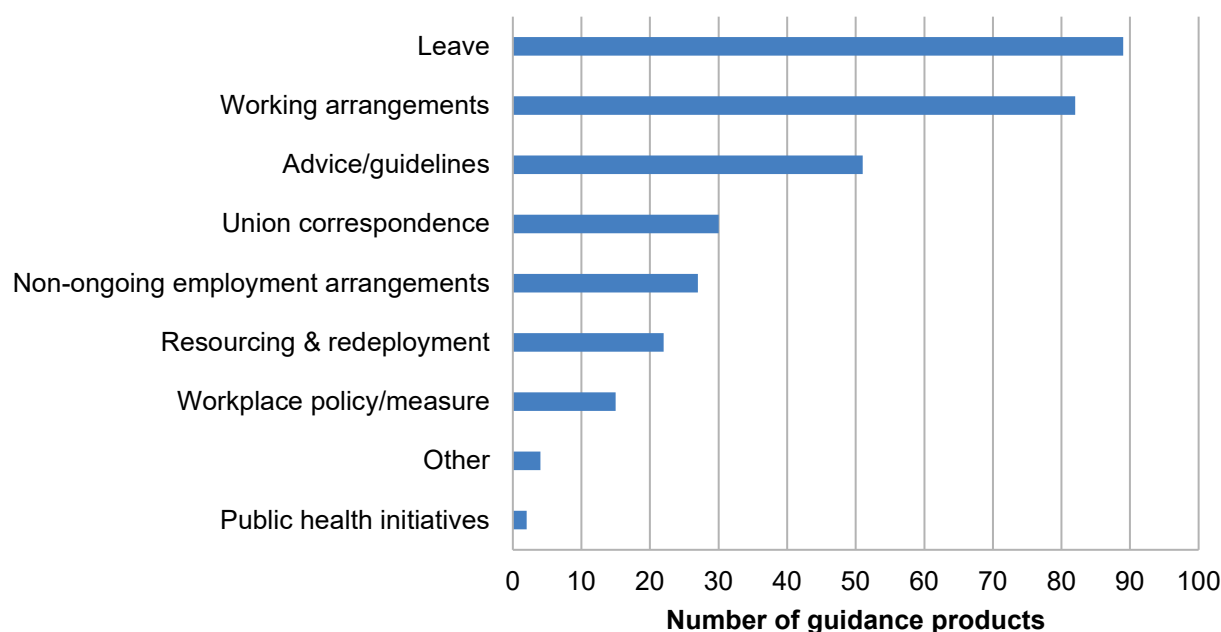


Source: ANAO analysis.

3.60 Most guidance products (26 of 42 products, or 62 per cent) were intended for staff in management and corporate roles within APS agencies, such as agency heads, COOs, human resources teams and line managers, particularly guidance on working arrangements and leave. In addition, eight products (19 per cent) were intended for APS staff, and eight (19 per cent) for the sector as a whole.

3.61 In releasing APS-wide guidance, the COVID-19 Taskforce made efforts to create consistency across the sector where appropriate. This included centralising responses to media enquiries, providing templates for use by agencies and publishing ‘frequently asked questions’ to address recurring issues.

3.62 As shown in Figure 3.4, the most common category of email enquiry received by the APSC COVID-19 Taskforce was employee leave arrangements (89 of 322 emails, or 28 per cent). Most of these enquiries related to leave options available to parents and carers affected by school closures and to individuals required to quarantine or self-isolate.

Figure 3.4: Analysis of APSC email enquiries by category

Source: ANAO analysis.

3.63 In addition to providing guidance products and responding to email enquiries, the COVID-19 Taskforce encouraged sharing of internal resources and communications across the APS, coordinating the collection and dissemination of these materials. Around 170 items of agency guidance or other communication were shared through the GovTEAMS community as examples for other agencies. These included copies of agency head internal communications to staff, internal protocols and checklists for managing COVID-19 risks in workplaces and tips on managing working from home arrangements. Feedback from agencies suggest these materials were useful, particularly for smaller agencies, in drafting internal communication to staff.

3.64 Overall, guidance products were largely appropriate for their intended audiences, containing informative and relevant content across a broad range of topics, with clear design, plain English, and efforts to achieve consistency across the sector where appropriate.

Accessibility of guidance products

Website guidance

3.65 Table 3.3 shows analysis of the most commonly viewed pages on the APSC website, based on the number of unique page views, from 13 March to 26 July 2020. Circular 2020/1, which outlined COVID-19 leave arrangements, had the highest number of unique page views.³⁵

³⁵ Data is for the version of the Circular published on 16 March 2020.

Table 3.3: Analysis of page views to APSC website

Page name	Number of unique page views	Average time on page (minutes)
Circular 2020/1: COVID-19 leave arrangements	45,253	5.5
Coronavirus (COVID-19) Home Page	34,219	2.0
Circular 2020/5: Preparing for a COVID-safe transition for APS workplaces	21,999	5.6
Circular 2020/3: COVID-19 — Remote working and evolving work arrangements	20,670	4.3
Updated guidance on staff working from home arrangements	17,711	3.8

Source: ANAO analysis of APSC website traffic data from Google Analytics.

3.66 Analysis commissioned by PM&C's APS Reform Office on COVID-19 communications strategies at the end of May 2020 found that 'APS employees claim they do not frequently access the PM&C or APSC websites for information on the COVID-19 outbreak', with emails being the preferred channel of communication.

3.67 ANAO analysis of the 322 email enquiries to the COVID-19 Taskforce found poor awareness among APS agencies of guidance issued on APSC's website, with around 30 per cent of enquiries addressed by referring them to relevant pieces of guidance available on the website.

GovTEAMS guidance and information

3.68 The APSC COVID-19 Taskforce's GovTEAMS community for COVID-19 information began with 201 members, based on APSC's existing contacts for APS human resources practitioners. As at 13 August 2020 the community had 937 members, representing 164 agencies (155 agencies had 'active' members³⁶). The majority of these members were in agency corporate or human resources teams.

3.69 From 3 April 2020 the COVID-19 Taskforce issued weekly updates by email, summarising newly released materials on the GovTEAMS community and encouraging sharing of resources. Feedback from agencies indicates they found these channels of communications useful in keeping up to date with new products and advice.

COO Committee communications

3.70 As discussed in Chapter 2, the COO Committee played an active role in the management of the APS workforce response to COVID-19. APSC advised the ANAO that it determined that the most efficient way to communicate with portfolio agencies was to ask COO Committee members to circulate key messages through their portfolio contacts. COOs were requested by the COO Committee Chair and APSC to share outcomes and information from meetings, including a summary of new GovTEAMS products and relevant information and updates on COVID-19 policies, through forwarding regular bulletins prepared by the Committee Secretariat (see paragraph 2.70). The COO Committee's lessons learned paper from July 2020 noted that communications from the Committee were helpful in keeping executives and portfolio agencies informed. However, feedback received

³⁶ GovTEAMS members who have not verified their email address or have had accounts deactivated are given an 'inactive' status. Of the 937 members, 131 were recorded as 'inactive' (as at 13 August 2020).

by the Taskforce (outlined in Box 3) suggests some portfolio agencies did not receive messages from COOs in a timely manner.

Timeliness of guidance

3.71 The ANAO calculated the time taken for guidance to be released by APSC in response to key events, such as announcement of government policy or updates in health advice. On average, APSC took:

- 7.6 calendar days to release guidance in response to a key event, with around 33 per cent of guidance released within 3 days of the relevant key event; and
- 6.6 calendar days to update guidance in response to new key events.³⁷

Table 3.4 provides more detail on response times.

Table 3.4: Analysis of time taken to release guidance

Time	Website guidance	GovTEAMS guidance
Same day	5.6%	16.7%
1–3 days	11.1%	29.2%
4–7 days	44.4%	20.8%
8 days or more	38.9%	33.3%

Source: ANAO analysis.

3.72 APSC advised the ANAO that the time taken to release certain pieces of guidance depended on their materiality, complexity, and the Taskforce's prioritisation of tasks. Guidance products to assist the implementation of legal directions from the Prime Minister or advice from the APS Commissioner were prioritised and released promptly. For example:

- guidance for agency heads to assist the application of the Prime Minister's direction to identify critical staff and functions for redeployment was released within two calendar days of the direction (see paragraphs 3.9–3.17); and
- guidance on flexible working arrangements during COVID-19 was released the day after the APS Commissioner announced that APS agencies should facilitate work from home where practicable.

3.73 Some guidance products required more extensive consultation process. For example, Circular 2020/5: *Preparing for a COVIDsafe transition for APS workplaces* was presented to the COO Committee for discussion and received feedback and input from various agencies prior to its finalisation. The circular was released on 8 May 2020, seven days after the Prime Minister announced the National Cabinet's decision to bring forward the timeline for easing of COVID-19 restrictions in Australia. Other products that were less material (such as infographics) took longer to release.

3.74 Feedback from agencies (discussed at Box 3) indicates some products, especially early in the response, were not sufficiently timely to meet their needs. In some cases, agencies felt they did not receive prior notice from the COVID-19 Taskforce that guidance was being developed, which meant

³⁷ The ANAO used calendar days to calculate timeliness rather than working days, as evidence indicates that Taskforce members frequently worked on weekends to respond to the rapidly changing pandemic situation.

they created internal guidance and had to change their position once APSC guidance was released. APSC advised the ANAO that it kept the COO Committee informed about guidance products it was developing and Committee members were expected to pass this information on to portfolio agencies. Feedback from agencies indicates that timeliness of guidance and proactive communication improved as the pandemic progressed.

3.75 APSC was also reasonably timely in responding to email enquiries from agencies. The COVID-19 Taskforce took an average of three calendar days to respond to an email enquiry, including responding quickly by phone if the enquiry was urgent, with 17.1 per cent of emails responded to on the same day (see Table 3.5).

Table 3.5: Analysis of time taken to respond to email enquiries

Time	Email advice
Same day	17.1%
1–3 days	46.6%
4–7 days	30.4%
8 days or more	5.9%

Source: ANAO analysis.

Have processes been put in place to capture lessons learned from the response and plan a phased transition for future operations?

APSC and the COO Committee have commenced a number of initiatives to capture lessons from the APS workforce response to COVID-19. Planning for future operations has commenced and there are indications that planning is being informed by lessons learned.

3.76 The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the need to adapt to unexpected circumstances. In 2004 the Management Advisory Committee (the precursor to the Secretaries Board) highlighted the need to ‘learn from the last crisis in planning for the next one’. It also noted that the ‘formal review and reform of existing processes following a crisis is vital’ and should ‘be undertaken on a whole of government basis’.³⁸

3.77 The ANAO examined review and planning work led by the COO Committee and APSC, focussing on:

- processes for capturing lessons learned from the APS workforce response to COVID-19; and
- APS-wide planning for a phased transition to future operations.

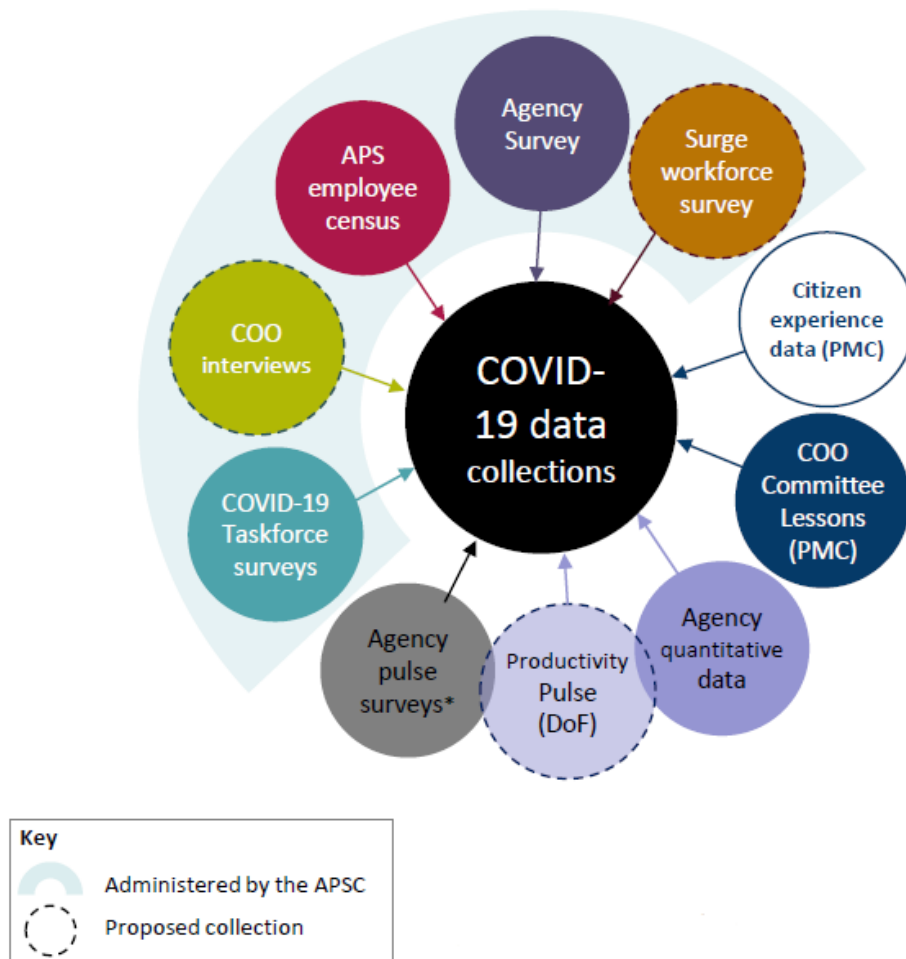
Lessons learned from the APS workforce response

3.78 In early May 2020 the Government requested analysis of the APS response to COVID-19 and recommendations for future approaches to workplace arrangements, productivity and service delivery. APSC has been leading the lessons learned analysis and is expected to provide a response

³⁸ Management Advisory Committee, *Connecting Government: Whole of Government Responses to Australia's Priority Challenges*, 2004, p. 109.

to the Government in late 2020. On 10 June 2020 APSC presented a paper to the COO Committee outlining the evidence base for this analysis, drawing on various data sources, including work commissioned by the COO Committee and APSC to identify lessons from the APS workforce response. Figure 3.5 shows a diagram of the evidence sources identified in the paper, with descriptions of these sources provided in Table 3.6.

Figure 3.5: Evidence sources for APS-wide COVID-19 lessons learned



Source: Paper for COO Committee meeting of 10 June 2020.

Table 3.6: Description of evidence sources for APS-wide COVID-19 lessons learned

Source	Description
COVID-19 Taskforce surveys (APSC)	APSC undertook targeted consultation in April and May 2020 seeking feedback on the COVID-19 Taskforce's advice and guidance (discussed at paragraph 3.57 and Box 3). While feedback was generally positive, it highlighted issues with version control, timeliness, inconsistency and lack of guidance on deployment processes. APSC prepared a report in July 2020 outlining lessons learned and actions taken to address issues.
COO interviews (APSC)	APSC interviewed members of COO Committee in June and July 2020 to capture qualitative feedback on operational and management perspectives of the APS COVID-19 response. A report on outcomes was presented to the COO Committee in late September 2020, highlighting various lessons related to crisis architecture, workforce resilience, flexibility and expertise. The Committee agreed to consider lessons to inform its strategic forward agenda and noted lessons would also inform the development of existing APS reform initiatives.
APS employee census (APSC)	The APS employee census has been conducted since 2012 to provide insight on employees' views and help target strategies to build APS workplace capability. Due to COVID-19, the 2020 APS employee census was postponed from May–June to October–November. The 2020 census included additional questions to assess COVID-19 impacts.
Agency survey (APSC)	APSC issued a survey to agencies in July 2020 with questions assessing the impact of COVID-19 on various aspects of agencies' operation. This included questions on remote access, internal policies, and the proportion of staff deployed internally and externally. Responses were received from 95 agencies with results showing agencies had a range of experiences.
Surge workforce survey (APSC)	In late June 2020 the Workforce Management Taskforce issued an exit survey for staff returning from deployment. The survey was initially provided to agency human resources staff to distribute to returning staff. However, due to a low response rate, APSC began emailing returning staff directly in August 2020.
Citizen experience data (PM&C)	PM&C commenced a Citizen Experience Survey in 2018 to understand citizen experience and satisfaction with public services delivered by the APS. Surveys of at least 2,500 people are conducted every 4 months, providing time-series data that can be used to assess changes in perceptions of APS services.
COO Committee lessons (PM&C)	As discussed at Table 2.1 and paragraph 2.22, the COO Committee established a Lessons Learnt Working Group, which reported back in July 2020. The report concluded the Committee 'was seen as effective in providing an APS-wide approach and response to the crisis' and made twelve recommendations to address issues related to meetings and timeliness, communications and working groups. The report was endorsed by the Committee and it undertook to implement the recommendations.
Agency quantitative data (COO Committee Productivity Working Group)	<p>As noted in Table 2.1, in June 2020 the COO Committee established a working group to assess the impacts of COVID-19 on agency productivity. The group reported back to the COO Committee in early August noting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the APS has increased the number of outputs it produces and the number of hours worked (with staff taking less leave and/or accruing more flex-time); and there is no robust evidence to suggest a material shift in levels of staff productivity per hour worked. <p>The report highlighted the scarcity of appropriate data, noting 'significant data collection' would be required to progress the work further. In August 2020 the COO Committee agreed to progress with the next stage of this work.</p>

Source	Description
Productivity pulse (Finance) and agency pulse surveys	In a project commenced prior to COVID-19, Finance is undertaking work to measure staff productivity. In May 2020 Finance identified five relevant survey questions from the APS employee census and asked agencies to include them in pulse surveys. Survey responses from twelve agencies, including Finance, suggested an improvement in perceptions of productivity when benchmarked against the 2019 employee census results. ^a

Note a: Questions measured respondents' agreement with the following statements: 'I can identify a clear connection between my job and my agency's purpose'; 'I feel committed to my agency's goals'; 'Internal communication within my agency is effective'; 'My agency inspires me to come up with new or better ways of doing things'; and 'My agency really inspires me to do my best work every day'.

APS-wide planning for a phased transition to future operations

COO Committee planning

3.79 In early April 2020 the COO Committee commenced work on recovery planning, initiating two working group projects to examine: 'transitioning from crisis to the new normal' over the medium term (three to six months); and 'planning for the recovery phase' over a longer term (nine to eighteen months). Workshops were convened for both projects in April 2020 involving a number of COO Committee members and external staff.

- As at September 2020 the 'Transitioning from Crisis to the New Normal' Working Group had not reported back to the COO Committee on the outcomes of its April workshop.³⁹
- The 'Planning for the Recovery Phase' Working Group presented a paper to the COO Committee in mid-May, identifying learnings in a range of areas including cross-agency approaches to information technology and staff capability. While the Committee endorsed the paper, minutes of its meeting do not record whether it agreed on next steps for the Working Group, as requested in the paper.⁴⁰

APS reform

3.80 In December 2019, shortly before the emergence of COVID-19, the Australian Government released an agenda for reforming the APS.⁴¹ While implementation planning for the reform agenda was paused in April 2020, APSC advised the Assistant Minister on 3 April 2020 that reform work would continue, stating: 'In some ways, our response to the COVID-19 crisis is a reform activity — we have had to operate in huge uncertainty, think differently and manage our work differently'.

3.81 In June 2020 APSC and PM&C presented a paper to the COO Committee on the refreshed reform agenda, noting that it would 'build on lessons and momentum from the APS's COVID-19 response'. The paper outlined that the Secretary of PM&C and the APS Commissioner had agreed to three immediate reform priorities:

39 PM&C advised the ANAO that the outcomes were incorporated into ongoing APS reform work being overseen by the COO Committee.

40 PM&C advised the ANAO that the Working Group was subsequently paused due to escalating case numbers in Victoria.

41 PM&C, *Delivering for Australians. A world-class Australian Public Service: The Government's APS reform agenda* [Internet], Commonwealth of Australia, 2019, available at: <https://www.pmc.gov.au/news-centre/government/governments-aps-reform-agenda-world-class-australian-public-service> [accessed 7 September 2020]

- supporting delivery of the Government's COVID-19 recovery agenda;
- digital transformation and ICT reform; and
- workforce planning and capability actions.

3.82 APSC and PM&C are leading on the third priority, which includes initiatives such as an APS professions model, learning and development strategy and mobility framework. The mobility framework, in particular, has been informed by lessons learned from COVID-19.

APS mobility framework and surge reserve

3.83 In July 2020 APSC commenced work on an APS mobility framework for policies, guidance and templates to support the strategic use of mobility beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Development of an APS 'surge reserve' is identified as a priority initiative under the framework. The aim of the surge reserve is to prepare for future emergency deployments where the APS has a role in service delivery and public safety. The intention is that the reserve would consist of a trained pool of available APS employees who have formally volunteered ahead of time to be redeployed when required. The surge reserve and other proposed mobility framework initiatives were endorsed for further development by the Secretaries Board at its virtual retreat on 30 July 2020.



Grant Hehir
Auditor-General

Canberra ACT
1 December 2020

Appendices

Appendix 1 Entity responses



Australian Government
Australian Public Service Commission

AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSIONER

Mr Grant Hehir
Auditor-General for Australia
Australian National Audit Office
GPO Box 707
Canberra ACT 2601

Grant

Dear Mr ~~Hehir~~

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft audit report regarding *Management of the Australian Public Service's Workforce Response to COVID-19*.

The Australian Public Service Commission welcomes the draft report and its findings. The Australian Public Service has made a significant contribution to the COVID-19 pandemic response and it is pleasing to receive confirmation that the management of the workforce during this challenging period was effective.

The Commission also welcomes and supports the report's key messages for all Australian Government entities relating to governance, risk management and policy implementation. These key messages will help to position the Australian Public Service to continue to respond effectively to future crises.

On behalf of the Commission, I would also like to thank you and your officers for the professional and collaborative approach that characterised the audit process. I look forward to the upcoming tabling of the final report.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Woolcott', followed by a long horizontal flourish.

Peter Woolcott AO
18 November 2020

B Block, Treasury Building
Parkes Place West PARKES ACT 2600
GPO Box 3176 CANBERRA ACT 2600



Australian Government
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

SECRETARY

Ref: EC20-000706

Mr Grant Hehir
 Auditor-General for Australia
 Australian National Audit Office
 Email: OfficeoftheAuditorGeneralPerformanceAudit@anao.gov.au

Dear Auditor-General

Thank you for your email of 23 October 2020 regarding the proposed performance audit report on *Management of the Australian Public Service's Workforce Response to COVID-19* (the Audit), which includes content relating to the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C).

I acknowledge the opportunity to review and respond to an extract of the Audit, pursuant to section 19 of the *Auditor-General Act 1997*.

I welcome the conclusions and supporting findings made in the Audit. I note the Audit's conclusions are that:

- management of the Australian Public Service (APS) workforce in implementing the Australian Government's COVID-19 priorities was effective;
- arrangements established to oversee and monitor the APS's workforce response to COVID-19 were appropriate; and
- management of the APS workforce in implementing the Australian Government's COVID-19 priorities was effective.

I agree with the three conclusions made in the Audit.

As I stated to the Senate Select Committee of COVID-19 on 13 May 2020, I am immensely proud of the contributions from public officials across the APS and from the State and Territory public sectors. Their joint efforts have supported the response to COVID-19 and in the economic recovery which will be ongoing.

In addition to the effective management of the APS workforce, I would also observe that the Australian Public Service Commissioner, Mr Peter Woolcott AO, and I paid considerable attention to maintaining engagement with the workforce.

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This included four open letters from Mr Woolcott and myself, in addition to four APS200 events, with a fifth scheduled later this month. I consider these also contributed to the overall success of the workforce response.

A summary of my response is provided in an attachment to this letter.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P. Gaetjens'.

Philip Gaetjens
18 November 2020

Appendix 2 List of guidance released by APSC

Title	Category	Target audience	Date first issued	Date last updated
Website guidance				
Circular 2020/1: COVID-19 leave arrangements	Leave	Employers	30 January 2020	3 April 2020
COVID-19 – Social distancing and transmission reduction, advice for agency managers	Working arrangements	Employers	18 March 2020	15 May 2020
Information for workers from Australian government agencies, services and programs visiting remote communities	Working arrangements	Employees	18 March 2020	N/A
Working from home during COVID-19: advice to agencies	Working arrangements	Employers	20 March 2020	11 May 2020
Circular 2020/3: COVID-19 – Remote working and evolving work arrangements	Working arrangements	Employers	27 March 2020	9 April 2020
Looking after your mental health series: - responding to uncertainty; - supporting others in times of uncertainty; and - the importance of physical health.	Public health initiatives	Whole of APS	27 March 2020	28 April 2020
APS Workforce Management Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)	Resourcing & deployment	Employees	30 March 2020	7 June 2020
APS Workforce Management Taskforce – Standard secondment terms and conditions	Resourcing & deployment	Other	30 March 2020	N/A
APS Workforce Management Taskforce – Memorandum of Understanding	Resourcing & deployment	Other	30 March 2020	1 April 2020
Infographic – Remote ready?	Working arrangements	Employees	8 April 2020	N/A
Infographic – Do you need to meet face to face?	Working arrangements	Employees	8 April 2020	N/A
Infographic – Work arrangements	Working arrangements	Employees	8 April 2020	N/A
Circular 2020/4: Authorisation to extend non-SES, non-ongoing engagements during the COVID-19 pandemic	Non-ongoing employment arrangements	Agency heads	17 April 2020	N/A

Title	Category	Target audience	Date first issued	Date last updated
COVID-19 fact sheet – Managing work from home arrangements for employees with disability	Working arrangements	Employers	17 April 2020	21 April 2020
Guidance for parents and carers	Public health initiatives	Whole of APS	17 April 2020	1 May 2020
Circular 2020/5: Preparing for a COVID-safe transition for APS workplaces	Working arrangements	Whole of APS	8 May 2020	N/A
Circular 2020/6: Temporary mobility arrangements as part of the continued response to COVID-19	Resourcing & redeployment	Whole of APS	8 May 2020	N/A
FAQs for employees: gradual relaxing of COVID-19 restrictions	Working arrangements	Employees	12 May 2020	2 June 2020
GovTEAMS guidance				
Agency union response template	Union correspondence	HR/Corporate teams	16 March 2020	26 March 2020
Approach to managing contractors	Non-ongoing employment arrangements	COOs	16 March 2020	26 June 2020
Casual Employees Miscellaneous Leave Determination No. 1 template	Non-ongoing employment arrangements	Agency heads	16 March 2020	26 June 2020
COVID-19 – Social distancing and transmission reduction – advice for agencies	Working arrangements	Employers	16 March 2020	N/A
Sharing of pandemic and business continuity plans	Union correspondence	HR/Corporate teams	26 March 2020	12 June 2020
Looking after your mental health series: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • responding to uncertainty; • supporting others in times of uncertainty; and • the importance of physical health.^a 	Public health initiatives	Whole of APS	27 March 2020	1 May 2020
Guidance for Secretaries and Agency Heads – APS employees and the COVID-19 pandemic	Resourcing & redeployment	Agency heads	28 March 2020	30 April 2020
COVID-19 school closure flowchart	Leave	Employers	30 March 2020	N/A

Title	Category	Target audience	Date first issued	Date last updated
Flexible working arrangements during COVID-19	Working arrangements	Employers	30 March 2020	N/A
Guidance for agencies responding to union	Union correspondence	HR/corporate teams	31 March 2020	15 May 2020
Payment of allowances during COVID-19	Working arrangements	Employers	2 April 2020	23 April 2020
Leave types for COVID-19 diagnosis or exposure decision tree	Leave	Employers	3 April 2020	6 August 2020
Mobility of the Australian Public Service in response to COVID-19 decision tree	Resourcing & redeployment	Employers	3 April 2020	N/A
FAQs on leave, school closures, flexible working	Working arrangements	Whole of APS	7 April 2020	29 April 2020
Media talking points	Media correspondence	HR/corporate teams	7 April 2020	25 May 2020
Infographic – Remote ready?	Working arrangements	Employees	7 April 2020	N/A
Template letter – evidence employee is an essential worker	Resourcing & redeployment	HR/Corporate teams	9 April 2020	N/A
Guidance for parents and carers	Public health initiatives	Whole of APS	17 April 2020	1 May 2020
APS Mobility Register – FAQs	Resourcing & redeployment	Employees	22 April 2020	N/A
Pay and conditions while on temporary mobility – FAQs	Resourcing & redeployment	Employees	23 April 2020	N/A
COVID-19 return to work posters	Working arrangements	Employers	19 May 2020	21 May 2020
COVIDSafe app on employer-issued devices	Public health initiatives	Employers	20 May 2020	N/A

Note a: The 'Looking after your mental health' series are listed together in this table, but were treated as three separate guidance products in the ANAO's analysis.

Source: ANAO analysis of APSC guidance issued through its website and GovTEAMS platform.

Appendix 3 Prime Minister's direction under subsection 21(1) of the *Public Service Act 1999*

Direction under subsection 21(1) of the *Public Service Act 1999* — COVID 19 — movement of APS employees to functions critical to the continued delivery of services to the Australian public

I, Scott Morrison, Prime Minister of Australia, issue the following direction to Agency Heads in relation to the management of APS employees.

1. The object of this direction is to facilitate the most efficient and effective deployment of APS employees and expertise to meet the exceptional challenge posed by COVID 19 to Australian society – a task which has become the principal focus of APS endeavour.
2. Each Agency Head is required to identify, as a matter of urgency, those functions performed in the agency that, taking into account the consequences of the COVID 19 pandemic, are currently critical to:
 - (a) the continued delivery of services to the Australian public; or
 - (b) the operation of the APS as a whole.
3. Each Agency Head is also required to identify those employees in their agency whose duties do not involve the performance of those functions referred to in either 2(a) or 2(b), and who are capable of undertaking work, as an employee of the agency:
 - (a) on a temporary basis for other APS agencies that are critical to the continued delivery of services to the Australian public, or are critical to the operation of the APS as a whole; or
 - (b) on a temporary basis to assist State or Territory government agencies to address the consequences of COVID 19, including to assist them to maintain the continued delivery of services to the Australian public; or
 - (c) on a temporary basis to assist community organisations to address the consequences of COVID 19, including to assist a community organisation to maintain the continued delivery of services to the Australian public.
4. Each Agency Head is to provide the details of the functions referred to in paragraph 2 (where relevant), and the groups of employees in paragraph 3, to the Australian Public Service Commissioner as soon as it is completed, but no later than 30 March 2020.
5. The Commissioner will then notify relevant Agency Heads as to which employees or groups of employees in the agency are to undertake work elsewhere, as described in paragraph 3(a).
6. Each Agency Head is then required to exercise all powers available to him or her to make available its employees to undertake work in the APS agency specified by the Commissioner, and to do so as quickly as possible.
7. More generally, each Agency Head is required to cooperate with any requests or directions made by the Commissioner in relation to the provision of services by APS employees

to sectors of critical need. As described in paragraphs 3(b) and (c) above, those areas of critical need may be in State or Territory government sectors, or in community organisations.

8. The Commissioner will issue further guidance for Agency Heads about the application of this direction.

9. This direction commences on the date on which is it made.

SCOTT MORRISON

PRIME MINISTER

26 MARCH 2020