

T h e   A u d i t o r - G e n e r a l

Audit Report No.32 1998-99  
Performance Audit

## Agency Management of Parliamentary Workflow

A u s t r a l i a n   N a t i o n a l   A u d i t   O f f i c e

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Canberra ACT  
8 March 1999

Dear Madam President  
Dear Mr Speaker

The Australian National Audit Office has undertaken an across-agency performance audit of the management of Parliamentary workflow, in accordance with the authority contained in the *Auditor-General Act 1997*. I present this report of this audit, and the accompanying brochure, to the Parliament. The report is titled *Agency Management of Parliamentary Workflow*.

Following its tabling in Parliament, the report will be placed on the Australian National Audit Office's Homepage—  
<http://www.anao.gov.au>.

Yours sincerely



P. J. Barrett  
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. The ANAO assists the Auditor-General to carry out his duties under the *Auditor-General Act 1997* to undertake performance audits and financial statement audits of Commonwealth public sector bodies and to provide independent reports and advice for the Parliament, the Government and the community. The aim is to improve Commonwealth public sector administration and accountability.

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# Abbreviations

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AAO	<i>Administrative Arrangements Order</i>
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ANAO	Australian National Audit Office
APS	Australian Public Service
ASO	Administrative Service Officer
CCU	Customer Communications Unit (Centrelink)
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CSC	Customer Service Centre (Centrelink)
CLO	Cabinet Liaison Officer
COSMIC	‘Centrelink’s Operating System for Managing Information and Communications’
DEETYA	(former) Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs
DESPATCH	DSS IT-based parliamentary workflow application
DFaCS	Department of Family and Community Services
DHAC	Department of Health and Aged Care
DHFS	(former) Department of Health and Family Services
DLOs	Departmental Liaison Officers
DMPLS	Directorate of Ministerial and Parliamentary Liaison Services (Department of Defence)
DOFA	Department of Finance and Administration
DSS	(former) Department of Social Security
IT	Information Technology
MINREPS	Ministerial representations (Department of Defence)
MP	Member of Parliament
MPSS	Ministerial and Parliamentary Services Section (former Department of Social Security)
OMO	Outposted Ministerial Officer
PAPA	Public Affairs, Parliamentary and Access Branch (former Department of Health and Family Services)

PARLMAN	Manual of Ministerial and Parliamentary Procedures (Department of Defence)
PM&C	Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
PPQs	Potential Parliamentary Questions
QoNs	Questions on Notice
QTBs	Question Time Briefs
SES	Senior Executive Service
SOG	Senior Officer Grade



# Summary and Recommendations



# Audit Summary

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## Background

1. Ministers are given specific powers and functions under legislation, as well as the broad responsibility to oversee the running of government departments and agencies. They are accountable to Parliament for the overall administration of their portfolios, both in terms of policy and management, and for carriage in Parliament of their accountability obligations to that institution.

2. Within agencies, the responsibility for providing advice and service to ministers rests with chief executive officers. Depending upon individual portfolio arrangements, agencies within portfolios may provide advice and services direct to ministers. Executive members of departments maintain day to day contact with ministers and their offices, and are supported by staff who provide information, advice and required responses.

3. Parliamentary workflow reviewed in the audit encompasses a number of parliamentary and ministerial support functions common to the operations of most Australian Public Service (APS) agencies. Management of parliamentary workflow is an important core business of all APS agencies. It is one means by which they ensure that their ministers and Parliament receive timely, quality advice and services.

4. The audit focused on agency management of parliamentary and ministerial support processes coordinated within ministerial service units. It did not examine the broader agency services provided to the Government, ministers and Parliament which relate to policy development and associated program delivery.

5. The audit reviewed agency management of parliamentary workflow by the following four APS agencies during 1997–98:

- Department of Defence;
- Department of Health and Family Services<sup>1</sup> (DHFS);
- Department of Social Security<sup>2</sup> (DSS); and
- Centrelink.

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<sup>1</sup> Now the Department of Health and Aged Care.

<sup>2</sup> Now the Department of Family and Community Services.

## Parliamentary workflow

6. For the purpose of this audit, parliamentary workflow includes three areas of client service provided to ministers and to parliament:

- services for ministers which support their role as Minister administering the department<sup>3</sup>;
- services for ministers to support their work external to Parliament; and
- services to the Parliament, Parliamentary Committees, and to other Members of Parliament.

## Audit objectives and criteria

7. The purpose of the audit was to assess whether management of parliamentary workflow by the agencies reviewed was efficient and effective and to identify elements of good practice. In assessing agency effectiveness and efficiency, the audit focused on issues of client service such as timeliness, quality and cost. It considered also the governance framework and accountability arrangements relevant to parliamentary workflow, as well as more operational considerations including the use of information technology, development of relevant management information and suitable benchmarking arrangements.

## Overall conclusion

8. The audit's overall conclusion was that the agencies reviewed achieved a generally high degree of effectiveness in their coordination and management of parliamentary workflow. The audit was unable to draw any conclusion on the efficiency of individual agency management of parliamentary workflow as there was an overall lack of information on the cost of the services provided. Nevertheless, agencies had established some good practices in the management of parliamentary workflow which, along with other related examples raised during the audit, are reflected in a good practice checklist at Chapter 3 of the report.

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<sup>3</sup> *Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia*, s. 64

# Key Findings

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## Governance

9. The agencies reviewed maintain effective management arrangements over their parliamentary and ministerial services.

## Accountability

10. Details of the human and financial resources which the agencies expend on providing services to ministers and Parliament are not generally collected nor are costs systematically attributed. At the time of the audit, these services were not reported on in detail in annual reports nor in Budget estimates documents.

## Client service

11. Generally, a high degree of effort is sustained across agencies to produce the integrated, coordinated, ongoing services expected and required by ministers.

12. The relationship between agency and minister seems to work well where a strong, supportive ongoing working partnership is developed within an environment of trust and confidence.

13. Client service provided to ministers could be enhanced by establishing better processes of client feedback, by which agencies could identify potential areas for improvement; inform appropriate sections in the organisation; and assess ongoing performance to ensure its continuing relevance and contribution to agreed outcomes or results to be achieved.

14. Where agencies perform functions using the purchaser/provider model, there should be an explicit agreement on the responsibilities of those concerned for delivery of specified advice and services to the relevant ministers. This is essential for ongoing confidence and positive relationships between the two parties.

## Timeliness

15. Parliament and ministerial offices generally set clear and firm deadlines for provision of information and advice. Agencies have responded by formulating internal standards and targets for timeliness. To assist agencies to meet these standards, ministerial service units coordinate and track the production of material for Parliament and ministers. Most ministerial service units generate regular management

reports on performance of functional units against timeliness standards, particularly for ministerial correspondence.

## Quality

**16.** Ministers and their offices have an unequivocal requirement for high quality services and products from agencies. Agencies have instituted a high degree of quality control for material produced for Parliament and for ministers. Ministerial service units endeavour to gain a clear appreciation of preferences of ministers and staff and to respond quickly to specific changes in preferences. There has been hesitancy on the part of most agencies both to seek formal feedback from ministers' offices which would assist in developing detailed specifications for quality standards and to assess agency performance against these standards.

**17.** Purchaser and provider organisations should establish mechanisms for ongoing consultation and coordination between them to ensure that relevant minister/s receive sound, comprehensive and integrated information and advice.

## Cost

**18.** To date, ministerial and parliamentary workflow has operated in an environment where every effort has been made to meet ministerial needs, with limited concern for cost or level of effort expended by agencies. The cost of these services is virtually uncapped in a context of continuing growth in demand.

**19.** At the present time, the agencies reviewed do not estimate or budget at the level of ministerial and parliamentary workflow. For the majority of these agencies, this is expected to change with the introduction of accrual budgeting and the requirement for reporting on outputs and their performance.

## Use of technology

**20.** Agencies reviewed have invested (or are currently investing) in purpose-designed information technology (IT) systems to improve client service and to enhance overall effectiveness. These systems have the potential to deliver measurable improvements in timeliness and quality of services and to provide strategic management information.

## Management information

**21.** Agencies could make better use of information held within their parliamentary workflow systems to provide strategic information for

management on issues raised in Parliament and in ministerial correspondence and work underway within the agency for ministers and Parliament.

## Benchmarking

**22.** A lack of comparable data and differing arrangements for the provision of parliamentary and ministerial services currently make benchmarking (for other than standards of timeliness) difficult. Nevertheless there is some scope for agencies to undertake cooperative benchmarking projects in areas where they have common parliamentary workflow items with clearly identified parameters for costing and performance.

## ANAO Recommendations and Agency Responses

**23.** The ANAO made seven recommendations aimed at improving the efficiency and effectiveness of parliamentary workflow. The agencies reviewed indicated their general agreement with opportunities for improvement that were identified in recommendations.

# Recommendations

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*Set out below are the ANAO's recommendations with Report paragraph references and a summary of agencies' responses. More detailed responses are shown in the body of the report.*

*The recommendations are targeted to the agencies reviewed during the audit. Lessons learned during the audit and good practices identified in the agencies reviewed and in other bodies consulted during the audit are included in a Good Practice Checklist at Chapter 3. The recommendations and the Checklist are likely to be applicable to other APS agencies.*

**Recommendation No.1**  
**Para. 2.16** The ANAO recommends that agencies collect data on the cost, quantity and quality of their parliamentary workflow outputs and that they consider reporting these in a suitable form as part of their performance information in annual reports and, where significant, in Budget documents.

***Department of Defence:*** Agreed with qualification

***Department of Health and Aged Care:*** Agreed with qualification

***Department of Family and Community Services:*** Agreed

***Centrelink:*** Agreed

**Recommendation No.2**  
**Para. 2.37** The ANAO recommends that agencies regularly consult with their ministers to identify, enumerate and document the desired range, quality and cost of services to be delivered to ministers and Parliament.

***Department of Defence:*** Agreed with qualification

***Department of Health and Aged Care:*** Agreed

***Department of Family and Community Services:*** Agreed

***Centrelink:*** Agreed



**Recommendation No.3**  
**Para. 2.61** The ANAO recommends that agencies examine their current approaches to drafting replies to ministerial correspondence and review the potential to adopt more efficient or innovative practices, and that they discuss these options with their ministers.

***Department of Defence:*** Agreed

***Department of Health and Aged Care:*** Agreed

***Department of Family and Community Services:***  
 Agreed

***Centrelink:*** Agreed

**Recommendation No.4**  
**Para. 2.76** The ANAO recommends that agencies develop performance standards covering quality, timeliness and cost of parliamentary workflow outputs.

***Department of Defence:*** Agreed

***Department of Health and Aged Care:*** Agreed

***Department of Family and Community Services:***  
 Agreed

***Centrelink:*** Agreed

**Recommendation No.5**  
**Para. 2.99** The ANAO recommends that agencies put in place effective mechanisms to cost the production of parliamentary workflow outputs.

***Department of Defence:*** Agreed

***Department of Health and Aged Care:*** Agreed with qualification

***Department of Family and Community Services:***  
 Agreed

***Centrelink:*** Agreed

**Recommendation No.6**  
**Para. 2.115** The ANAO recommends that ministerial service units produce strategic management information on issues raised in Parliament and in ministerial correspondence, and that they assist coordination of parliamentary workflow by disseminating information on ministerial briefings and minutes in preparation within the agency.

***Department of Defence:*** Agreed

***Department of Health and Aged Care:*** Agreed

***Department of Family and Community Services:***  
Agreed

***Centrelink:*** Agreed

**Recommendation No.7**  
**Para. 2.123** The ANAO recommends that agencies consider undertaking benchmarking projects in cooperation with other organisations to assess and improve the relative efficiency of their management of parliamentary workflow.

***Department of Defence:*** Agreed

***Department of Health and Aged Care:*** Agreed with qualification

***Department of Family and Community Services:***  
Agreed

***Centrelink:*** Agreed

# Audit Findings and Conclusions



# 1. Introduction

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*This chapter describes the constitutional and legal framework in which Parliament, ministers and the APS operate and interact. It establishes the parameters of the audit and defines ‘parliamentary workflow’ for the purposes of the audit. It sets out the audit objectives and approach and the processes followed by the audit team.*

## The Constitutional and Legal Framework<sup>4</sup>

**1.1** The framework for Australian Government is set out in the *Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia*, with Commonwealth powers separated broadly into legislative, judicial and executive functions. Executive power is vested in the Queen and is exercisable primarily by the Governor-General, acting on advice from the Executive Council. The Constitution provides that all Ministers are Executive Councillors and recent practice has been to appoint all Parliamentary Secretaries as well.

### Ministers and Portfolios

**1.2** In Australia’s Cabinet system of government, the political party or parties which control a majority in the House of Representatives become the Government and provide the ministers, including the Prime Minister, all of whom must be members of the Parliament.

**1.3** The Prime Minister’s responsibilities extend over the full range of government activities. Accordingly, the Prime Minister decides on the division of responsibilities between ministers and allocates these as ‘portfolios’ of activities and programs to be pursued in accordance with the agenda and decisions of the Government, and the legislative provisions that are applicable to the allocated responsibilities. The Prime Minister also determines which ministers will comprise the Cabinet, the most authoritative body within executive government. The Cabinet undertakes collective consideration of, and decision-making on, strategic directions and major policy issues, and the coordination of the Government’s political and administrative agenda.

**1.4** Acting on advice from the Prime Minister, the Governor-General appoints ministers, establishes departments, and formally allocates portfolio responsibilities among ministers through an *Administrative Arrangements Order* (AAO) published in a special issue of the *Commonwealth of Australia Gazette*. The AAO specifies the name of the department which

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<sup>4</sup> See *A Guide on Key Elements of Ministerial Responsibility*, Prime Minister, Canberra, April 1996

is to be responsible to each minister and lists both the specific Commonwealth Acts (in whole or in part) and the broad functions that are to be administered within the portfolio.

**1.5** Ministers are given specific powers and functions under legislation, as well as the broad responsibility to oversee the running of government departments and agencies. However, some important powers such as making legislative regulations and authorising many appointments, are vested in the Governor-General in Council (the Executive Council).

**1.6** Ministers have to meet considerable constitutional requirements and, as members of the Government, have substantial parliamentary responsibilities, particularly for carriage of legislation effecting government policy and commitments within their portfolios.

## **Ministers and Parliament**

**1.7** Ministers are accountable to Parliament:

- for the overall administration of their portfolios, both in terms of policy and management; and
- for carriage in the Parliament of their accountability obligations to that institution.

## **Ministers and the Australian Public Service**

**1.8** The development and provision of policy advice and the implementation and administration of core Commonwealth Government programs are undertaken by the APS. The APS comprises those organisations whose staff are employed under the authority of the *Public Service Act 1922*. In addition to the portfolio department, each portfolio may include a number of other APS agencies both statutory (ie established under particular legislation) or non-statutory in nature. (Note: the non-APS Commonwealth public sector also includes government business enterprises and statutory authorities whose staff are not employed under the Public Service Act, as well as the defence forces.)

**1.9** Under a minister, each department is headed by a Secretary. (Secretaries may also adopt other titles such as Chief Executive Officer.) The office of Secretary is defined under the *Public Service Act*, which states (sub-section 25(2))<sup>5</sup>:

*The Secretary of a Department shall, under the Minister, be responsible for its general working, and for all the business thereof, and shall advise the Minister in all matters relating to the Department.*

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Codd, M 1990, *The Role of Secretaries of Departments in the APS*, SESU Occasional Paper No. 8, Public Service Commission, Canberra

**1.10** On his/her appointment, each minister receives a Letter of Commission from the Prime Minister which sets out the objectives and directions that the Government expects the minister and department to pursue during the ministerial term. As a Secretary's line of working authority goes directly to the minister, this letter provides guidance for action by a secretary to set policy and program directions within a department in line with government requirements.

## Background

**1.11** Relationships between minister and Secretary and between a minister's office and an agency are broad and complex. At one end of the spectrum the secretary is the minister's principal advisor on policy and management. The minister can convey strategic directions to him or her in an unrecorded, verbal exchange. At another, the Secretary is manager of a large operation charged with providing arms-length quality services to the minister. Ministers and their offices have ongoing, essentially unquantified, interaction with agency senior executives and most will have substantial direct contact with agency staff in States and Territories, where the department or agency has decentralised operations, and with other parts of the APS.

**1.12** The volume of transactions between agencies and their ministers' offices has grown and the content has proliferated, particularly over the last decade. There has been increasing demand on agency support for ministers and Parliament to meet the discipline of larger, more diverse portfolios with work distributed between multiple ministers sworn to administer various components of departmental responsibilities and/or parliamentary secretaries who have discrete responsibilities; to manage tighter timetabling of Government legislative programs; to manage the highly secure procedures of Cabinet work; to develop detailed responses to meet increasing parliamentary oversight of their administrations; to support expanding ministers' offices and their greater level of involvement in departmental subject matter; and to draft suitable replies to citizens and interest groups growing in confidence in putting forward views on Government policies and programs and/or seeking to advance favourable consideration of their particular cases.

**1.13** Ministers and Parliament expect a high level of service from the APS. The services that the APS provides to ministers and to Parliament pervade most aspects of the work of agencies, making it difficult to fully quantify them or to assess their quality. Effective governance of services provided to ministers and to Parliament is of significant importance to secretaries. Increased complexity and large volume transactions require

the latter to establish and maintain sound internal frameworks that can provide assurance that the department as a whole is providing consistent, timely, quality products and services to its minister/s. While individual secretaries remain personally responsible and accountable for departmental services, they have established centralised ministerial service units to coordinate arms-length parliamentary and ministerial support functions.

**1.14** Ministerial service units manage quantifiable, large-volume areas of parliamentary workflow such as ministerial briefings and minutes, draft responses to ministerial correspondence and responses to Parliamentary questions. These units utilise purpose designed computer systems to provide fast-track lines of communication to their ministers' offices and tracking systems across the agency to ensure that responses, information and advice are brought in on time and that they meet ministerial specifications.

## **Parliamentary workflow**

**1.15** Ministers and Secretaries are empowered to organise their departments and, within budgetary limits, staff them as they see fit. Parliamentary workflow is typically delegated to a specifically designated central work unit set up for this purpose. Secretaries and senior staff continue to have extensive direct contact with ministers and their officers on the full range of departmental activities but the high volume work and the coordination and tracking of formal documentation is conducted by these units, which this report designates as 'ministerial service units'. The units generally work under the close oversight of a secretary or deputy secretary.

**1.16** The audit focused on agency management of parliamentary and ministerial support processes coordinated within ministerial service units. It did not examine the broader agency services provided to the Government, ministers and Parliament which relate to policy development and associated program delivery. These form the primary and the most substantial interaction between ministers and their departments. Parliamentary workflow systems are designed to help streamline the provision of information, document flow and services to ministers and Parliament which support these endeavours. The audit was concerned with the effectiveness and efficiency of those systems.

## **Audit objectives**

**1.17** The purpose of the audit was to assess whether management of parliamentary workflow by the agencies reviewed was efficient and effective, and to identify elements of good practice. In assessing agency



effectiveness and efficiency, the audit focused on issues of timeliness, quality, cost and client service. It considered also the broad contextual issues of governance and accountability, and more operational considerations including the use of information technology, development of management information and benchmarking comparisons.

## Audit approach

**1.18** The audit reviewed agency management of parliamentary workflow by the following four APS agencies during 1997–98:

- Department of Defence;
- Department of Health and Family Services (now the Department of Health and Aged Care);
- Department of Social Security (now the Department of Family and Community Services); and
- Centrelink.

**1.19** These agencies were included in the audit because they provided models of good practice and/or illustrated emerging issues. All had in place, and were in the process of enhancing, IT-based systems specifically developed to streamline and enhance the effectiveness of their parliamentary workflow.

**1.20** The audit was designed to focus on a core business of agencies, one which has not previously been subject to audit or public review<sup>6</sup>. There were no data available within the public domain. Data were collected from the agencies reviewed on their throughput of parliamentary workflow during 1997–98. While the audit focused on the work of ministerial service units, data were also collected from other areas of the agencies reviewed which provided specialist services for ministers and for Parliament that were not generally coordinated directly by ministerial service units.

**1.21** Ministerial service units have developed with little if any central guidance to agencies on their structure or responsibilities. While some of their functions are subject to external controls and deadlines—in particular, rules and standing orders of the House of Representatives and the Senate for responses in Question Time and to Questions on Notice (QoNs), requirements of Parliamentary Tabling Offices for parliamentary papers, Government requirements for legislative timetabling and Cabinet

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<sup>6</sup> In March 1987, the Efficiency Scrutiny Unit (chaired by Mr David Block) reported to Cabinet on one aspect of parliamentary workflow in *A Scrutiny of the Handling of Ministerial Correspondence (Project Quill)*. The results were distributed to public sector agencies but were not published or widely circulated.

documentation—many are not. Overall, these units display disparate practices and processes, differing standards, different approaches to data management and internal reporting, and, depending on the agency, they take responsibility for different mixes of activities.

**1.22** Ministerial service units did not quantify the full range of services that they provided to ministers and to Parliament. In some instances, where data had not been collected or was not readily available, the agencies reviewed assisted the ANAO by interrogating their systems to obtain 1997–98 workflow data. In several cases they have modified their systems accordingly to improve future data collection.

**1.23** Workflow data<sup>7</sup> for 1997–98 were collected on:

- Parliamentary workflow provided to support the Minister administering the department<sup>8</sup> including:
  - ministerial briefings;
  - ministerial minutes;
  - assistance throughout Cabinet processes;
  - assistance throughout legislative processes;
  - coordination of Executive Council matters;
  - Question Time Briefs/ Potential Parliamentary Questions;
  - Questions on Notice;
  - ministerial correspondence;
  - monitoring of Question Time;
  - scrutiny of Hansard output;
  - management of Tabling in Parliament of Ministerial Statements, Government Responses, Reports, etc;
  - advice on appointments to, and functioning of, Government statutory/non-statutory organisations, advisory boards, etc.
  - administrative support of Departmental Liaison Officers located in Ministers' offices; and
  - management of the provision of departmental support to Ministers' offices.
- Parliamentary workflow to support the Minister in work external to Parliament, especially:

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<sup>7</sup> Further information on the characteristics of parliamentary workflow is set out at Appendix E.

<sup>8</sup> *Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia*, s. 64

- Public Affairs, including involvement in media releases and speech writing and briefings for meetings and visits.
- Parliamentary workflow to provide services to the Parliament, Parliamentary Committees, and other Members of Parliament, including:
  - advice, submissions and responses to Parliamentary Committees; and
  - services to other Members of Parliament, including the shadow ministry, backbenchers and backbench committees.

**1.24** The audit did not examine several discrete items, that agencies produce for Parliament and for public distribution, that are governed by specific regulations or guidelines:

- annual reports;
- preparation of Budget estimates;
- Portfolio Budget Statements;
- Portfolio Additional Estimates Statements; and
- contribution to and involvement in Auditor-General reports.

## The audit

**1.25** In assessing the effectiveness and efficiency of agency management of parliamentary workflow, the audit focused mainly on issues of client service such as timeliness, quality and cost.

**1.26** The characteristics and outputs of parliamentary workflow during 1997–98 in each agency reviewed were examined. Where available, statistical data and management information on the auditees' parliamentary workflow outputs for 1997–1998 were collected and analysed to ascertain:

- scale of workflow;
- timeliness (for example, % completed within deadline, % overdue); and
- quality (for example, % signed out by minister or delegate, % returned for 'rewrite').

**1.27** The original audit plan was to analyse and quantify the levels of resource usage and indicative cost of:

- ministerial correspondence;
- Questions on Notice (QoNs); and
- ministerial briefings and minutes.

**1.28** However, after examination of available computer histories of these outputs for 1997–98, it was concluded that data were insufficient to allow any robust and reliable costings to be derived.

**1.29** Comparative analysis across the agencies reviewed with a view to benchmarking particular functions was also limited by the records available, variety in the classification of items produced and a wide disparity in the volume of work they produced. Benchmarking analysis was conducted only on the timeliness of production of draft responses to ministerial correspondence.

**1.30** Data on governance arrangements were collected, including levels at which specific outputs were signed-off to the minister, frameworks for internal and external accountability, and systems for measuring performance.

**1.31** The audit also examined the extent and quality of management information that agencies derived from parliamentary workflow systems together with the frequency at which it was provided and details of its distribution. During the course of the audit all agencies subject to the audit put in place improved processes for identifying, measuring and reporting on aspects of the parliamentary workflow process.

**1.32** Interviews were conducted with Secretaries of the departments included in the audit and with the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Centrelink, to obtain their perspectives on management and governance of their parliamentary workflow. Meetings were held with staff in the office of each of the relevant ministers to canvass their viewpoints as clients of the services provided.

**1.33** The size of a minister's staff, the extent to which such staff are delegated watching briefs over certain issues, and the degree to which they have developed direct contact networks within departments, can measurably affect the level of effort agencies need to make to ensure that there is effective governance and management of ministerial services. Trend data on staff numbers in ministers' offices were collated from issues of the *Commonwealth Government Directory* and graphed.<sup>9</sup>

**1.34** To gain a central agency perspective, discussions were held with officers of the ministerial service unit and with members of the accrual budget team in the Department of Finance and Administration, and with the Cabinet Office in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

**1.35** Discussions were also held in New Zealand with:

- the Secretary of the Ministry of Health;
- the Secretary of the Ministry of Defence;
- a senior executive in the Department of Social Welfare
- officers of The Treasury;

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<sup>9</sup> See relevant graphs in the appendices dealing with each agency reviewed, except Centrelink.

- the State Services Commission; and
- Office of the Auditor-General,

to gain an understanding of comparable approaches taken in New Zealand.

**1.36** Discussions were held with officers from the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Chief Minister's Department with responsibility for the inclusion of parliamentary workflow data within the ACT Government accrual budget framework.

**1.37** Audit fieldwork was conducted in the four agencies reviewed during the period from July to mid October 1998. Audit matters were discussed with agencies throughout the audit. Discussion papers were distributed to the agencies in mid-October. The proposed report of the audit was provided to those agencies in November 1998 and revised after considering their comments.

**1.38** The audit was conducted in accordance with ANAO Auditing Standards and cost \$277 000. Mr Christopher Conybeare AO was engaged to provide expert advice to the audit team.

## Acknowledgments

**1.39** The ANAO wishes to express its appreciation for the time, effort and expertise contributed by staff of all agencies reviewed during the conduct of this audit. We are also grateful for the cooperation of the representatives of the Departments of Finance and Administration and Prime Minister and Cabinet, the ACT Chief Minister's Department and agencies in New Zealand that were consulted during the audit.

## Structure of the Report

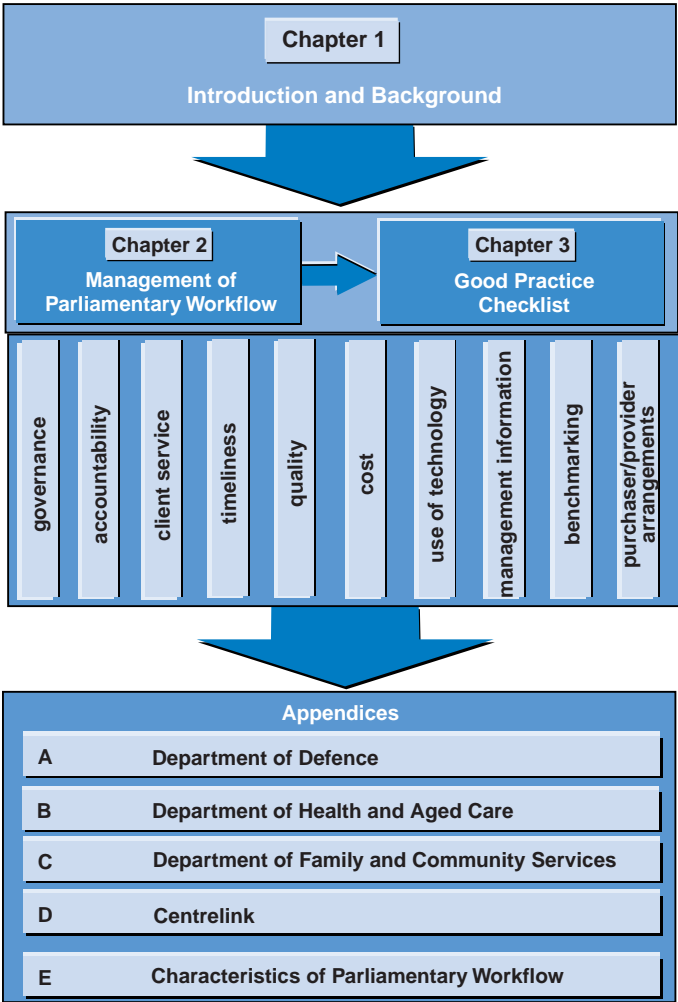
**1.40** The structure of the report is illustrated in Figure 1.

**1.41** Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 provides an overall analysis of the management of parliamentary workflow reviewed during the audit together with audit findings and recommendations. These are reported under governance, accountability, client service, timeliness, quality, cost, use of technology, management information and benchmarking. Chapter 3 provides a good practice checklist which, it is hoped, will assist not only the agencies reviewed but other APS agencies, in improving the efficiency and effectiveness of their parliamentary workflow.

**1.42** Appendices A to D report on management of parliamentary workflow in each agency reviewed. Appendix E is a summary of the characteristics of parliamentary workflow in the APS. This summary has been prepared to assist agencies in defining and streamlining their various

ministerial and parliamentary services and to establish common ground between agencies in order to facilitate benchmarking of relevant functions.

**Figure 1**  
**Structure of the report**



## 2. Management of Parliamentary Workflow

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*This chapter draws together the findings and recommendations of the audit under nine headings: governance, accountability, client service, timeliness, quality, cost, use of technology, management information and benchmarking.*

### Governance

**2.1** The ANAO found that agencies maintain effective management arrangements over their parliamentary and ministerial services. There was strong leadership from secretaries and senior executives supporting the provision of high quality service. Agencies were held accountable by ministers for all services provided and received ongoing, largely informal feedback on service standards. Secretaries and senior executives had direct, open channels of communication with ministerial and parliamentary clients and maintained an oversight of communication systems operating within their ministerial service units.

**2.2** Ministerial service units' responsibility for maintaining an accurate trail of documents and services provided to Parliament and ministers is undertaken in the context of agency governance of ministerial services. At the heart of this governance framework is the relationship between Minister and Department. No major decision involving Minister and Department is made without documentation, and ministerial service units are responsible for the coordination of ministerial documents and for ensuring, amongst other things, that qualitative oversight is maintained. While agency approaches to governance of parliamentary and ministerial services were the context not the subject of this audit, they are commented on in this report to illustrate the wider environment within which management of parliamentary workflow is directed.

**2.3** By way of example, one agency reported how it had consciously addressed governance and accountability issues associated with liaison with, and response to, its ministers. While the secretary had responsibility for direct contact with the principal portfolio Minister, each member of the department's senior executive team was designated as a contact person for the Minister Assisting, the Parliamentary Secretary, and the senior staff members in their offices. Each member of the executive team ensured that they telephoned their nominated contact at least once a day to talk over current and emerging issues and they made themselves available to be contacted at any time. None of this work was costed or transparent in analysis of the agency's parliamentary workflow.

**2.4** The relationship between agency and minister appeared to work best where a strong, ongoing working partnership was developed. The nature of this partnership and the agency's service standards often depended on the relative experience of the minister and his/her preference for an arms length or an integrated relationship with the agency together with the competence or otherwise of the minister's office. Other factors were important, particularly the amount of time a minister could devote to developing rapport and positive relationships with agencies, and providing frank feedback on their performance. Finding time can be difficult for ministers, especially in portfolios that have contentious issues at the fore and in those with many active groups of stakeholders spread over a wide geographic area.

**2.5** One agency reported how one minister, during the period under review, had initiated a process to develop strong relationships within his portfolio. The minister had established a reference group made up of ten senior members of the portfolio executive and had held regular planning sessions and all day seminars with them. This process established effective relationships and enabled the minister to interact effectively and to work strategically with a cross section of his portfolio.

**2.6** The audit noted that the allocation of responsibility between agency action areas for producing parliamentary and ministerial services output was generally, but not always, explicitly defined. To a greater or lesser extent, therefore, depending on the subject matter, ministerial service unit staff are required to be skilled at identifying where, within the agency, they can send urgent requests for information in order to be assured of a timely, sound response. This is particularly important when deadlines are very short; at times, responses could be required within a matter of only minutes, for example at Question Time during parliamentary sitting periods.

**2.7** All agencies reviewed had systems of delegations for review and signing-off of documents produced for ministers and Parliament.

**2.8** The ANAO noted that the weakest areas of governance of agency management of parliamentary workflow were the lack of external reporting of services provided and, as a consequence, no real means of assessing accountability for the efficient use of agency resources.

## **Accountability**

**2.9** To date agencies have not reported publicly on their costs, outputs or performance in relation to ministerial and parliamentary support functions. Data on the human and financial resources expended in services to ministers and Parliament are not generally collected, nor are costs



systematically attributed. Nor are these services generally reported in annual reports and Budget documents in a systematic or comprehensive fashion<sup>10</sup>.

**2.10** As the APS moves to define and cost all agency outputs, in the context of examining contestability for the provision of services and functions and, where opportune, to contract them out, a core business of this type will of necessity become more explicit and more visible<sup>11</sup>. One agency told the ANAO that it was not prepared for market testing of provision of services to ministers and Parliament as it was such a core activity, performed on demand across all functional elements of their agencies, that it would be difficult to identify the full scope of services provided. This audit will assist in providing an overview of the range and scale of agencies' parliamentary workload.

**2.11** The audit noted that in New Zealand:

- agencies include in annual planning and reporting documents their parliamentary workload outputs and their key indicators and measures of performance;
- agencies include details of parliamentary workload outputs in their budget forecasting and estimates processes, specifying cost and required levels of quality and quantity; and
- parliamentary workload outputs are included in performance agreements between departmental chief executives and their ministers whereby the minister agrees to purchase a specific quantity and mix of services each year from his or her ministry for a set price.

**2.12** It was noted that, while these approaches ensured the accountability of all parties, they appeared to focus and report on internal processes rather than on the achievement of specific program or policy results.

**2.13** The audit endorsed the need for greater accountability by agencies in the attribution of expenditure on ministerial and parliamentary services. The lack of attribution of costs for these activities may have led to a perception that their value is measured in some different way that is not relevant to a full cost accrual-based accounting environment. While parliamentary workflow costs are not systematically attributed to this function, overstatement of the costs of policy advising and/or program administration will continue.

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<sup>10</sup> The ANAO recognises that requirements on the content of annual reports are determined by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and that of Budget documents by the Department of Finance and Administration.

<sup>11</sup> To date the Departments of Finance and Administration and Prime Minister and Cabinet have market tested their corporate service functions and subsequently both have contracted out substantial parts of them. In both agencies the units handling parliamentary workflow were retained.

**2.14** Better estimates of the costs of these services would make them more visible and will provide information for ministers and Parliament on the costs of the services they require, thus allowing opportunities for informed discussion on appropriate levels of client service, timeliness, quality standards and other levels of effort provided by agencies. In saying this, the ANAO recognises the difficulties that would arise in the identification and attribution of costs for some services, particularly those that, by their nature, are provided urgently, such as updated and new Question Time Briefs, or that involve contact with a minister's office that is not recorded within ministerial service units such as out of hours briefings by agency Executive members.

**2.15** All agencies reviewed are currently developing outcome and output frameworks in preparation for the introduction of accrual budgeting. Most have included reporting on specific services provided to ministers and Parliament in their preliminary design. In the first instance costs will be attributed on the basis of staff numbers, that is they will not be based on accurate measures of time and effort expended. The ANAO considers that, as it impinges on multiple departmental areas, more work will need to be done to map comprehensively the workflow trail generated by parliamentary workflow. This will be necessary before agencies can quantify their true cost and can report accurately on parliamentary workflow outputs.

## Recommendation No.1

**2.16** The ANAO recommends that agencies collect data on the cost, quantity and quality of their parliamentary workflow outputs and that they consider reporting these in a suitable form as part of their performance information in annual reports and, where significant, in Budget documents.

### *Agency Responses*

#### *Department of Defence*

**2.17 Agreed with qualification.** Defence intends to capture additional cost information on parliamentary workflow for internal management purposes. However, since it forms a minor part of Defence's activities and does not accord with the present focus on reporting on major outputs, Defence does not intend to present the information externally as a matter of course.

#### *Department of Health and Aged Care*

**2.18 Agreed with qualification.** The Department of Health and Aged Care is moving towards collecting and reporting data on the price, quantity and quality of outputs produced for the Minister and Parliament across all

outcomes. However, it is not always easy to draw the line between general policy and administrative work and work done specifically for Ministers. Indeed, it could be argued that all departmental work, broadly speaking, is done for or on behalf of the Ministers. The Department of Health and Aged Care also proposes to move eventually to a finer disaggregation of costs, but not in 1999–2000.

### *Department of Family and Community Services*

**2.19 Agreed.** This recommendation is supported and, as recognised in the report, the Department of Family and Community Services is moving ahead in:

- the proposal to identify the costs of ministerial and parliamentary services will be identified with the introduction of accrual budgeting measures in the 1999–2000 Budget Estimates; and
- the work on obtaining performance information on the Department's policy advising and information services.

**2.20** It is agreed that this information should be reported in annual reports and Budget documents.

### *Centrelink*

**2.21** Centrelink **agrees** with this recommendation. Centrelink supports the need to develop more comprehensive performance information relating to parliamentary workflow and attendant resource and financial impacts. Centrelink is currently undertaking detailed analysis of customer service delivery processes as a matter of high priority to improve process quality and to identify and achieve the efficiency dividends anticipated by the Government.

**2.22** However, the extent of such data collection would itself need to reflect the significant resources required to map and cost the various underlying processes, to record cumulative costs and to acquire reliable data regarding the quality of the various outputs at the numerous points in the process.

## **Client service**

**2.23** The audit found that the most noticeable feature of client service in relation to parliamentary workflow was that it is usually not articulated in any formal way. Agencies approach client service to their ministers' offices in full knowledge of their duty to the Government of the day. The audit found that workflow was done well, in large part promptly and competently, but that there were no specific stated objectives and only rarely any established set standards of performance, other than timeliness.

**2.24** The audit found that parliamentary workflow, in providing advice and support for ministers and Parliament, is a core business of agencies. Generally, a high degree of effort is sustained across agencies to produce the integrated, coordinated, ongoing services needed and required by ministers. The audit noted that individual ministers' offices had a great deal of influence over the level of effort required to maintain parliamentary workflow, and that the sometimes subtle preferences of a minister could significantly impact on the scale of the workload.

**2.25** Ministers are the primary clients for parliamentary workflow. But the agency is an important client also: implicit in material prepared for ministers and for Parliament is the importance of advancing the interests of the agency, most particularly in presenting its activities and principles in a clear, complete and comprehensive way.

**2.26** An important responsibility for agencies is to ensure that incoming ministers receive a flow of information to enable them to deal with immediate and urgent issues and to buttress their capacity to project an informed and consistent view of their administration—in Cabinet, in Parliament and outside in the community. The audit noted that agency contact with new ministers is performed in a professional way, with a technical ease which comes from many years of experience.

**2.27** The audit sought out the agreements between agencies and ministers on the standards of service which would be provided for the range of parliamentary workflow functions. While generally not identified as service agreements, at the time of the audit all agencies (except Centrelink, which had only recently been established) had parliamentary manuals or handbooks which set out standards for timeliness for some of the different items of parliamentary workflow and which identified the current individual stylistic preferences of the portfolio's minister/s.

**2.28** While much of the content was carried over from minister to minister, the audit team was informed that the manuals were discussed in detail with each incoming minister and his/her staff and that the sections on stylistic preference were rewritten at that time to suit the new minister's individual preferences; manuals were also amended from time to time as ministers' instructions changed.

**2.29** Parliamentary and ministerial offices set clear and firm deadlines for provision of information and advice. Agencies have responded by formulating internal standards and targets for timeliness. To assist agencies to meet these standards, ministerial service units coordinate and track the production of material for Parliament and ministers. Most ministerial service units generate regular management information (reports) on performance of functional units against timeliness standards and targets.

**2.30** The ANAO found that all agencies have robust informal channels with ministerial offices for feedback on issues such as timeliness, quality and overall satisfaction levels with work provided. The avenue for ministers and their staff to provide feedback on client service issues was regular discussion—between Minister and Secretary, senior advisor and agency executive members, ministerial staffers and heads of the ministerial service unit. Ministerial staff generally review all documents submitted to ministers and where changes or corrections are required, return them to ministerial service units for action. These units seek to incorporate the lessons learned from such feedback in their ongoing review of material going forward to the minister.

**2.31** The ANAO is aware that, in addition to feedback on specific issues as they arise, New Zealand agencies have developed formal arrangements such as quarterly surveys of their ministers' offices:

## Figure 2

### Criteria for quarterly survey on advice provided to Ministers: New Zealand

A quarterly survey will enable the Minister to provide formal feedback on the advice provided, based on the following criteria:

- delivery of advice on the agreed number of projects;
- coverage of relevant issue;
- clear statement of the purpose of the advice;
- logical argument;
- accuracy;
- presentation of an adequate range of well-assessed policy options;
- evidence of adequate consultation;
- practicality; and
- presentation.

Regular meetings between the Minister and senior staff and a range of regular reports will provide opportunities for progress and quality of outputs to be monitored.

Source: New Zealand Ministry of Health Annual Report for the year ended 30 June 1997

**2.32** Ministerial staff of portfolios reviewed did not see great value in conducting regular surveys although most were interested in having a more streamlined and systematic process for recording and reporting on ministerial correspondence returned for corrections or 'rewrites'. This proposal is described in more detail in paragraphs 2.69 to 2.75.

### *Other Client Service Measures*

**2.33** Depending on the portfolio, ministerial service units in portfolio departments are tasked with the distribution of material to and from more than one minister plus possibly a parliamentary secretary. Agencies are also required to service a minister's requirements when he/she is involved in cooperative arrangements with other ministers in related portfolios.

**2.34** The provision of Departmental Liaison Officers (DLOs) by portfolio departments in each minister's office is an effective means of providing optimum client service. DLOs act as central liaison points between departments and relevant agencies and parliamentary offices and provide assistance with the smooth flow of ministerial and parliamentary papers.

**2.35** Agencies' parliamentary manuals generally did not set out procedures for services which support the minister in work external to Parliament. It was in these areas that the ANAO noted that ministers' offices observed that there were gaps in departmental support, especially for items such as production of speeches and visit briefs. The ANAO considered that there was room for agencies to establish more explicit dialogue with ministers on the nature and scope of services to be provided. Whereas there are currently firm standards in regard to timeliness, there is room to develop performance indicators in regard to quality and to address other areas of client concern.

**2.36** The ANAO considers that client services provided to ministers could be enhanced through establishing accountable processes of client feedback which would enable agencies to identify potential areas for improvement and to assess ongoing performance to ensure relevance and contribution to agreed outcomes.

## Recommendation No.2

**2.37** The ANAO recommends that agencies regularly consult with their ministers to identify, enumerate and document the desired range, quality and cost of services to be delivered to ministers and Parliament.

### *Agency Responses*

#### *Department of Defence*

**2.38 Agreed with qualification.** Defence does not see any need to formalise the feedback and performance monitoring arrangements that currently work effectively. Defence will, of course, continue to ensure that the Department fully understands and meets Ministers' requirements and that these are conveyed to all relevant staff in the Defence organisation. Defence will monitor the costs and discuss with the Ministers where those costs are significant or considered excessive.

#### *Department of Health and Aged Care*

**2.39 Agreed.** Ministerial endorsement of the broad output specification and pricing in the annual Portfolio Budget Statement means there is already implicit endorsement of ministerial expenditure.

### *Department of Family and Community Services*

**2.40 Agreed.** The Department agrees that more effort should be put into identifying, costing and documenting the range of specific services required by Ministers and for these to form a client service agreement against which performance can be more accurately measured and costed.

### *Centrelink*

**2.41** Centrelink **agrees** with this recommendation.

**2.42** The scope of Centrelink's business is determined by the business partnership agreements it negotiates with client departments. Those business partnership agreements contain performance standards for the range of services Centrelink delivers for those client departments. These performance standards cover issues relating to parliamentary workflow.

**2.43** Centrelink has nine 'client' Ministers including the Minister for Family and Community Services, within whose portfolio Centrelink operates under the AAO, and the Minister for Community Services who, under the AAO, has responsibility for a range of Centrelink functions.

**2.44** Centrelink is in regular consultation with client Ministers and client departments on issues relating to parliamentary workflow and, through those consultations, will continue to refine parliamentary workflow performance issues.

**2.45** See comment under Recommendation No. 1 (paragraph 2.22) relating to costing parliamentary workflow.

## **Timeliness**

**2.46** Ministers' offices and agencies agreed on the importance of ministers receiving timely information. Indeed, the most important task of ministerial service units was widely perceived as that of coordinating responses and documents to reach the minister on time. The most frequently reported service lapses were in regard to this criterion. In part, this could be because of the clear and explicit agreements which agencies had in regard to timeliness. On this criterion they could be held accountable for meeting timing requirements and their performance could be assessed in this respect.

**2.47** The audit proposed to assess the timeliness of parliamentary workflow in 1997–98 by collecting data for the period on the percentage of work completed within deadlines and the percentage overdue. Standards for timeliness were found to vary between agencies and between different items of workflow. A more limited set of data, on the standards and targets set for timeliness of responses to ministerial correspondence and

preparation of replies to QoNs, was obtained from all agencies; some detail on the extent to which these were achieved was collected from each agency—details are in Table 1.

**2.48** A number of components of parliamentary workflow, such as provision of Question Time Briefs (QTBs), and responding to QoNs, are determined by the Parliamentary cycle of sitting periods. In these cases, timeliness standards reflect parliamentary deadlines enabling resources required to be estimated, planned for and applied systematically. Other parliamentary workflow items impose more changeable and unpredictable demands on agencies.

## **Ministerial Correspondence**

**2.49** In the agencies reviewed, the ANAO noted that the most resource intensive area of parliamentary workflow involved the handling of ministerial correspondence. All agencies reviewed had timeliness standards for preparation of replies and had difficulty meeting these standards. Some had set targets lower than the standards but these, too, often presented difficulties. Timeliness standards have been tightened in recent years, particularly with the introduction of IT systems to track the progress of preparation of draft responses through departments. The ANAO was advised that Ministers appointed after the change of Government in 1996 had emphasised the necessity to address backlogs and to improve timeliness. Although the audit did not collect data across all APS agencies, it was reported that the volume of correspondence appeared to be increasing, exhibiting particularly rapid growth and volatility in portfolios when major changes in policy and programs were proposed and/or where Government policies and priorities were perceived to be controversial.

**2.50** Demand for preparation of draft replies to ministerial correspondence is never uniform across agencies—it can place heavy demands on particular branches and policy areas. While heads of agencies generally advised the ANAO that program delivery was a priority and that resources could be redeployed to assist those areas with overload, this perception was not uniformly endorsed in interviews with ministerial staff. Ministerial offices with high and volatile volumes of correspondence reported that agencies often had difficulty in redeploying staff to cover what could often be short-term peaks.

**2.51** Agencies agreed that for ministerial correspondence to meet timeliness standards in every case could mean that the quality of replies would suffer, particularly where the subject matter presented a high degree of complexity or where policy or program elements were controversial or subject to change.



**2.52** Most of the agencies reviewed had overarching standards for timeliness and below these had a set of more modest targets for their performance. Most reporting on performance concentrated on ministerial correspondence. The standards and targets for timeliness used in the agencies reviewed, and the levels of performance achieved, where available, enabled limited benchmarking of performance as reported in Table 1. (Relevant extracts from this table are reproduced in Appendices A to D as appropriate.)

**Table 1**

**Ministerial Correspondence and Questions on Notice**  
**Agencies reviewed: Performance 1997–98**

<b>MINISTERIAL CORRESPONDENCE</b>			
<i><b>Signatory</b></i>	<i><b>Standard</b></i>	<i><b>Target</b></i>	<i><b>Performance 1997/98</b></i>
<b>Defence</b> Minister for Defence  Minister for Defence Industry, Science and Personnel  Ministers' Senior Advisers	14 calendar (10 working) days  21 calendar (15 working) days  21 calendar (15 working) days or shorter where directed by Minister	100%	54% of responses met the standard
<b>Health and Family Services</b> Minister  Agency	21 (calendar) days  28 (calendar) days	100%	56% of responses met the standard *
* Where correspondence is received from within the Ministers' electorates, the standard for preparation of a response is reduced to 14 (calendar) days; where responses are returned from Ministers' offices for rewrite, the standard is to respond within 7 (calendar) days			
<b>Social Security</b> Minister	21 calendar (15 working) days	90%	74% of responses met the standard
<b>Centrelink</b> Minister for Social Security	12 working days	90%	35% of responses met the standard *
* Centrelink is a new agency that was establishing its operational environment during 1997–98; figures relate to the period 1 October 1997 to end-June 1998			
<b>QUESTIONS ON NOTICE</b>			
	<i><b>Standard</b></i>	<i><b>Target</b></i>	<i><b>Performance 1997/98</b></i>
<b>Defence</b> <b>Health and Family Services</b> <b>Social Security</b> <b>Centrelink</b>	15 working days 21 (calendar) days  28 (calendar) days 28 (calendar) days	100% 100%  100% 100%	Not recorded 45%  76% Not recorded

Source: ANAO analysis of quantitative data supplied by ministerial services units in agencies reviewed

**2.53** The audit noted that New Zealand agencies have agreements with their ministers providing for all ministerial service outputs to be delivered within set timeframes and according to agreed specifications and prices. Annual performance targets are published in departmental annual reports and performance is reported against targets during the year. For example, the New Zealand Ministry of Health timeliness target for ministerial correspondence in 1996–97 was for 90% of responses to be prepared within timeframes agreed with the Minister’s office. The Ministry reported that 79.3% met the target, an improvement over 1995–96.

## Quality

### Presentation and style

**2.54** Items of parliamentary workflow have established forms of presentation and style. Some formats are common across the APS, such as those for Cabinet Submissions, and result from the evolution of processes and practice over many years. They are described in detail in agency parliamentary manuals and in many cases agencies have style guides and templates online to assist those officers responsible for their preparation.

**2.55** Ministers often have particular preferences for certain styles and presentation formats. Agencies discuss with a new minister shortly after his/her appointment any particular expectations and preferences and endeavour to convert them to format guidelines and to ensure that written material provided to the minister conforms to these guidelines. Ministerial preferences are most often addressed in relation to preparation of their correspondence, where they may be dealing with fellow parliamentarians, stakeholder organisations and the general public. Some ministers identify also preferences for presentation of other items such as briefings; these may be in terms of length or layout, for example, requiring preparation of material in point format.

**2.56** Agencies reported that the process of meeting ministerial preferences sometimes took time to bed down and that it was subject to continuing change and development. Sometimes subtle changes in preferences could significantly impact on the level of effort required. For example, at least initially, they could lead to increased numbers of rewrites in respect of ministerial correspondence returned to the agency for amendment or correction.

**2.57** In one instance reported to the audit team, a minister had changed the approach to ‘campaign’ letters—large numbers of proforma letters on specific portfolio matters—requiring individual replies to be drafted for each item when such material would not usually receive a response. This was a case where, if the agency had had information available on the cost

of producing individual responses, it would have been a routine component of the discussion, and would have provided the minister with advice on the cost implications of the decision.

**2.58** Ministerial service units generally monitor email sent directly to ministers. In most cases, where the respondent has provided a street address, the unit coordinates the drafting of a standard reply by letter, rather than replying by email.

**2.59** The ANAO found that there was potential for agencies to adopt more efficient approaches to responding to ministerial correspondence.<sup>12</sup> Options could include more readily identifying which correspondents require a reply signed by the minister, resolving matters by telephone contact rather than the preparation of a written response and preparing tailored responses to meet correspondent expectations. In this area the audit team took particular note of an innovative, client focused model developed by Centrelink that is described in Appendix D.

**2.60** Two of the agencies reviewed provide regular training sessions for action officers covering ministerial and parliamentary expectations of presentation and style and other practices. Training is conducted by ministerial service unit staff, external contractors and ministers' staff. The ANAO considers that this represents an example of good practice in ensuring quality output of material for ministers and Parliament.

### Recommendation No.3

**2.61** The ANAO recommends that agencies examine their current approaches to drafting replies to ministerial correspondence and review the potential to adopt more efficient or innovative practices, and that they discuss these options with their ministers.

#### *Agency Responses*

##### *Department of Defence*

**2.62** **Agreed.**

##### *Department of Health and Aged Care*

**2.63** **Agreed.** The Department is already undertaking action in this area and is keen to work with Ministers to manage the high volume of correspondence more responsively and strategically.

##### *Department of Family and Community Services*

**2.64** The Department **agrees** with this recommendation and the points raised under 'presentation and style' in the report will be useful for other

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<sup>12</sup> The 1987 report of *Project Quill* (op cit) recommended a similar approach.

agencies. In the Department's case, the ongoing requirements of the Ministers are monitored and reflected in the presentation and format of briefings and replies to ministerial correspondence. This is facilitated by the centralising of quality control checking and production of final replies as well as the review of submissions prior to despatch to the Ministers.

### *Centrelink*

**2.65** Centrelink **agrees** with this recommendation.

## **Quality assurance**

**2.66** Agencies reviewed endeavoured to achieve quality in documents prepared for ministers and Parliament largely through a hierarchical system of signoffs whereby more important documents had to be signed off by more senior members of agency staff. Ministers' offices reported that these procedures were far from infallible, particularly in regard to ministerial correspondence. Errors could be found in spelling and grammar or in matters of fact, some of which could have come about through failure to promulgate changes in preferences or developments in policy to functional areas responsible for preparation of material.

**2.67** The audit found that, as with presentation, quality was perceived to be a more important issue by both agencies and ministers' offices in preparation of correspondence, which was going outside into the community, than it was for items such as briefings, which were for internal consumption in ministers' offices. Initially the audit proposed to assess quality by comparing the percentage of ministerial correspondence signed out by a minister or delegate and the percentage returned for rewrite. It found, however, that not all agencies reviewed produced, or had the capacity to provide, such data.

**2.68** Where items containing errors got through agency quality control systems, if the matter was urgent they might be corrected in the minister's office by DLOs. Usually they were returned to and corrected in the ministerial service unit. Less often, because of time constraints, were they returned down the line so that the quality controllers and authors were all aware of the lapse. Certain ministers' offices expressed concern that while the former approach ensured there was a quick turnaround for rewrites, it could lead to repetition or proliferation of errors from the same area of the department. The ANAO observed that, while files containing revisions were generally returned to the action area, no agency had an agency-wide system of feedback which would help identify, target and eliminate errors and thus function as a means of pursuing improvements in quality.

**2.69** The Department of Finance and Administration (DOFA) has introduced a systematic process to enable its Ministers and their offices to

comment on the quality of all ministerial correspondence and briefs received from the Department. Figure 3 reproduces a box attached to this documentation which is sent to Ministers' offices for rating of the quality of the accompanying material.

**Figure 3**

**Department of Finance and Administration: Quality Rating Form**

Rejected	Timely	<input type="checkbox"/> Too long	Quality						
Yes/No	Yes/No	<input type="checkbox"/> Right length	<input type="checkbox"/> Routine	Poor	1	2	3	4	5
		<input type="checkbox"/> Too brief	Comments _____						
			_____						
			_____						

Source: papers tabled during discussions with DOFA staff

**2.70** DOFA reported that on average in the first months of implementation approximately 30% of these sheets were annotated in Ministers' offices, mainly by advisers but occasionally by ministers. Eighty percent of briefs and items of ministerial correspondence were rated four or five on the quality scale. DOFA and Ministers' offices are pleased with the implementation of this initiative and are seeking means to improve response rates as well as quality of work.

**2.71** Individual and aggregated results of the DOFA rating system enable managers to identify problems with quality and timeliness and to target areas for improvement. The results are reported as performance indicators to the agency's management. They also provide a background on the agency's performance for regular Executive meetings with Ministers' offices.

**2.72** In discussions with ministerial staff of the portfolios reviewed in the audit, the ANAO sought feedback on whether they would be interested in this approach to quality assurance. Staff in those ministerial offices with a manageable volume of ministerial correspondence saw no real benefit in it. They felt that they could achieve the results they wanted with a phone call. By contrast, those in offices with a high volume of correspondence and/or significant numbers of rewrites supported the approach. One office suggested that such a rating schedule should be online so that ministerial offices could respond directly onto the IT system which recorded and tracked workflow items. The advantage of putting this process online is that responses could be aggregated and included automatically in management reports and could also be immediately visible to Divisional staff down the line. It was pointed out that the original authors of rewrites often did not know that their work had been rejected. A rating system online would include them in the feedback loop and help to improve performance.

**2.73** A recent discussion paper prepared for DOFA<sup>13</sup> put together material on quality standards for policy advice from sources in Victoria, Tasmania, New Zealand and the ACT. Drawing on developments in these different jurisdictions, the paper lists criteria for assessing the quality of policy advice and, against each criterion, describes what they mean for managers both in preparing the policy advice and in terms of their performance. Table 2 is reproduced from page 9 of the DOFA paper.

**Table 2**

**Quality standards for policy advice output**

QUALITY STANDARD	MEANING FOR MANAGERS
PURPOSE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>aim of the advice is clearly set and addresses any question set</li> </ul>
LOGIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>assumptions upon which the advice is based are stated clearly</li> <li>argument is supported by evidence</li> </ul>
ACCURACY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>evidence used is accurate and reliable</li> <li>all material facts are included</li> </ul>
OPTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>an adequate range of options is presented</li> <li>benefits, costs and consequences of each option to both the government and the community are identified</li> </ul>
RESPONSIVENESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>advice is aware of current realities</li> <li>advice anticipates developments</li> </ul>
CONSULTATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>evidence of appropriate consultation with other government agencies and affected interests</li> </ul>
PRESENTATION and CONCISENESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>format meets with specified presentation standards</li> <li>advice is presented in a clear and concise manner</li> </ul>
PRACTICALITY and RELEVANCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>recommendations take account of anticipated problems of implementation, feasibility, timing and whole-of-government policy consistency</li> </ul>
TIMELINESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>advice complied with deadlines or response times specified by the Government</li> </ul>

**2.74** The audit found little evidence that agencies had a systematic approach to obtaining formal feedback from ministers' offices as a means of working towards achieving overall improvements in quality. Rather, agencies opted for a more informal, reactive approach to their ministers' expectations and requirements. The ANAO noted that both agencies and ministers' officers tended to question whether it was worth the effort to engage in questions of quality in situations where ministers' requirements could vary without notice and when ministers demand that quality standards be met in 100% of cases.

**2.75** Notwithstanding this latter viewpoint, the ANAO considers that

<sup>13</sup> Di Francesco, M., *Performance Information for Commonwealth Agencies and Authorities in the Outcomes and Outputs Framework: Measuring Output using the Example of Policy Advice*. A paper prepared for the Outcomes and Outputs Team Accrual Budget Project, Department of Finance and Administration. July 1998. University of Sydney.

there is room to identify standards of quality for ministerial and parliamentary services, perhaps along the lines of those described in Table 2, to assist authors of material and to develop performance indicators in regard to key attributes of these services. These should form the foundation for monitoring and evaluating performance across the agency.

## Recommendation No.4

**2.76** The ANAO recommends that agencies develop performance standards covering quality, timeliness and cost of parliamentary workflow outputs.

### *Agency Responses*

#### *Department of Defence*

**2.77** **Agreed.** These will be used primarily for internal management purposes.

#### *Department of Health and Aged Care*

**2.78** **Agreed.** The Department has developed performance indicators on the quality and timeliness of parliamentary workflow outputs, and will be moving to develop cost indicators under accrual budgeting.

#### *Department of Family and Community Services*

**2.79** **Agreed.** This recommendation is strongly supported. Timeliness measures have been in place for some time in the Department and are being extended to all parliamentary processes including Question Time briefing. As indicated in the comment on Recommendation No.1 (paragraph 2.19), work is underway to identify the costs of ministerial and parliamentary processes and to measure the quality of parliamentary outputs.

#### *Centrelink*

**2.80** Centrelink **agrees** with this recommendation subject to the comments made under Recommendation No.1 (paragraphs 2.21 and 2.22) on analysis and data collection relating to cost.

### **Quality advice—purchaser and provider**

**2.81** In discussions with the office of the then Minister for Social Security on the issue of quality, the need for coordinated advice from DSS and Centrelink was stressed. It was observed that Centrelink advice, in accordance with its functional charter and responsibilities, quite rightly emphasised delivery of services. However, advice from DSS had a stronger focus on flagging broader emerging issues. Ministerial staff considered it to be important that DSS kept a watching brief on Centrelink operations to provide early warning to the Minister on issues with potential political

implications. At the same time the Minister's office observed that Centrelink could be relied on to provide clear and complete information to the Minister on problems in service delivery or other aspects of its operations.

**2.82** Similar concerns regarding the provision of advice were raised during ANAO discussions with ministerial offices in New Zealand. In one portfolio, ministerial staff remarked on the lack of effective coordination across the portfolio and observed that advice received from the purchaser ministry, provider agencies and central agencies varied significantly in quality and content. Staff noted that they tended to place less reliance on advice from the purchaser ministry in favour of more grass roots material from providers. Therein lies a risk that, over time, as continuity of staff is lost, the purchasing agency can lose substantial knowledge about the providers and can itself come to be deemed as an unreliable source of advice to its minister. In the Australian context the ANAO considers that, on evidence available during the conduct of the audit, DSS and Centrelink have recognised the possibility of diverse points of view arising as a result of their different functional responsibilities. Consequently, they are both working to establish robust procedures to ensure coordinated, quality service to their portfolio minister.

**2.83** In 1998–99 the new Department of Family and Community Services (DFaCS) and Centrelink will introduce a cover sheet for all policy material submitted to their Minister's office. The cover sheet will identify at what points there was consultation between the two agencies and will also provide for a system of feedback on quality of policy advice. Minister and staff will be able to rate policy material on a number of quality criteria such as accuracy, logic, clarity, relevance and practicality. The ANAO supports implementation of this initiative as a means of gaining ongoing feedback which will assist both agencies to measure performance.

## Cost

**2.84** In planning for this audit, in order to assess the efficiency of management of parliamentary workflow, the audit team proposed to analyse three areas of workflow to quantify levels of resource usage and to estimate indicative costs. These were ministerial correspondence, Questions on Notice and ministerial briefings and minutes. Early in the fieldwork it became clear that this proposal could not be realised because the records available within agencies did not include sufficient data to enable reliable estimates of the cost of these services to be made.

**2.85** This conclusion is notwithstanding the fact that several agencies had undertaken projects to estimate costs of particular parliamentary workflow outputs. Defence routinely costs Questions on Notice—but



figures produced cover only those costs incurred in Defence action areas and do not include costs of the ministerial service unit; the then Department of Health and Family Services (DHFS) had undertaken an analysis of the average cost of ministerial correspondence as part of its business case for a significant IT upgrade; Centrelink and Defence had compiled costings for attendance at Senate Estimates hearings, however these did not include costs of producing briefings for the hearings.

**2.86** All of the ministerial service units examined had systems in place to track the movement of material being prepared for ministers' offices. The prime objective of this tracking was to ensure that responses were timely and that they were signed off at a suitable level to ensure quality assurance of the content. In some cases it was possible for the ANAO to obtain the histories of these documents and thus to identify the number of hands they had passed through, the dates work was completed at each level and passed on, and so on. However there was no indication of how much productive time was expended at each point which might have provided data useful for estimating the overall time-cost of the work performed.

**2.87** While agencies strive to ensure that they provide timely and quality advice to their ministers, they do not apply the same approach to measuring, estimating and costing these services as they have come to apply routinely to the delivery of other core services and programs. Data on the human and financial resources which agencies expend in services to ministers and to Parliament are not collected, nor are costs systematically attributed. Agencies do not estimate or budget at the level of ministerial and parliamentary workflow. While they do generally prepare estimates for the staff and administrative costs of ministerial service units, the policy and program areas responsible for preparation of parliamentary workflow documents do not estimate or report on the cost of production of these services.

**2.88** This situation is expected to change with the introduction of accrual budgeting although the extent of change in individual agencies will depend on the specific outputs identified. Accrual-based budgeting will require agencies to:

- identify as outputs the goods and services they provide to external customers; and
- describe the attributes of outputs and the contribution of outputs to outcomes.

**2.89** In reviewing the agencies' preliminary plans for their introduction of accrual-based budgeting measures in the 1999–2000 Budget estimates,

the audit noted that, within the framework of specific outputs which address set agency outcomes, two of the auditees—the former DHFS and DSS—proposed to make the costs of ministerial services explicit.

**2.90** While the then DHFS proposed to estimate and report the aggregate costs of ministerial services, the then DSS aimed for a finer disaggregation of costs, separating those of ministerial services from the costs of parliamentary services. For DSS, a proposed output class ‘Information Provision’ included ‘ministerial assistance’ and a separate output, ‘parliamentary scrutiny’. It was proposed that ministerial assistance would include general briefing, information and drafting services provided for the Minister, including but not limited to:

- replies to ministerial correspondence;
- information briefs and speaking notes;
- Question Time briefings; and
- press releases.

**2.91** While the planned approach by the then DSS was as outlined above, the ANAO is aware that the new DFACS may change its method for identifying its ministerial services in the context of developing its 1999–2000 Budget estimates. This follows the Government’s variations to administrative and departmental arrangements announced in October 1998 and the consequential expansion in the portfolio’s responsibilities such that estimates may be presented at a more aggregated level. While the final outcome is being worked through, the ANAO has been informed that DFACS intends to track the costs of all of its services, including ministerial services, to support performance management within the Department. DFACS’ recent engagement of a consulting firm will assist in developing an activity based costing facility for this purpose.

**2.92** The audit was undertaken during early planning and definition of outcome and output frameworks by agencies in preparation for the introduction of accrual budgeting. The ANAO noted that, in these preliminary designs, where services provided to ministers and Parliament were included, there was a potential risk of oversimplification in defining such services. In particular, there is a risk that the more visible services provided via ministerial service units may come to be perceived as the only services agencies provide for their ministers. Such an approach would fail to acknowledge that policy development and program delivery are in themselves key outputs that departments deliver to ministers and governments.

**2.93** It was reported to the ANAO that on the introduction of accrual-based budgeting, costs will be attributed on the basis of several drivers,

staff numbers being a primary one, rather than on precise measurement of individual costs. However, both the former DHFS and the former DSS advised the ANAO of plans to introduce a measure of time-costing by staff which should assist with more robust estimating and reporting of costs. The new agencies will identify a cost for their ministerial and parliamentary services, enabling them to develop strategies to work within these costs. This should provide the agencies with opportunities to review the efficiency of these services—to look at innovations in the use of appropriate technology, to adopt more efficient practices, to differentiate standards where appropriate, to vary service requirements and to suggest newer and more innovative approaches.

**2.94** In discussions with the Secretaries and the CEO of agencies reviewed, the ANAO asked whether they would be comfortable with the publication of the costs of these services. All replied that they would be, with the view being taken that accountability on costs could lead to more direct discussions with ministers on the provision of services to their parliamentary offices and to better prioritisation within the agency of parliamentary workflow activities.

**2.95** Audit fieldwork included a review of approaches to costing of ministerial services in the ACT Government and in New Zealand. Both these jurisdictions have accrual budgeting in place and have developed prices for particular ministerial services.

**2.96** New Zealand agencies have developed prices for policy advice, responses to ministerial correspondence and responses to parliamentary questions. All form the basis of annual agreements with ministers to purchase specified quantities of each output at an agreed price.

**2.97** Over the last three years the ACT Government has included ministerial services as an output or part of an output and has devised prices for these based on historic costings. The scope of ministerial services include preparation of: responses to possible Assembly questions; responses to questions on notice; ministerial speeches; Cabinet submissions; guidance and advice to Members of the Legislative Assembly regarding departmental activities and procedures; ministerial submissions to, and responses to questions and reports of, Assembly committees; and, briefs for external meetings. The ACT Government calculates and publishes the costs of providing its ministerial services—in 1997–98 these costs represented some 1.7% of the ACT's total Government Payment for Outputs.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Information provided to the audit team in discussions with officers of the ACT Chief Minister's Department.

**2.98** Ministers and Parliament are entitled to information about the costs of parliamentary and ministerial services provided by agencies. The ANAO is conscious that the area can be a sensitive one in relations between an agency and ministers as agency efforts directed towards efficiency may be misunderstood by ministers and their staff as cutting across ministers' legitimate requirements of agencies. Nevertheless, the ANAO is of the view that better performance and cost information in this area of an agencies operations would allow for more informed decisions to be made about the appropriate allocation of resources.

## Recommendation No.5

**2.99** The ANAO recommends that agencies put in place effective mechanisms to cost the production of parliamentary workflow outputs.

### *Agency Responses*

#### *Department of Defence*

**2.100 Agreed.** Defence intends to increase the availability of cost information which will take account of the time and effort involved in producing parliamentary workflow outputs.

#### *Department of Health and Aged Care*

**2.101 Agreed with qualification.** The comments on Recommendation No.1 (paragraph 2.18) also apply to this recommendation.

#### *Department of Family and Community Services*

**2.102 Agreed.** This recommendation is supported. See comment under Recommendation No.1 (paragraph 2.19).

#### *Centrelink*

**2.103** Centrelink **agrees** with this recommendation. See comment under Recommendation No.1 (paragraphs 2.21 and 2.22).

## Use of technology

**2.104** Agencies reviewed have invested (or are currently investing) in purpose designed IT systems with the capacity to image documents and to transfer them electronically between the ministerial service unit and officers responsible for producing work and, if required, ministerial offices. These systems have been introduced to improve client service and to enhance overall effectiveness. They have the capacity to deliver measurable improvements in the timeliness of responses by eliminating unproductive time spent in multiple handling and processing of documents. Management of quality control could also be enhanced by these systems. The ANAO

noted that, while some staff savings are likely through increased efficiency in the handling of ministerial and parliamentary material, the growing volume of requirements and the push for continued efforts to upgrade timeliness and quality make large cost offsets unlikely.

**2.105** The computer systems providing direct access to and from ministers' offices are integrated within agency networks with varying configurations depending on agency and ministerial requirements. They utilise software with the capacity to scan documents and to transfer them to and from ministers' offices, to store them for future reference, and to search and locate them by various means including searching by keywords. In the agencies reviewed, the audit found that these IT systems, managed within ministerial service units, operated with a consistently high degree of effectiveness in coordinating and managing large volume throughputs of material produced across the agency to meet ministerial and parliamentary needs.

**2.106** The Department of Health and Aged Care (DHAC) and Centrelink are currently moving to extend the capacity to image documents and to transfer them electronically to desktops across the agencies. These enhancements will affect workflow systems across these agencies and support demands on ministerial service units to meet a growing volume of requirements and a push for continuing efforts to upgrade timeliness and quality of outputs. Desktop access to parliamentary workflow systems for all staff involved in preparing written material should improve overall effectiveness in preparation and transfer of documents.

**2.107** Each minister's office in Parliament House is linked into the computer network of its portfolio department, providing access at least to the Secretary/agency head and the executive, directly into the ministerial service unit, and in some cases into the agency's entire email network. In late 1998, all ministers' offices were to move to high security, electronic handling of Cabinet documents under a new CABNET system. The audit team interviewed ministerial staff about their use of IT systems. Some offices had already minimised use of paper and increasingly relied on electronic storage of briefing papers and minutes. Some ministerial staff were interested in maximising electronic handling of documents, to the extent of printing out final copies for their ministers' signatures within their offices, rather than relying on final copies being couriered from the ministerial service unit.

**2.108** Even so, ministers' offices varied in their interest in, or acceptance of, more sophisticated use of technology in their dealings with their portfolio department. In most cases, DLOs, with a departmental background, are more confident users of the IT systems. Agencies provide

ongoing computer support and training to their ministers' offices but, while investing in sophisticated IT systems to streamline parliamentary workflow, the capacity and level of interest within these offices can limit the extent to which efficiencies will be achieved.

## Management information

**2.109** The ANAO considers that more work could usefully be done to develop effective management information systems using data generated by parliamentary workflow systems. Ministerial service units reported regularly to meetings of the agency executive. While they varied in the detail and layout of information, most of these reports concentrated on the volume and timeliness of ministerial correspondence. In many cases their underlying intention was to exhort heads of divisions to expedite delivery of overdue correspondence items from their functional areas.

**2.110** Parliamentary workflow systems contain useful management information which could assist in the move to accrual-based budgeting—in identifying outputs, supporting costing methodologies and estimating the distribution of workload across the organisation.

**2.111** Ministerial service units have early access to information which can be usefully disseminated across their agencies including Hansard, tabled reports and issues of relevance identified in document flow. For example, DOFA, which was consulted during the audit, provides 'hotlinks' on its Intranet site to Hansards from the previous day and Notice Papers for the current day. This centralised service enables faster response to ministers on Parliamentary business issues by agency functional units and avoids the previous duplication of effort by individual units.

**2.112** As agencies determine performance standards for timeliness and quality, ministerial service unit tracking systems could identify the extent to which different areas of the agencies meet these standards. They could generate reports to assist management to use this information to focus on better performance and quality improvement in service delivery and policy development. Such information could usefully be incorporated in existing executive information systems.

**2.113** The then DSS analysed data from its workflow system to provide strategic information to its executive on the volumes and trends in matters of concern raised in correspondence to the Minister. The ANAO considers that all agencies could find it useful to analyse correspondence flows and produce summary information on issues raised in correspondence. This could provide management and ministers with a means of monitoring community views on policies and programs and external perceptions of their performance.

**2.114** As a means of providing better coordination of ministerial briefings the former DSS and Centrelink have agreed to include on the shared section of their parliamentary workflow systems a summary of all policy-related material being produced in both agencies for their Minister. While the prime objective of this development is to ensure that the portfolio Minister receives, as she has requested, a coordinated and seamless thread of advice, the ANAO considers that a further result would be enhanced management information and better coordination of policy advising functions on the part of the executive of both agencies.

## Recommendation No.6

**2.115** The ANAO recommends that ministerial service units produce strategic management information on issues raised in Parliament and in ministerial correspondence, and that they assist coordination of parliamentary workflow by disseminating information on ministerial briefings and minutes in preparation within the agency.

### *Agency Responses*

#### *Department of Defence*

**2.116 Agreed.** Defence will examine the potential for provision of additional strategic management information.

#### *Department of Health and Aged Care*

**2.117 Agreed.** The Department is actively working on improving the administration of parliamentary workflow in terms of timeliness and quality of output. The Department is also in the process of evaluating its reporting requirements and looking at more effective reporting and presentation of relevant management information.

#### *Department of Family and Community Services*

**2.118 Agreed.** The Department notes that its work on providing strategic information on volumes and trends in ministerial correspondence is detailed in the report. The report also highlights as a better practice the Department's use of its management information system to provide summary information of all briefing material being prepared within the portfolio.

**2.119** It is recognised that more work is warranted in this area to make use of available data to provide more effective and comprehensive performance and management information.

#### *Centrelink*

**2.120** Centrelink **agrees** with this recommendation. Centrelink is continuing to develop its capability to efficiently and effectively produce management information.

## Benchmarking

**2.121** Currently there is very little capacity within the APS to benchmark the costs of parliamentary and ministerial services. Based on evidence gathered on the operations of the agencies reviewed during the course of the audit, ministerial service units exhibit disparate structures, practices and processes and have differing arrangements for the provision of services. There is inadequate information on costs of services, considerable variation in the way agencies classify them and, in some agencies, a lack of data on the volume of certain workflow items. Without robust data on their volume and cost, agencies cannot measure or benchmark their efficiency and, other than the general constraints of running costs limits, there are few incentives to look at more efficient or innovative ways of delivering these services. The ANAO considers that there is a need to identify a precise, common set of workflow items and to cost them appropriately.

**2.122** While there is lack of comparable data which currently makes benchmarking of services (other than standards of timeliness) difficult, there is some scope for agencies to undertake cooperative benchmarking projects in areas where they have common workflow items with clearly identified parameters for costing and performance.

## Recommendation No.7

**2.123** The ANAO recommends that agencies consider undertaking benchmarking projects in cooperation with other organisations to assess and improve the relative efficiency of their management of parliamentary workflow.

### *Agency Responses*

#### *Department of Defence*

**2.124** Agreed.

#### *Department of Health and Aged Care*

**2.125** **Agreed with qualification.** The disparate structures, practices and processes for the provision of ministerial services mean that it would be difficult to benchmark service costs across the APS. Without agencies reconfiguring and aligning the way in which they do their business, this recommendation would be difficult to meet. (Benchmarking exercises in terms of cost will be hampered by the problems identified at paragraph 22 page 15 of this Report.)

**2.126** While this portfolio intends to collect data on the price of outputs produced for Ministers, we are not aware of any administrative or legislative requirement or accounting standard that will require all agencies



to do this in a consistent way. This means that benchmarking is likely to remain difficult for the foreseeable future. However, it should be noted that this Department does liaise on an ad hoc basis with other Departments on how they do their business and has adopted/exchanged initiatives and ideas to make our processes more streamlined.

*Department of Family and Community Services*

**2.127** The Department **agrees** that benchmarking projects with other agencies would be useful in identifying common parliamentary workflows to assist in costing of services and measuring performance.

*Centrelink*

**2.128** Centrelink **agrees** with this recommendation.

**2.129** One of Centrelink's strategic goals is:

*to be first choice and benchmarked as the best practice in service delivery.*

To achieve this goal Centrelink has a number of key strategies. One of these is:

*Centrelink will be innovative. We will develop simple and efficient alternatives for providing services to customers and for the processes that underpin those services. We will respond to customer preferences for accessing services. Innovation will be encouraged, managed and rewarded.*

**2.130** Over time, Centrelink will seek to benchmark its parliamentary workflow arrangements with other organisations as a means to assess and improve the relative efficiency of the management of its parliamentary workflow.

## 3. Parliamentary Workflow—A Good Practice Checklist

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*This good practice checklist flows from information obtained from the agencies reviewed during the audit and other bodies and individuals consulted by the audit team. It may be of wider benefit within the APS and in some other jurisdictions.*

### Accountability

**3.1** Do meetings of the agency's executive include parliamentary workflow performance as a routine agenda item, and consider progress reports from the ministerial service unit?

**3.2** Are regular progress reports on the agency's parliamentary workflow performance against standards provided to Ministers' Offices, agency executive members and other key areas of the agency?

**3.3** Do the agency's Annual Report and Portfolio Budget Statements include a summary of parliamentary workflow outputs, resource usage and performance standards achieved?

### Governance

**3.4** Has the executive of the agency made an explicit commitment to meeting set performance standards relating to parliamentary workflow?

**3.5** Has the executive ensured that this performance commitment permeates the agency (including its decentralised parts) by including it in the agency corporate plan, and in business and operational plans; and by providing incentives for senior staff to meet standards set by ministers by including them in the performance agreement and assessment process?

**3.6** Has the executive of the agency made a commitment to efficient allocation of resources for handling parliamentary workflow, requiring the provision of information on the full cost of parliamentary workflow functions?

**3.7** Has the agency developed options for more efficient allocation of resources in the handling of ministerial correspondence and have these been discussed with and agreed by the Minister/s? Options might include:

- identifying which correspondents require a reply signed by the Minister;
- resolving matters by telephone contact rather than preparation of a written response,

- preparing tailored responses to meet correspondent expectations,
- analysing correspondence flows so that ministers can be more fully appraised of community views on policies and programs.

**3.8** Have the heads of the agency's functional units been informed of parliamentary workflow performance requirements agreed with Minister/s?

**3.9** Do performance agreements for relevant agency staff (Senior Executive Service and Senior Officers) include individual responsibility for the handling of parliamentary workflow items?

**3.10** Have agency program managers been provided with allocations of resources to meet the agency's agreed level of performance for the handling of parliamentary workflow material?

## Client service

**3.11** Does the agency provide briefings on parliamentary workflow processes for new ministerial office staff?

**3.12** Does the agency regularly survey its Minister/s' office/s to get feedback on their expectations and satisfaction with the quality and timeliness of parliamentary workflow?

**3.13** Has the agency developed achievable and quantifiable performance standards for its parliamentary workflow as a basis for discussion and agreement with the Minister/s? Do these standards cover issues such as timeliness, quality, scale of workflow and level of effort (or costs) of services?

**3.14** Do action officers across the agency have ready access to clear and comprehensive guidelines on parliamentary workflow requirements—timeliness, quality, formatting, content, etc.—for example through a parliamentary workflow manual? Are these guidelines available online?

## Timeliness

**3.15** Does the agency have timeliness standards in place for the provision of information to its minister/s?

**3.16** Have timeliness standards been agreed with the minister/s, particularly to meet differing expectations for different workflow items, such as shorter turnaround times for correspondence from parliamentarians?

**3.17** Are timeliness standards communicated throughout the agency and published in the agency's parliamentary manual? Is there an understanding throughout the agency of the timeliness required to meet performance standards set for parliamentary workflow outputs?

- 3.18** Is the timeliness of parliamentary workflow outputs monitored?
- 3.19** Are regular status reports on timeliness of output provided to program managers and the agency executive?
- 3.20** Are arrangements in place so that staff resources can be readily redeployed or redistributed within the agency, or centralised, as required, in order to ensure that timeliness standards can be achieved in all functional areas?

## Quality

- 3.21** Does the agency have standards to assess quality in the provision of information to the minister/s?
- 3.22** Have quality standards been agreed with minister/s' offices?
- 3.23** Do minister/s' offices have the opportunity to report formally on their assessment of the quality of material submitted from the agency?
- 3.24** Is the quality of parliamentary workflow outputs monitored within the agency?
- 3.25** Are regular status reports on the quality of these outputs provided to managers, including analysis to identify the source of errors, for example the need for rewrites of ministerial correspondence?
- 3.26** Is there an understanding communicated throughout the agency of quality requirements for parliamentary workflow outputs? for example, through the agency corporate plan and linkages to key result areas, through performance agreements and by access to the agency's parliamentary manual or guide to parliamentary workflow standards?
- 3.27** Does the agency conduct training in relevant subject matter and practices for action officers required to deal with parliamentary workflow material?

## Cost

- 3.28** Are measures in place within the agency to identify and quantify all parliamentary workflow outputs?
- 3.29** Has the agency implemented reliable mechanisms to measure the full costs of the production of its parliamentary workflow outputs?
- 3.30** Are the costs of parliamentary workflow estimated for each agency cost centre and are resource allocations made at the cost centre level?
- 3.31** Do budgetary estimates include such details and are they reported in agency Portfolio Budget Statements if significant?

**3.32** Is end-year performance against estimates, if significant, reported in the agency's Annual Report?

**3.33** Are costs of parliamentary workflow outputs monitored against resource allocations and regularly reported to managers, to the executive and to Minister/s?

## Use of technology

**3.34** Does the agency maximise the use of technology to increase the efficiency of processing parliamentary workflow material by, for example, reducing the number of unproductive steps through online allocation of material within the agency?

**3.35** As a means of reducing duplication and uncertainty and to assist with consultation, does the agency have in place information systems to provide for early notice across the agency that preparation of material for the minister/s, such as briefings and minutes, is under way on particular subject matter?

**3.36** Do all managers and minister/s offices have access to the agency workflow tracking and processing system, and to databases on work under way and performance information?

## Management information

**3.37** Does the agency's IT system generate data on:

- the quantity of parliamentary workflow outputs received and despatched?
- the distribution of workflow across the agency?
- items returned for rewrite? and
- the ageing of overdue items?

**3.38** Is information and knowledge generated during work performed by the agency's ministerial service unit made accessible to other areas of the agency in order to maximise consistency of approach and efficiency of resource usage, and to minimise duplication and problems with quality, timeliness and cost of outputs?

**3.39** Is management information provided in a regular report to the executive of the agency showing details of:

- the scale and distribution of ministerial and parliamentary workload across the agency within the reporting period;
- the extent to which standards of quality and timeliness have been met by different areas;

- work outstanding; and
- cost and staffing performance against allocations?

**3.40** Does the ministerial service unit prepare regular summary reports for management on issues raised in ministerial correspondence and parliamentary Questions on Notice?

## Performance indicators

**3.41** Does the agency have established targets for timeliness (for example, responses to ministerial correspondence to be provided within 21 days), quality (for example, less than 10% of draft responses to be returned for rewrites) and cost, which are disseminated to all staff?

**3.42** Does the agency assess and monitor performance against such targets at the functional unit level?

**3.43** Are such results reported, say quarterly, to regular meetings of the agency executive, and to the Minister/s, and are they included in the Annual Report?

## Benchmarking

**3.44** Does the agency regularly assess its standards of and performance on timeliness, quality and cost of services provided, against levels of performance achieved in comparable agencies?

## Purchaser/provider arrangements

**3.45** Where purchaser/provider arrangements are in place between or within Commonwealth agencies, do the parties include, in service agreements between them, details of requirements and standards for the handling of parliamentary workflow?

Canberra ACT  
8 March 1999



P. J. Barrett  
Auditor-General

# Appendices





## Appendix A

### Department of Defence

1. The Department of Defence is responsible for the defence of Australia, and functions carried out include civil defence, defence science and technology, defence production, and defence purchasing, including offsets for defence purposes.

#### Characteristics and Output of Parliamentary Workflow

2. Defence was chosen as one of the agencies to be reviewed because of its size (full-time defence force and civilian staffing, excluding reservists and cadets, of some 73 000 during 1997–98), the number and locational spread of its functional units within a 14 program structure and the fact that it currently calculates the cost of production of certain parliamentary services. The audit team also noted that Defence had initiated an IT-based system to manage ministerial and parliamentary workflow which has been adopted as a model by a range of agencies in formulating their own parliamentary workflow systems.

3. At the time of the audit the Defence portfolio was administered by the Minister for Defence and the Minister for Defence Industry, Science and Personnel. The portfolio also contained the Minister for Veterans' Affairs (and the Department of Veterans' Affairs, which separately serviced its Minister's parliamentary workflow requirements). Following announcement of revised ministerial and departmental arrangements in October 1998, the portfolio now contains the Minister for Defence, the Minister Assisting the Minister for Defence (who is also the Minister for Veterans' Affairs) and a Parliamentary Secretary.

4. Parliamentary workflow relevant to the Department of Defence is largely the responsibility of the Directorate of Ministerial and Parliamentary Liaison Services (DMPLS), part of the Reporting and Resource Services Branch, Resources and Financial Programs Division; DMPLS has direct access to the executive including the Secretary as required. In 1997–98 DMPLS comprised some 12 staff, under the direction of a Senior Officer Grade (SOG) B.

5. DMPLS is the focal point of contact for liaison between the Department and ministers' Parliamentary Offices on ministerial, Cabinet and parliamentary matters; some 65 separate action areas within Defence may be tasked by DMPLS with responsibility for preparation of material on such matters.

6. Table 3 shows the range and extent of output of parliamentary workflow recorded for Defence during 1997–98:

**Table 3**

**Parliamentary Workflow: 1997–98**

	Defence (Number)
Ministerial Requirements	Ministerial Briefings (at Ministers' request)
	145
	Ministerial Minutes and Submissions
	2 366
	Production and handling of Cabinet papers
	Cabinet Submissions/Memoranda (agency generated):
	19
	Cabinet Submissions (coord comments):
	154
	Cabinet Decisions/Minutes (relevant to agency):
	151
	Legislation (Statutory Rules/Legislative instruments)
	16
Ministerial Support	Question Time Briefs (1998 Winter Session)
	85
	Background Briefs (1998 Spring Session)
Parl Req'mts	109
	Parliamentary Questions on Notice (Finalised)
	130
	Ministerial Correspondence
	4 898 (i)
	Tabling of Ministerial Statements, Documents, Reports
	17
Ministerial Support	Departmental Liaison Officers in Ministers' offices
	3 (ii)
	Media Releases
	60
Parl Req'mts	Coordination of speeches etc. for the Ministers and others
	92
	Coordination of briefs for Ministerial etc. visits, meetings, etc
Parl Req'mts	210
	Responses to, and Briefings for, Parliamentary Committees/Inquiries
Parl Req'mts	27

Sources: Discussions with DMPLS and other Defence staff.

- (i) 'campaign' correspondence is not registered individually; numbers include preparation of paper responses to Internet email correspondence addressed to a minister, if a physical return address is included; does not include material passed to Defence from ministers' offices that is the responsibility of other agencies (466 in 1997–98)—the Department undertakes preparation of covering correspondence and despatch.
- (ii) At the time of the audit these comprised: SOG B, 2 x SOG C [plus 2 uniformed Escort Officers]; following announcement of revised ministerial and departmental arrangements in October 1998, an additional DLO has been allocated to the office of the newly appointed Parliamentary Secretary within the Defence portfolio.

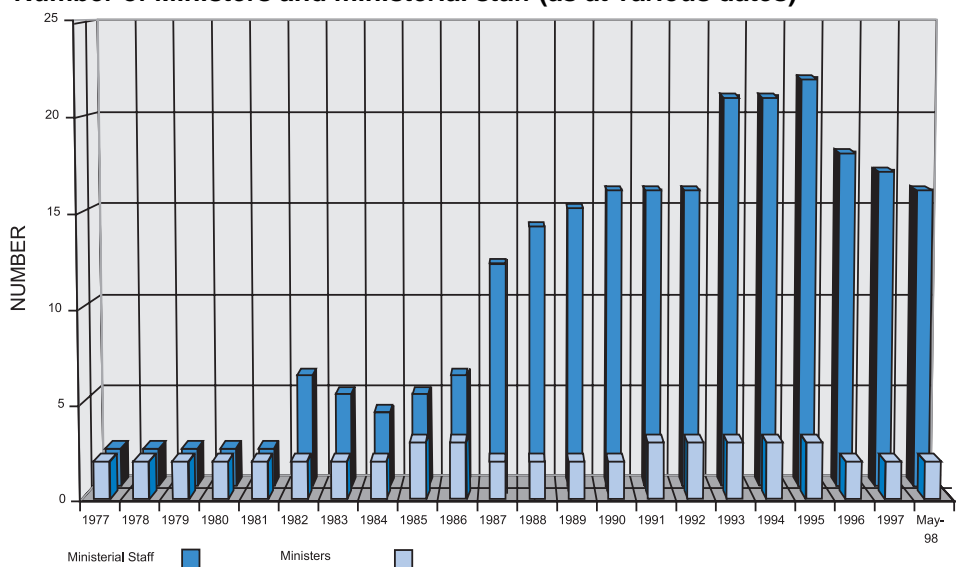
7. For the first year, in its Annual Report for 1997–98 Defence reported on some aspects of its parliamentary workflow, notably the numbers of ministerial correspondence items, Cabinet Submissions and Questions on Notice it had handled during the year. While the level of detail did not cover the entire range and extent of parliamentary workflow as detailed in Table 3, the ANAO considers that this development significantly enhances transparency and accountability concerning parliamentary workflow functions.

8. Graph 1 illustrates changes, as reported in issues of the *Commonwealth Government Directory*, in the number of ministers (including Parliamentary Secretaries) and ministerial staff (ie those provided under the *Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984*) plus Departmental Liaison Officers, that have occurred within the Defence portfolio since 1977. Note: during the period, machinery of government changes in 1987 provided for the creation of portfolios with more than one minister.

### Graph 1

#### Defence portfolio

#### Number of Ministers and ministerial staff (as at various dates)



Sources: Commonwealth Government Directories 1977 to May 1998

### Timeliness Performance Standards and Achievements

9. The following performance standards in regard to timeliness were in place within Defence during 1997–98; details of performance against the standards and targets are shown also.

**Table 4****Department of Defence****Ministerial correspondence and Questions on Notice: Performance 1997–98**

MINISTERIAL CORRESPONDENCE			
<i>Signatory</i>	<i>Standard</i>	<i>Target</i>	<i>Performance 1997/98</i>
Minister for Defence	14 calendar (10 working) days	100%	54% of responses met the standard
Minister for Defence Industry, Science and Personnel	21 calendar (15 working) days		
Ministers' Senior Advisers	21 calendar (15 working) days		
Note: the standards specified may be reduced to shorter periods at the direction of Ministers/staff			
QUESTIONS ON NOTICE			
	<i>Standard</i>	<i>Target</i>	<i>Performance 1997/98</i>
	15 (working) days	100%	Not recorded

**10.** DMPLS reports weekly within the Reporting and Resource Services Branch on the Department's performance on the handling of ministerial correspondence (and also on ongoing work in relation to a limited range of other parliamentary workflow material such as preparation of speeches and briefings for visits). Particular performance deficiencies that may be exhibited within policy/program areas, for example in meeting set targets or in the quality of responses, are taken up by DMPLS with responsible action officers and/or supervisors. If required such matters may also be raised at meetings of the Department's executive at appropriate times.

### **Quality Performance Standards**

**11.** DMPLS provides a quality check of material, for example to ensure that material is provided in the format agreed with ministers' offices from time to time. The provision of a comprehensive and illustrative Manual of Ministerial and Parliamentary Procedures (PARLMAN), together with a detailed 'Drafter's Guide', offers further assistance to those undertaking preparation of material for ministers by providing guidelines on the specific requirements of Parliamentary Offices, and through identifying format and timeliness standards.

**12.** DMPLS also offers a regular program of training sessions on relevant subject matter and practices, for action officers across the Department and for uniformed men and women who may be required to prepare material that will be forwarded to ministers' offices such as draft responses to ministerial correspondence. The training sessions are presented

by DMPLS staff, contractors and staff of the Defence ministers. ANAO believes that this represents an example of good practice.

**13.** During 1997–98 DMPLS did not have a system for systematically recording Defence levels of performance against any quality requirements determined by ministers’ offices. Nevertheless, at all stages of preparation of material for the ministers’ offices, comments are recorded on the material as it moves between the Department and Parliamentary Offices. As all material is scanned into the Department’s management information system, feedback to authors and supervisors is available online and all annotated files are returned to the initial action areas.

**14.** Material being prepared in Defence policy/program areas for the consideration of ministers is subject to internal quality checking. There is a requirement that the content must be cleared at an appropriate level (for example, final replies to ministerial correspondence are to be cleared by a Senior Executive Service (SES)/Defence One-star level or above).

## Management Information System

**15.** DMPLS manages most elements of parliamentary workflow using an IT system; features include scanning of material, recording of tracking and access data for each item and text searching by subject, name or status. The system provides comprehensive registration, recording and control functions for all ministerial representations (MINREPS) handled by the Department. MINREPS are defined as written correspondence or oral communication:

- to the ministers from any source;
- to any person within the Defence Organisation from Commonwealth or State Members of Parliament or Senators;
- referred by another Commonwealth or State Department, seeking advice for the minister administering that Department; and
- from the ministers’ offices.

**16.** At the time of the audit the ANAO noted that, while all MINREPS were recorded in the Defence tracking system as individual items, they were included in a sequential numbering system that did not label them as, for example, ministerial correspondence, briefings, minutes, responses to Questions on Notice, bills from the ministers’ offices for payment, etc. Consequently there was no easy means of identification of the magnitude of the various types of material being handled. Indeed, ‘campaign’ letters were not separately recorded at all, but were bundled as 1 item.

17. While the overall number of MINREPS and the subject matter of individual MINREPS can be discerned by the trained operators in DMPLS, the audit team noted that management reporting, for example to obtain accurate data on the number of items of ministerial correspondence received during a period, required some manual manipulation of the system.

18. During the currency of the audit, DMPLS staff enhanced the MINREPS recording system by distinguishing between items, for example ministerial correspondence and requests for briefings, to improve the effectiveness of management reporting. The ANAO suggests that Defence consider further enhancements to the present system, such as recording of and reporting on data on ageing of ministerial correspondence in the system, that could assist in providing better reporting to management on performance against timeliness standards.

19. The audit noted that the system as presently constituted does not provide for online allocation of material to and preparation of replies by action officers. The ANAO considers that enhancement of the system to provide this facility, as has been done in some other Departments that use similar applications, would improve the effectiveness of DMPLS' handling of MINREPS.

### **Costing of Parliamentary Workflow Functions**

20. Alone among the agencies reviewed, Defence maintains a system of recording attributed costs, determined using the Defence *Ready Reckoner of Personnel Costs and Related Overheads*<sup>15</sup>, for the preparation of responses to QoNs. Under this arrangement the effort expended in policy and program areas is costed, but those costs relevant to DMPLS' input and handling of material are not calculated. Recorded costs are reported to a minister's office by memorandum on each occasion that a final response is provided for a minister's agreement to tabling on the relevant parliamentary *Notice Paper*. In 1997–98, costs identified for the preparation of 130 finalised responses to QoNs totalled \$72 692.

21. Defence is notable in its identification of attributed costs for the production and handling of this, or any component of, parliamentary workflow material. The point has been made elsewhere in this Report that, in the context of the move to accrual budgeting and an output/outcomes framework, other agencies will need to adopt similar practices.

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<sup>15</sup> The *Ready Reckoner* provides costing information on each rank in each Service, by locality, and for each civilian classification within the Department of Defence. The rates contained in the *Ready Reckoner* relate to personnel costs only and are exclusive of plant and equipment, inventory, motor vehicles, building and office accommodation costs; such costs, where applicable, are costed on a case by case basis.

Nevertheless, the Defence system did not provide coverage of all of the processes involved in responding to QoNs, and thus costs are understated. Moreover, no record is kept of costs attributable to the production and handling of other parliamentary workflow elements, for example ministerial correspondence, that clearly require usage of many more agency resources in total.

**22.** The ANAO concluded that further application within Defence of the costing system, including to parliamentary workflow elements other than QoNs, should be encouraged as it would assist in formulating a comprehensive costing of this output.

### **Other Ministerial Services**

**23.** In addition to the range of Ministerial and Parliamentary services outlined in Table 3 above, DMPLS also provides:

- administrative support to the ministers' offices including handling information requirements not covered by formal briefing requests, coordination of purchasing requests and the payment of accounts and coordination of IT support;
- a secure courier service to and from Parliamentary Offices, delivery to and collection from the Cabinet Secretariat and other departments and agencies, collection of Daily Hansards and Notice Papers as well as other ad hoc requests;
- provision of administrative support for DLOs working from the ministers' offices, including short term relief staffing purposes; and
- provision of administrative support for a uniformed Escort Officer in each of the ministers' offices; occupants are rotated between the three Services; each individual service pays for the direct costs (salary and allowances) of each Escort Officer assigned to a minister.

## Appendix B

### Department of Health and Aged Care

1. The audit was conducted in the then Department of Health and Family Services (DHFS). Following ministerial and administrative arrangements variations introduced in October 1998, as a result of which some former DHFS functions moved to the new Department of Family and Community Services, the Department's name was changed to the Department of Health and Aged Care (DHAC) to reflect its revised responsibilities and functions.

2. DHAC is responsible for promoting good health and ensuring that all Australians have access to key health services, including:

- aged and community care services
- public health initiatives
- Medicare and pharmaceutical benefits
- hospital and health care funding
- health services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders
- emergency services for people in crisis.

### Characteristics and Output of Parliamentary Workflow

3. The then DHFS was chosen for audit review because of the complexity of the portfolio's functions and the size of its parliamentary workflow (Note: while comprehensive figures for the entire public sector were not available to the ANAO—no central agency maintains records in this area—the former DHFS was acknowledged as being required to handle one of the largest ministerial correspondence workloads in the Commonwealth arena).

4. At the time of the audit the Health and Family Services portfolio was administered by the Minister for Health and Family Services, the Minister for Family Services and a Parliamentary Secretary. Following announcement of revised ministerial and departmental arrangements in October 1998, the Health and Aged Care portfolio now contains the Minister for Health and Aged Care, the Minister for Aged Care and a Parliamentary Secretary.

5. Unlike other agencies reviewed, DHAC has a Branch, the Public Affairs, Parliamentary and Access (PAPA) Branch, headed by an SES officer, responsible for the provision of services to the Minister. PAPA Branch has direct access to the executive including the Secretary as required. Within PAPA Branch, coordination of parliamentary workflow is largely the responsibility of the Parliamentary Section. The Parliamentary Section



functions as the focal point of contact for liaison between the Department and ministerial offices on ministerial, Cabinet and parliamentary matters.

6. In 1997–98 the Parliamentary Section comprised some 24 staff, under the direction of a SOG B.

7. Table 5 shows the range and extent of output of parliamentary workflow recorded for the former DHFS during 1997–98:

**Table 5**

**Parliamentary Workflow: 1997–98**

		Health and Family Services (Number)
Ministerial Requirements	Ministerial Briefings (at Ministers' request)	987
	Ministerial Minutes and Submissions	3 008
	Production and handling of Cabinet papers	
	Cabinet Submissions/Memoranda (agency generated):	16
	Cabinet Submissions (coord comments):	78
	Cabinet Decisions/Minutes (relevant to agency):	184
	Legislation (Items Primary Legislation Finalised)	12 (i)
	Question Time Briefs (New and amended)	1 150
	Parliamentary Questions on Notice (Finalised)	166
	Ministerial Correspondence	88 210 (ii)
Ministerial Support	Tabling of Ministerial Statements, Documents, Reports	Done by DH & FS program areas - recorded as a subset of Ministerial minutes above
	Departmental Liaison Officers in Ministers' offices	5 (iii)
	Media Releases	365 (iv)
	Coordination of speeches etc. for the Minister	299 (iv)
Parl Req'mts	Coordination of briefs for Ministerial etc. visits, meetings, etc	Included in briefings figure above
	Responses to, and Briefings for, Parliamentary Committees/Inquiries	Done by DH & FS program areas (v)

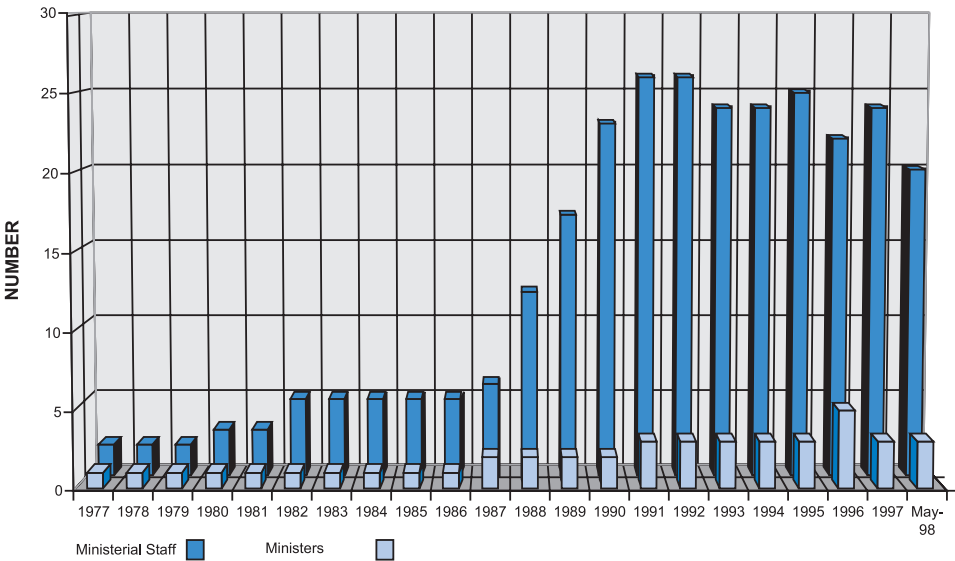
Sources: Discussions with PAPA Branch and other DH & FS staff.

- (i) DHFS also handled 41 Executive Council matters; 88 legislative instruments were tabled and gazetted.
- (ii) Some 88 210 items were received in 1997–98; of these, 14 676 were for action [7148 were accorded official replies signed by Ministers], 6335 were for information, 67 199 were 'campaign' mail and were not provided with signed responses.
- (iii) Administrative Service Officer (ASO) 6 to SOG B.
- (iv) Includes only those speeches and media releases which are prepared with Minutes and Briefings for Ministers; other speeches and media releases are prepared in DHFS program areas and in the ministers' offices.
- (v) Except for liaison with Senate Legislation (Estimates) Committee—1061 questions taken on notice during 1997–98.

8. The audit team noted that, in its Annual Report for 1997–98, the then DHFS did not report any detail on its parliamentary workflow, for example on the range and extent of parliamentary workflow as detailed in Table 5 above. As stated elsewhere in this report, the ANAO considers that such a development in future years would significantly enhance transparency and accountability concerning parliamentary workflow functions.

9. Graph 2 illustrates changes, as reported in issues of the *Commonwealth Government Directory*, in the number of ministers (including Parliamentary Secretaries) and ministerial staff (ie those provided under the *Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984*) plus Departmental Liaison Officers, that have occurred within the Health portfolio (variously titled over the period) since 1977. Note: during the period, machinery of government changes in 1987 provided for the creation of portfolios with more than one minister.

**Graph 2**  
**Health portfolio**  
**Number of Ministers and ministerial staff (as at various dates)**



Sources: Commonwealth Government Directories 1977 to May 1998

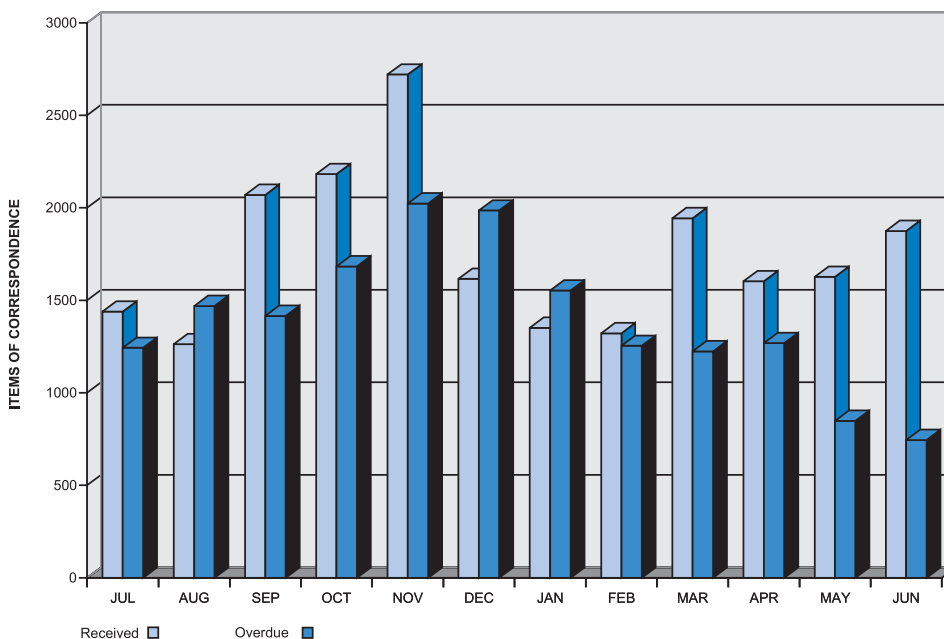
### Timeliness Performance Standards and Achievements

10. The following performance standards in regard to timeliness were in place within the then DHFS during 1997–98; details of performance against the standards and targets are shown also.

**Table 6**
**Department of Health and Family Services**
**Ministerial correspondence and Questions on Notice: Performance 1997–98**

<b>MINISTERIAL CORRESPONDENCE</b>			
<i>Signatory</i>	<i>Standard</i>	<i>Target</i>	<i>Performance 1997/98</i>
Ministers	21 (calendar) days *	100%	56% of responses met the standard
Department	28 (calendar) days		
* Where correspondence is received from within the Ministers' electorates, the standard for preparation of a response is reduced to 14 (calendar) days; where responses are returned from Ministers' offices for rewrite, the standard is to respond within 7 (calendar) days			
<b>QUESTIONS ON NOTICE</b>			
	<i>Standard</i>	<i>Target</i>	<i>Performance 1997/98</i>
	21 (calendar) days	100%	45%

11. Graph 3 illustrates the Department's performance during 1997–98 in dealing with correspondence to ministers passed to the Department for handling or for preparation of a response to be signed in ministers' offices.

**Graph 3**
**Department of Health and Family Services**
**Ministerial correspondence: handling 1997–98**


Source: ANAO analysis of quantitative data supplied by DHFS

**12.** Graph 3 illustrates that, despite the size of its ministerial correspondence workload, by the end of the 1997–98 financial year the Department had made significant inroads into reducing the numbers of items overdue. It was clear to the ANAO team that the timely processing of ministerial correspondence is a priority for the Department and that action areas have adopted a range of strategies to manage this. For example, the ANAO was informed that for those Divisions that have a significant correspondence workload, often a dedicated group or individual is engaged to handle correspondence as their priority work. Where they are provided, Outposted Ministerial Officers (OMOs) also assist in this process.

**13.** In July 1998 about 40% of all correspondence received in the Department was overdue compared to 63% overdue in February 1998. The Department advised that it has set benchmarks for improving performance on overdue correspondence throughout the forthcoming financial year towards targets of:

- 30% or less overdue by December 1998; and
- 20% or less overdue by June 1999.

**14.** Ministerial correspondence is an ongoing agenda item at senior management meetings and this maintains an emphasis on meeting timeliness requirements in the handling of ministerial correspondence. Performance against set targets is disseminated within the Department at appropriate times as part of its regular management information reporting system.

**15.** A strategy adopted by the Department, in part in order to reduce the number of overdue correspondence items, is the inclusion, as a standard criterion in SES and Senior Officer Performance Agreements and in the Performance Development Scheme for action officers, of individual performance in meeting timeliness standards for parliamentary workflow. This includes ministerial correspondence, briefings, Questions on Notice, Question Time briefings and Senate Estimates Questions on Notice. The ANAO agrees that such action will serve to reinforce with departmental officers at all levels the necessity for timeliness in the handling of ministerial and parliamentary work responsibilities.

**16.** The Department's 1998–99 Portfolio Budget Statements identify a number of performance assessment measures for the PAPA Branch in relation to the provision of ministerial and parliamentary services. Prominent among these is the target of responding in a timely fashion when items such as ministerial correspondence and requests from ministers' offices for Question Time Briefings are received within the Department.

## Quality Performance Standards

17. The Parliamentary Section prepares regular reports for the Executive and for ministers' offices on the numbers of draft responses to ministerial correspondence that require rewrites. For example, reports for March 1998 showed that of 1067 letters sent to the Parliamentary Offices for signature, 131 (12%) were either returned for rewrite or were rewritten/modified in ministers' offices. When letters are returned, they are analysed to identify the source of errors; these could include minor amendments and alterations required due to requests from Parliamentary Offices, unsatisfactory wording or a need for the material to include updated information. The ANAO considers that, in order that performance against quality requirements can be monitored and enhanced, advice on reasons for rewrites should be provided to action areas that are responsible for preparation of material.

18. The ANAO noted that the former DHFS's provision of a detailed Parliamentary Handbook offers very effective assistance to those undertaking preparation of material for ministers by providing guidance on the specific requirements of Parliamentary Offices, for example in identifying format and timeliness standards. The Parliamentary Section also offers a regular program of in-house training sessions on relevant subject matter and practices for action officers across the Department who may be required to prepare material that will be forwarded to ministers' offices such as draft responses to ministerial correspondence. The ANAO considers that these measures represent good practice in the management of parliamentary workflow within the Department.

19. The provision by the Parliamentary Section of OMOs who are physically located within some program areas has also assisted in meeting the quality requirements of material passing to ministers' offices. OMOs are responsible for:

- providing information and advice to program areas and State Offices on the preparation of ministerial correspondence;
- monitoring the progress of ministerial and parliamentary material, ensuring deadlines are met and that documents meet the standards outlined in the Parliamentary Handbook;
- identifying the training needs of departmental staff in relation to parliamentary procedures; and
- providing advice and training on the information systems and departmental resources that are available to program areas, such as Parliamentary Templates.

**20.** However, notwithstanding the measures set out above that assist in the development and maintenance of quality in the provision of information from the Department, the Parliamentary Section does not have a comprehensive system for systematically recording, and disseminating to executive members, levels of performance against quality requirements determined by ministers' offices.

**21.** Nevertheless, material being prepared in departmental policy/program areas for the ministers' consideration is, of course, subject to internal quality checking as the content must be cleared at an appropriate level (as a matter of practice, in most cases this is done at SES Band 1 level or higher). The Parliamentary Section also carries out quality control oversight of both content and format of replies to ministerial correspondence to be signed by ministers, and of other material being forwarded to ministers' offices.

### **Management Information System**

**22.** The parliamentary workflow management system in place prior to August 1998 was primarily paper-based. Certain urgent material, such as Question Time Briefs, has been distributed electronically across the Department using email and shared files. The now superseded system did, however, provide comprehensive registration, recording and control functions for ministerial and parliamentary material.

**23.** Management reports are submitted on a monthly basis to meetings of the executive. Statistics are presented graphically at a level of disaggregated information useful for line management in action areas to monitor the ministerial correspondence and briefings/minutes output, particularly in terms of timeliness.

**24.** DHAC also provides summary monthly management reports to its ministers' offices that are designed to meet their specific needs by showing, for example, the numbers of replies to ministerial correspondence completed/signed/on hand/returned for rewrite etc. during a particular month.

**25.** A substantial redevelopment of the parliamentary workflow operational environment was implemented from August 1998 as part of the Department's new Desktop Management System. The new system has potential to significantly improve administration of parliamentary workflow in terms of quality and timeliness of output, to reduce the extent of non-value work tasks inherent in many parliamentary workflow processes by enhancing electronic distribution and management of items within the Department, and to provide for more effective reporting and presentation of relevant management information.

26. The ANAO considers that the new system would represent good practice in the handling of ministerial and parliamentary material in the future.

### **Costing of Parliamentary Workflow Functions**

27. In examining the business case for adoption of a revised IT parliamentary workflow system, the then DHFS concluded that opportunities for improvements in efficiency lay particularly in enhancing the handling of ministerial correspondence. This reflected the outcome of a study by consultants of an indicative sample of material, and an assessment of business processes that were followed generally, which found that the direct cost of handling ministerial correspondence is approximately \$325 per item and that, on average, a response took 36 days to complete, with only some 3 ½ hours of this time being devoted to creating the output. [These findings look to be realistic when compared with those established by the Efficiency Scrutiny Unit in its March 1987 report *A Scrutiny of the Handling of Ministerial Correspondence*; at that time the average cost of providing a substantive reply to an item of ministerial correspondence was estimated as being \$261 and the average time taken to respond was 35 elapsed days.]

28. Following on from this analysis of existing processes, the Department's upgraded IT-based parliamentary workflow system has been implemented to more efficiently handle ministerial correspondence, briefings and minutes by, for example, providing for electronic transfer of items to eliminate some of the non-productive tasks performed previously, thus allowing staff to add value rather than shuffle paper and by making it easier for action and clearance officers to concentrate on content rather than on format and process.

29. The ANAO notes that the staffing structure of the Parliamentary Section is subject to revision during 1998–99 to reflect the impact of the new system.

### **Other Ministerial Services**

30. In addition to the range of ministerial and Parliamentary services outlined in Table 5 above, the Parliamentary Section also provides:

- administrative support to Parliamentary Offices including handling information requirements not covered by formal briefing requests, management of parliamentary assets, coordination of purchasing requests and the payment of accounts and coordination of IT support;
- a key role in the development and maintenance of the Department's parliamentary workflow IT system;

- a secure courier service to and from Parliamentary Offices, delivery to and collection from the Cabinet Secretariat and other departments and agencies, collection of Daily Hansards and Notice Papers as well as other ad hoc requests;
- provision of administrative support for five DLOs working from the ministers' offices and the Parliamentary Secretary's Office, including for budget bidding and short-term relief staffing purposes; and
- management of the provision of Outposted Ministerial Officers that are physically located within program areas to assist in the handling of parliamentary workflow material.



## Appendix C

### Department of Family and Community Services

1. The audit was conducted within the then Department of Social Security (DSS). Following ministerial and administrative arrangements variations introduced in October 1998, DSS functions have been included within the Family and Community Services portfolio. This portfolio consists of:

- the Department of Family and Community Services (DFaCS), combining the former DSS, three areas (Family and Children's Services, Disability Programs and the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service) from the former Department of Health and Family Services, and the family relationships function from the Attorney-General's Department;
- the Child Support Agency, formerly with the Australia Taxation Office;
- Centrelink;
- the Social Security Appeals Tribunal; and,
- the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

2. Within the portfolio, DFaCS is a social policy formulation and advisory body and Centrelink, created as the Commonwealth Services Delivery Agency with effect from 1 July 1997, has taken responsibility for the previous DSS Australia-wide network of offices, visiting services, call centres, etc.

3. DFaCS has responsibility for monitoring Centrelink's performance in delivering income support payments and services. As portfolio secretary, the Secretary to the Department of Family and Community Services is a member of the Centrelink Board and has responsibility for monitoring and advising government on Centrelink's role and development as a Commonwealth agency. This continues previous arrangements in that the former DSS's relationship with Centrelink was covered by a Business Partnership Agreement between the DSS Secretary and Centrelink's CEO which set out a framework for the delivery of services by Centrelink.

## **Characteristics and Output of Parliamentary Workflow**

4. The then DSS was chosen as one of the agencies to be reviewed because of the size of its parliamentary workflow (see Table 7 below) and the range of effective measures that it has introduced to handle parliamentary workflow, particularly its IT management and reporting system. In planning the audit the ANAO also noted that DSS had established a Ministerial Correspondence Team to prepare the majority of replies to ministerial correspondence, and to check and edit all other draft replies.

5. Moreover, DSS was selected for the audit to provide an insight into an emerging issue for the APS—the management of parliamentary workflow between a provider agency and a purchaser/policy agency. In this audit, this would require examination of the delivery of ministerial and parliamentary services by Centrelink and the agreements introduced between DSS and Centrelink to provide services to ministers. These matters are discussed further below—see ‘Relationship with Centrelink’.

6. At the time of the audit the then Social Security portfolio was administered by the Minister for Social Security and a Parliamentary Secretary. The new Family and Community Services portfolio is administered by the Minister for Family and Community Services and the Minister for Community Services.

7. Parliamentary workflow in DSS and now DFACS is largely the responsibility of the Ministerial and Parliamentary Services Section (MPSS), part of the Executive Support Branch. MPSS reports to the Departmental Board of Management through the Executive Support Branch and has direct access to the executive including the Secretary as required. MPSS provides the central point of contact between the Department and ministerial offices.

8. MPSS comprised some 20 staff in 1997–98, under the direction of a SOG A. The structure of the Section for the 1998–99 financial year broadly comprises a Ministerial Correspondence Team and a Parliamentary Unit.

9. Table 7 shows the range and extent of output of parliamentary workflow recorded for the then DSS during 1997–98:

**Table 7**  
**Parliamentary Workflow: 1997–98**

		Social Security (Number)
Ministerial Requirements	Ministerial Briefings (at Ministers' request)	316
	Ministerial Minutes and Submissions	1 241
	Production and handling of Cabinet papers	
	Cabinet Submissions/Memoranda (agency generated):	13
	Cabinet Submissions (coord comments):	59
	Cabinet Decisions/Minutes (relevant to agency):	146
	Legislation (Acts received Royal Assent)	7 (i)
	Question Time Briefs (1997–98 Parl. Sessions)	405
	Parliamentary Questions on Notice (Finalised)	60
	Ministerial Correspondence	10 359 (ii)
	Tabling of Ministerial Statements, Documents, Reports	6
	Departmental Liaison Officers in Ministers' offices	3 (iii)
Ministerial Support	Media Releases	76
	Coordination of speeches etc. for the Ministers	22
	Coordination of briefs for Ministerial etc. visits, meetings, etc	98
Parl Req'ts	Responses to Parliamentary Committees/Inquiries	Included in no. of briefings above

Sources: Discussions with MPSS and other DSS staff.

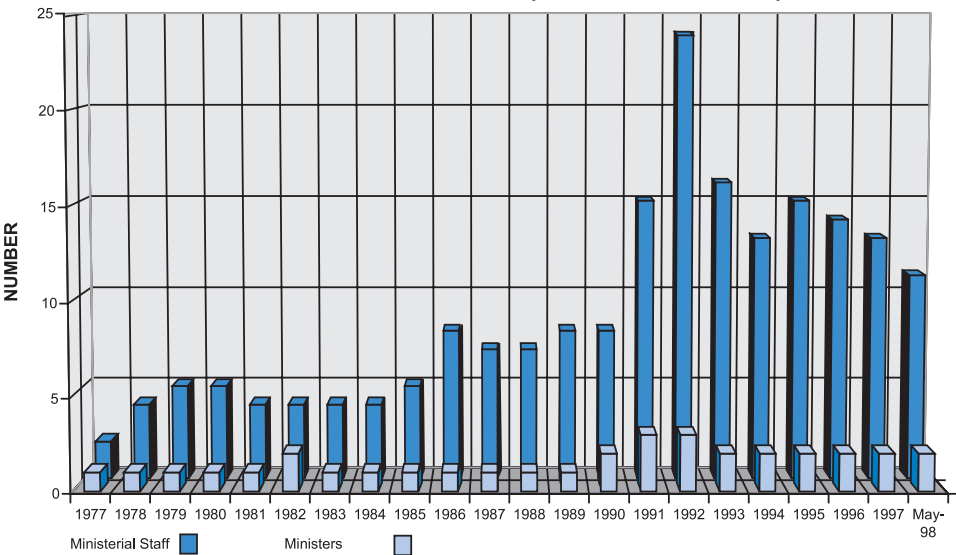
- (i) Does not include regulations and disallowable instruments.
- (ii) Of these, 7275 were handled by DSS and 3084 were referred to Centrelink. Of the cases handled by DSS, 1265 involved largely standard responses to large numbers of proforma or similar letters on specific subjects ('campaign' cases).
- (iii) SOG B, 2 x SOG C.

**10.** For the first time, in its Annual Report for 1997–98 the then DSS reported on various aspects of its parliamentary workflow. While the level of detail in the data provided did not cover the entire range and extent of parliamentary workflow as detailed in Table 7, in other respects comprehensive commentary was provided on various subject matter such as recording the finalisation of ministerial and parliamentary services protocols with Centrelink and reporting on the standards of performance achieved in dealing with ministerial correspondence and Questions on Notice.

**11.** The ANAO considers that this reporting development significantly enhances transparency and accountability concerning parliamentary workflow functions.

12. Graph 4 illustrates changes, as reported in issues of the *Commonwealth Government Directory*, in the number of ministers (including Parliamentary Secretaries) and ministerial staff (that is those provided under the *Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984*) plus Departmental Liaison Officers, that have occurred within the Social Security portfolio (variously titled over the period) since 1977. Note: during the period, machinery of government changes in 1987 provided for the creation of portfolios with more than one minister.

**Graph 4**  
**Social Security portfolio**  
**Number of Ministers and ministerial staff (as at various dates)**



Sources: Commonwealth Government Directories 1977 to May 1998

### Timeliness Performance Standards and Achievements

13. The following performance standards in regard to timeliness for responses to ministerial correspondence and Questions on Notice were in place within the then DSS during 1997–98; details of performance against the standards and targets are shown also.

**Table 8****Department of Social Security****Ministerial correspondence and Questions on Notice: Performance 1997–98**

<b>MINISTERIAL CORRESPONDENCE</b>			
<i><b>Signatory</b></i>	<i><b>Standard</b></i>	<i><b>Target</b></i>	<i><b>Performance 1997/98</b></i>
Minister	21 calendar (15 working) days	90%	74% of responses met the standard
<b>QUESTIONS ON NOTICE</b>			
	<i><b>Standard</b></i>	<i><b>Target</b></i>	<i><b>Performance 1997/98</b></i>
	28 (calendar) days	100%	76%
<p>During 1997–98 the then DSS also had timeliness requirements in the provision of Question Time Briefs and Ministerial Briefings. In both cases these were set on an individual item basis so as to meet the requirements of the minister. For example, Question Time Briefs were to be provided within 2 hours of receipt or as otherwise negotiated with the minister's office, while briefings were to be provided to meet timing requirements relevant to the purpose of the brief, for example, for a ministerial visit, etc., or by a due date set in negotiations with the minister's office.</p> <p>While performance against individual standards was not recorded, the ANAO was informed that requirements set by the minister's office were largely met during 1997–98.</p>			

**14.** Ministerial correspondence is an ongoing agenda item at senior management meetings and this maintains an emphasis on meeting timeliness requirements in the handling of ministerial correspondence. Performance against set targets is disseminated within the Department each fortnight as part of its regular management information reporting system.

### **Quality Performance Standards**

**15.** Through MPSS, the former DSS provided access to an online Ministerial and Parliamentary Handbook for all DSS staff. The manual offered assistance to those undertaking preparation of material for ministers by providing guidelines on the specific requirements of ministers' offices, for example, through identifying format and timeliness standards.

**16.** During 1997–98 MPSS did not have a system for systematically recording DSS levels of performance against quality requirements determined by ministers' offices. For example, the number of ministerial correspondence items returned to DSS for rewrite was not included in reports to management. Nevertheless, material being prepared in DSS policy/program areas for ministerial consideration is subject to internal quality checking because of internal instructions that content must be cleared at an appropriate level. MPSS also provides a quality control check of all material in order to ensure that briefings are provided in the required format, to check if the legal services area has been consulted where there is

legislative impact, to identify cases which need to be brought to the attention of the executive, and to check that coordination between the Department and Centrelink has taken place where necessary.

**17.** The allocation of a Ministerial Correspondence Team within MPSS also contributes to the maintenance of quality standards. Writers within the Team, in conjunction with agency functional units, prepare approximately 75% of the responses to ministerial correspondence referred to the Department. This correspondence relates to policy issues underlying the portfolio's income support payments and programs. Content agreed between MPSS and policy/program Branches is incorporated in those responses that do not require consideration of significant new or amended policy issues nor individual case assessment. Remaining correspondence is referred directly to other DSS Branches, for example, Legal Services, or to the Customer Communications Unit in Centrelink, for the preparation of replies or other appropriate action; upon return to MPSS each of these items is once again subject to a quality check by members of the Ministerial Correspondence Team.

**18.** The Ministerial Correspondence Team also handles the preparation of responses to Internet email correspondence addressed to the minister or to the Department. Where a postal address is included a paper reply is prepared and in other cases a reply is sent by email.

**19.** The ANAO considers that this approach to handling responses to ministerial correspondence works well in the context of a policy department such as DFaCS where social security and income support legislation does not give a minister authority to exercise a range of discretions to approve variations from standard responses in individual case management matters. Moreover, the members of the Ministerial Correspondence Team have accumulated knowledge and experience that contributes to a consistent approach, and therefore higher quality output, in the handling of ministerial correspondence. The centralised handling of much of the correspondence load also lessens the extent of the flow of ministerial correspondence paperwork and/or electronic content around the Department, with consequential efficiencies in the management and control of output, including in the achievement of timeliness and quality standards and targets.

**20.** The audit team was informed that, as part of a broader initiative to obtain performance information on various aspects of the Department's policy advising and information services, initial action had been taken to seek the endorsement of the then DSS Board of Management to a process that would provide, in part, for ministers' offices to record on a cover sheet for each piece of briefing material an assessment against a number of quality

measures. As proposed, the new arrangement would also identify for the minister any coordination action that had taken place before the material was presented to the minister, particularly that necessarily undertaken between DSS and Centrelink. The intention behind introducing the new system was to encourage feedback from ministerial offices to MPSS on the quality of material provided. This would assist in more carefully targeting ministerial needs on succeeding occasions. The draft format of that part of the proposed cover sheet that relates to quality reporting, current at the time of the audit, is shown in Figure 4:

**Figure 4**

**Quality reporting format: DSS**

This section to be completed by customer.				
	VERY GOOD	SATISFACTORY	UNSATISFACTORY	COMMENTS
Overall rating	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Timeliness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Accuracy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Consultation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Clarity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Logical	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Relevance and Practicality	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Presentation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Options	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Additional comments (eg. Did you accept the advice or did the advice help you make a decision?):				
Signature: _____ Date: _____				

Source: papers sighted during discussions with MPSS staff

**21.** The ANAO supports this initiative. Such a scheme would not only provide information about the level of ministerial satisfaction with departmental performance as a provider of social policy advice, but would also assist in the development of quality assurance measures for the policy development process and support the accrual budgeting and reporting framework by offering a measure of the effectiveness of the output of policy and other advice in achieving planned outcomes.

**22.** In addition, quality monitoring and reporting will be enhanced through a future upgrade of the DESPATCH system (see details below). MPSS plans to refine the categories used for recording on DESPATCH the details of those replies to ministerial correspondence returned from intended signatories for further action. This information will be collated and reviewed to provide a series of performance measures for the quality of replies prepared by both the Department and Centrelink.

## **Management Information System**

**23.** MPSS manages most elements of parliamentary workflow using an IT application (DESPATCH), which was implemented in August 1996. (Note: DESPATCH is the local departmental name for a system which is marketed as the Parliamentary Correspondence Management System (PCMS) and is being, or has been, introduced in a number of other agencies.)

**24.** DESPATCH was designed as a comprehensive recording and tracking system to manage all ministerial and parliamentary processing, including ministerial correspondence, ministerial briefings, parliamentary questions and Cabinet papers. The features of DESPATCH include scanning of material, recording of tracking and status data for each case, online allocation of material to and preparation of replies by action officers within the Ministerial Correspondence Team, provision for bulk management of replies to 'campaign' cases and text searching by subject, name, or status.

**25.** The utility of the DESPATCH system has recently been enhanced through implementation of a requirement that ministerial briefings under internal development in both the former DSS and Centrelink be identified and notified to MPSS via DESPATCH at the beginning of the process rather than when the material is ready to be despatched to ministers' offices. It is envisaged that the revised process will enable staff in both organisations to identify areas of common interest and to coordinate input and consultation on briefings during the developmental stage rather than at the end of the process. It will also alert the executive to sensitive and key issues on which ministerial briefing is being prepared. The ANAO considers that this development will enable better coordination of ministerial briefings and provide improved services to the minister and the executive.

**26.** The capacity exists for DESPATCH databases to be made available in ministerial offices, with the option of incorporating processing activity within those offices. There is also potential for all action areas of the Department to have access to the database to incorporate processing of all parliamentary workflow. This could be particularly useful for managing ministerial correspondence in more complex policy cases referred to program areas outside the Ministerial Correspondence Team. This extension of the database could also provide for online approval of content by Branch managers and access to statistical and performance information.

**27.** The DESPATCH system provides readily available information on performance against standards and on the size and nature of parliamentary workflow material received, in the system and finalised during any period. MPSS uses this facility to provide a detailed fortnightly report on performance to the minister and to DFACS/Centrelink executives, including



trends and statistical information, for example, on overdue responses to ministerial correspondence.

**28.** The ANAO considers that the DESPATCH system provides examples of better practice in ministerial and parliamentary workflow tracking and processing systems.

### **Relationship with Centrelink**

**29.** DFACS and Centrelink have different roles and responsibilities, within the context of a purchaser/provider business relationship. For 1998–99, the relationship has been formalised through negotiation and agreement of a Business Partnership Agreement between the then DSS and Centrelink.

**30.** As part of the Agreement, MPSS and the Customer Communications Unit (CCU) of Centrelink negotiated a Ministerial and Parliamentary Services Protocol. The protocol covers accountability arrangements, services to be delivered, key result areas and specific performance standards for various key activities. For example, MPSS has agreed to despatch incoming ministerial correspondence to CCU within one working day of receipt, while CCU has agreed to provide cleared replies to MPSS within 12 working days unless otherwise agreed.

**31.** The ANAO supports this approach, and the resulting information flow between the two ministerial and parliamentary service units, as a means of ensuring that the minister(s) are provided with appropriate, timely and quality services.

### **Other Ministerial Services**

**32.** In addition to the range of ministerial and parliamentary services outlined in Table 7 above, MPSS also provides:

- administrative support to ministerial offices including handling information requirements not covered by formal briefing requests, coordination of purchasing requests and the payment of accounts and coordination of IT support;
- a secure courier service to the ministers' Parliamentary Offices, delivery to and collection from the Cabinet Secretariat and other departments and agencies, daily collections from the Department of Finance and Administration, collection of cables from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, collection of Daily Hansards and Notice Papers as well as other ad hoc requests; and
- provision of administrative support for DLOs working in Parliamentary Offices.

## Appendix D

### Centrelink

1. Centrelink is formally known as the Commonwealth Services Delivery Agency. The Agency is located in the Family and Community Services portfolio and is a statutory authority established by sub-section 6(1) of the *Commonwealth Services Delivery Agency Act 1997*. Centrelink has a Board of Management responsible for the corporate governance of Centrelink, which includes deciding Centrelink's goals, priorities, policies and strategies, and ensuring that Centrelink's functions are performed properly, efficiently and effectively. The Chief Executive Officer is responsible for the day to day administration of Centrelink.

2. Centrelink's operations were launched on 24 September 1997. It was created, largely from the service delivery networks of the then Departments of Social Security (DSS) and Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA), to deliver a range of services for the Commonwealth Government.

3. Centrelink works in partnership with and under contract to government agencies such as the Departments of Family and Community Services, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business, and Health and Aged Care to provide Commonwealth services to the Australian public from its network of regional and local offices. Prospectively, Centrelink is working towards delivering appropriate services for State Government entities.

### Characteristics and Output of Parliamentary Workflow

4. Centrelink was chosen for inclusion in the audit because of the innovative nature of service provider arrangements it has entered into with other Government policy and program agencies, and hence with their respective ministers. Centrelink also has a stated emphasis on customer service in all of its operations, including in the management of parliamentary workflow. This is reflected in its proactive approach towards resolving issues raised in ministerial correspondence through direct customer contact if applicable.

5. Parliamentary workflow in Centrelink is largely the responsibility of the Customer Communications Unit (CCU), which is part of the Customer Theme Team. During 1997–98 the CCU comprised some 26 staff, distributed between two sub-teams—the ‘Priority Communications’ team, and the ‘Parliamentary Services’ team.
6. From the CCU’s inception on 1 October 1997, its parliamentary workflow responsibilities predominantly concerned provision of services to the then Minister for Social Security and DSS on matters relevant to the range of income support payments and customer services that are provided by Centrelink under contractual arrangements entered into with the then DSS. The CCU has also provided similar parliamentary workflow input to the former DEETYA and its Minister, but on a much smaller scale.
7. As for other Centrelink functions, parliamentary workflow services are performed in accordance with business partnership agreements with purchaser agencies such as the Departments of Family and Community Services, Education, Training and Youth Affairs and Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business. The agreements specify details of the ministerial and parliamentary services to be provided by Centrelink under contract and establish performance standards which Centrelink is required to meet in such areas as timeliness of responses.
8. Similar arrangements for the provision of ministerial and parliamentary services will be entered into with other client organisations which may contract with Centrelink for the delivery of services in the future.
9. Table 9 shows the range and extent of output of parliamentary workflow recorded for Centrelink from 1 October 1997 to end-June 1998:

**Table 9****Parliamentary Workflow: 1997–98**

		<b>Centrelink (Number)</b>
<b>Ministerial Requirements</b>	Ministerial Briefings (at Ministers' request)	107
	Ministerial Minutes and Submissions	192
	Production and handling of Cabinet papers	Handled by policy departments
	Cabinet Submissions/Memoranda (agency generated):	
	Cabinet Submissions (coord comments):	
	Cabinet Decisions/Minutes (relevant to agency):	Handled by policy departments
	Legislation	
	Question Time Briefs (1988 Winter Session)	20
	Parliamentary Questions on Notice (Finalised)	7
	Ministerial Correspondence	2 736 (i)
	Tabling of Ministerial Statements, Documents, Reports	Handled by policy departments
<b>Ministerial Support</b>	Departmental Liaison Officers in Ministers' offices	Provided by policy departments
	Media Releases	93
	Coordination of speeches etc. for the Minister	22
<b>Parl Req'mts</b>	Coordination of briefs for Ministerial etc. visits, meetings, etc	Included in briefings figure above
	Responses to Parliamentary Committees/Inquiries	Handled by policy departments

Sources: Discussions with CCU and other Centrelink staff.

- (i) Numbers comprise those items handled on behalf of DSS (2127) and DEETYA (609); 'campaign' correspondence is individually registered and answered; as many of the written representations received in Centrelink involve individual customer cases and as Centrelink is charged with providing an effective response at the customer level, Area Support Offices work with local Customer Service Managers to facilitate direct contact such as personal telephone contact with the customer and therefore, with the agreement of the customer, perhaps there may be no need for a written response.

**10.** The audit team noted that in its Annual Report for 1997–98, Centrelink did not report any detail on its parliamentary workflow, for example on the range and extent of parliamentary workflow as detailed in Table 9 above. As stated elsewhere in this report, the ANAO considers that such a development in future years would significantly enhance transparency and accountability concerning parliamentary workflow functions.

### **Timeliness Performance Standards and Achievements**

**11.** The CCU is responsible for ensuring that standards relating to timeliness are achieved for parliamentary workflow items prepared within Centrelink.

12. The timeliness standards that were in place for 1997–98 (Note: the CCU began operations only from 1 October 1997) covering Centrelink’s preparation of responses to ministerial correspondence passed to it through DSS and its handling of Questions on Notice, and its record of achievement against the standards, albeit in the initial year of its establishment when its systems were still being formulated, are as follows:

**Table 10**

**Ministerial Correspondence and Questions on Notice  
Centrelink: Performance 1997–98**

MINISTERIAL CORRESPONDENCE			
<i>Signatory</i>	<i>Standard</i>	<i>Target</i>	<i>Performance 1997/98</i>
Minister for Social Security	12 working days	95%	35% of responses met the standard
QUESTIONS ON NOTICE			
	<i>Standard</i>	<i>Target</i>	<i>Performance 1997/98</i>
	28 (calendar) days	100%	Not recorded

13. Performance against set targets, particularly for ministerial correspondence, is disseminated regularly within Centrelink at appropriate times as part of its management information reporting system (see below). Particular performance deficiencies that may be exhibited, for example in meeting set targets or in the quality of responses, are taken up by officers of the CCU with responsible action officers and/or supervisors. If required such matters may also be raised at meetings of Centrelink’s executive at appropriate times.

14. A Ministerial and Parliamentary Services Protocol for 1998–99 had been agreed between Centrelink and the former DSS covering, in part, key result areas and specific performance standards for activities such as preparation of responses to ministerial representations. A further Performance Agreement had been negotiated with the former DEETYA covering provision of similar ministerial support by Centrelink in relation to jobseeker, youth or student services provided within Centrelink on behalf of DEETYA.

15. Following changes in departmental structures introduced in October 1998, these agreements will require amendment to reflect the new makeup of Centrelink’s business partners together with any revised administrative arrangements that need to be introduced between the parties concerning the provision of ministerial and parliamentary services by Centrelink.

**16.** The ANAO supports negotiation of relevant agreements, such as those detailed above, as a necessary component of purchaser/provider business relationships that exist or may be put in place in the future between Centrelink and other agencies.

### **Quality Performance Standards**

**17.** Given the nature of Centrelink's operations, the CCU's focus in relation to handling of matters raised through ministers is to provide a quality customer service that is outcome/resolution oriented. For the CCU's Priority Communications team this means that when a written response is sent to a customer, either directly or through their representative (for example, a Member of Parliament [MP]), the matter has been resolved or action has commenced to resolve the issue. That is, each response is personalised and is not an 'off the shelf' reply. For the CCU's Parliamentary Services team, this means that the service provided is tailored to meet the needs of the relevant client department(s) and minister(s).

**18.** The Priority Communications Team is responsible for final preparation of responses to ministerial correspondence passed to Centrelink for handling, and also for handling correspondence addressed to Centrelink's CEO and Manager, CCU; the Team also deals with Internet email items. All items are registered within the CCU's COSMIC system (see below) and then passed by fax, except for those matters handled directly by the CCU, to one of the 16 Centrelink Area Support Offices, or National Support Office Segment or Theme Teams for necessary action, and advice on the content of a reply. In this process CCU provides direction as to ways in which a matter is to be handled, the level of desired contact with a customer, the required content of the material needed for preparation of a response etc; the fax lists a contact officer within CCU who has responsibility for the particular item, and for finalisation of any written response.

**19.** In cases that require a written response, material received from Area Support Offices or Customer Service Centres (CSCs) is provided in electronic format in the form of a summary of relevant information from the field; the CCU's Priority Communications Team then prepares the final, complete version of the response, with appropriate salutation and signature blocks, etc. Draft responses that are to be signed other than in Centrelink are communicated electronically to client agencies, and printed by the ministerial service functional areas of those organisations for signature by the respective minister, ministerial staffer or departmental officer.

**20.** Where letters to a Minister raise issues or complaints involving individual customer cases, and where it is considered appropriate to do so, local Customer Service Managers in CSCs may facilitate direct action

such as personal contact with the customer to attempt to resolve the matter. The emphasis is on resolving the issue promptly where this is possible. Depending on the situation, with the necessary agreement when the matter has been satisfactorily resolved, the client is asked if they require a reply from the Minister. Centrelink reports that in many cases the customer is satisfied to have resolved the problem; in that case there is no ministerial reply except where the correspondence being addressed is in the form of representations by an MP or Senator on behalf of a customer. In these circumstances the MP or Senator is advised of the outcome achieved for the customer.

**21.** Centrelink CSCs are required to have extensive contact with the local Commonwealth MP in order to provide optimal customer service, including in the speed with which customer requirements are handled. This policy may have the effect of reducing the number of individual customer service cases that are raised through MPs' offices, and then result in a ministerial representation.

**22.** While acknowledging that written responses to ministerial representations would still need to be used in particular circumstances, the ANAO supports Centrelink's innovation in providing enhanced customer service through direct contact where this is appropriate. The ANAO considers that other Commonwealth agencies could consider a similar option where such contact is possible and appropriate.

**23.** While no Centrelink-specific parliamentary workflow manual existed at the time, during the course of the audit the ANAO was informed that one was being developed, to include templates for the handling of various parliamentary workflow items, which would be provided online where it can be accessed by all Centrelink staff. The ANAO supports this action as good practice in providing specific guidance in a readily available format that should assist in raising the quality of material that Centrelink is responsible for preparing.

**24.** During 1997–98 Centrelink's CCU did not have in place a system for systematically recording levels of performance against quality requirements determined by ministers' offices regarding the provision of information through the then DSS and/or DEETYA. That said, all ministerial briefings and minutes/submissions and all responses to ministerial correspondence are cleared within Centrelink at SOG B Manager level or higher and briefing material for preparation of responses is cleared at a level determined by each Area or National Segment Manager. Further, the quality of material being prepared within Centrelink for ministerial consideration is subject to internal quality checking and clearance by the Manager, CCU. This arrangement also assists in ensuring that material is provided in the format agreed with ministers' offices from time to time.

**25.** The ANAO notes that material for ministers prepared in, or with input from, Centrelink will be included in the quality feedback reporting system currently under development in the former DSS, now the Department of Family and Community Services (see Appendix C). The proposed system will provide, in part, an option for ministers' offices to record for each item an assessment against a number of quality measures such as accuracy, clarity, relevance and practicality, and presentation. The ANAO endorses Centrelink's inclusion in this system.

**26.** As recorded elsewhere in this report, the ANAO notes that the former DSS intends to monitor its performance against the ministers' quality requirements by refining the categories used for recording in its ministerial management system those cases returned from intended signatories for rewrites. This information would be collated and reviewed to provide a series of performance measures, for example of the quality of replies prepared by both that Department and Centrelink. The ANAO considers that the CCU should continue to have close contact with the new Department of Family and Community Services on this issue.

## **Management Information System**

**27.** Parliamentary workflow in Centrelink is managed using an IT system, COSMIC ('Centrelink's Operating System for Managing Information and Communications'). The system was released in late July 1998 and is designed to interface with similar systems utilised in client departments. The ANAO has been advised that the security function in COSMIC is designed so that client departments can only interface with communications relevant to their own business and that they cannot access data concerning any other agency serviced by Centrelink.

**28.** Prior to the release of COSMIC, in handling ministerial correspondence CCU team members had access through the systems operated by client Departments as follows:

- DESPATCH (DSS) allowed CCU staff to record and track material and to prepare a draft reply online;
- Parliamentary Document Management System [PDMS] (DEETYA) allowed CCU staff to track material.

**29.** The features of COSMIC include scanning of material, recording of tracking and progress data for each case and text searching by subject, name or status. The management information component of the COSMIC system provides for bi-monthly reports to management on, for example, the extent of workload in various categories and fortnightly reports on the timeliness of responses to ministerial correspondence.



**30.** The ANAO considers that the COSMIC system represents good practice in ministerial and parliamentary workflow tracking and processing systems. Further development of the system, such as online allocation of material to and preparation of input by action officers outside the CCU, would enhance its effectiveness, especially as Centrelink is being assessed against time requirements for, for example, preparation of responses to ministerial correspondence.

## **Other Ministerial Services**

**31.** Due to its involvement in the flow of material relevant to the provision of services to individual customers, the CCU may become aware of issues that should be raised at a policy level with service-purchaser departments/agencies. The ANAO supports the requirement for the CCU, through Centrelink management, to coordinate Centrelink action in order to bring such matters to attention, including of minister(s) if applicable.

**32.** The ANAO has been informed that Centrelink is involved in preparation of policy briefings and minutes/submissions by DSS/DFaCS where client service-related issues are involved. In addition to this desirable coordination measure, the ANAO notes that the (then DSS) online recording of briefings being prepared, whether within either DSS or Centrelink, provides for good practice in systematic consultation during the developmental stages of policy and operational issues rather than at the end of the process.

**33.** In interviews with staff in the office of the then Minister for Social Security the ANAO was advised that the 'chain of command' between DSS and Centrelink was not always clear on various issues. To save time, ministerial staff would sometimes approach Centrelink directly, at either Area Support Office/Customer Service Centre or National Support Office levels, but at the same time could also approach a DSS policy functional area. The ANAO was informed also that other ministers, parliamentary committees and individual MPs had approached the (then) Minister for Social Security on issues which concerned Centrelink services being provided to other portfolios. While discussions with Centrelink and DSS staff offered convincing evidence that both organisations had adapted quickly to identify gaps and duplication in their links to the office of the Minister for Social Security, it is clear that this process still has some way to go when other agencies are involved in Centrelink activities.

**34.** The ANAO notes that more immediate information flow and tailored support could result from a move, which the ANAO understands was being considered at the time of the audit, to appoint a Centrelink-provided DLO to the office of the Minister for Family and Community Services, as the prime user of Centrelink services.

## Appendix E

### Characteristics of Parliamentary Workflow

#### **Parliamentary workflow provided to support the Minister administering the Department**

##### *Ministerial Briefings*

1. A ministerial ‘briefing’ is an agency response to a specific request from a minister, or ministerial staff. The aim of a briefing is to provide clear, simple and concise information on the subject matter of the request.

2. The content of ministerial briefings may vary depending on the circumstances current within the portfolio. However, as a brief does not seek any action on the part of a minister (in contrast to minutes—see below), other than to note that the brief has been provided, its format may be relatively informal and closely tailored to the preferences of a minister, for example specifications could be set as “no more than four dot points, limit to one page”.

3. Ministerial offices may seek specific information on a policy, program or issue, particularly one that is the subject of current action or public/Parliamentary interest. Briefings may include provision of information as the first step in a policy development or review exercise, which would entail preparation of a policy submission (see below) at a later stage of the process. Briefings may need to be provided when ministers and/or parliamentary secretaries meet within the portfolio on current and future policy and program matters or when they meet with Commonwealth colleagues for discussions on particular matters for which coordination and collaboration across portfolios is required, for example during Budget deliberations. Briefings may be required when ministers attend particular meetings such as those with State counterparts, or for ministers’ representation on ministerial councils. Alternatively, particularly with a new minister or government, advice from an agency may be required to obtain a background perspective on more general matters, for example international trends relevant to the operations of the portfolio.

4. Ministerial service units administer established arrangements for the production of ministerial briefings that are to be forwarded to ministers’ offices, including registration of the request and its due date, allocation of the task to a policy or program area for action, monitoring of the returned draft briefing material for adherence to format and quality standards and provision of passage of the material to the minister’s office. The relevant action area has responsibility for clearance of the briefing at an appropriate level. The briefing will also include the details of an action officer for the provision of further information should the minister’s office require this.

5. If a matter is considered to be pressing, a briefing may be requested by a minister or ministerial staff through direct contact with a member of the agency's Executive. On many occasions such requests occur, and are handled, outside normal working hours of the agency. A particularly urgent request may be satisfied by provision of an oral briefing, either in person or by telephone. Even if a written brief is provided, the established formatting and recording requirements of the agency for the provision of briefing information may not be followed when matters are urgent.

### *Ministerial Minutes*

6. A 'minute' is an agency-initiated item that provides formal advice or information to a minister on a matter and that, in a formal decision-making context, seeks the minister's consideration of and ruling on options to be taken (for example in a policy or program development exercise) and/or approval for a particular course of action (for example that the minister exercise a statutory obligation) or for expenditure of money. A minute may also be termed as a 'submission'. Depending on the circumstances, the subject matter covered in minutes can be similar to that provided at a minister's request in the form of a briefing.

7. A minute will also sometimes be prepared to accompany a draft response to an item of ministerial correspondence if it is necessary to provide additional information to a minister or his/her office on relevant issues concerning the content of the draft ministerial response.

8. Depending on the subject matter, a minute may require inclusion of background material as attachments and/or may include a media release or correspondence to be signed in order to promulgate the action recommended.

9. Ministerial minutes are managed by ministerial service units in a similar manner to that in place for ministerial briefings.

### *Cabinet Documents*

10. Procedures for preparing material for consideration by Cabinet and for management of Cabinet documents are dealt with in the *Cabinet Handbook*, produced by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C). All Cabinet documents are confidential and special handling requirements are mandatory.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> During 1997–98 PM&C investigated cost-effective ways of improving accountability, control and security in the handling of Cabinet documentation. Using the existing secure Ministerial Communications Network as the basic platform, PM&C commenced implementing a system of electronic management and circulation of Cabinet documents (known as the CABNET system).

CABNET is being implemented by evolutionary procurement over a 15 month period in two phases. Under the first phase, which went 'live' on 26 October 1998, ministers' offices in Parliament House commenced receiving Cabinet minutes via CABNET. During the second phase, expected to be completed by end-May 1999, all departments and a small number of agencies will commence receiving and sending a range of Cabinet documents.

**11.** The majority of documents considered by Cabinet are either submissions or memoranda. Submissions are prepared in the relevant minister's name and contain the minister's recommendations advocating a course of action. Memoranda are prepared in the relevant department's name and are generally in response to requests by Cabinet for supplementary information or the development of options. Memoranda do not contain recommendations, but do provide conclusions or summaries of the information presented.

**12.** Under administrative procedures determined by PM&C, each Commonwealth agency appoints a Cabinet Liaison Officer (CLO), located generally in the ministerial service unit, to assist officers with Cabinet matters. In particular the CLO acts as the central point for day-to-day contact with the Cabinet Secretariat (located within PM&C) on matters relating to management of the submission process and handling of documents, and with other departments/agencies as necessary, and administers guidelines and provides advice to agency staff on all aspects of preparation and handling of Cabinet documents.

**13.** Policy and program action areas are responsible for the preparation of draft Cabinet submissions and memoranda in accordance with the Cabinet Handbook and any internal guidelines. Internal departmental clearance and the minister's endorsement are required at the end of the preparation process. When draft material has been prepared, the CLO arranges for coordination comments to be provided by external departments/agencies that have a legitimate perspective on the issue raised in the draft submission; while central coordinating departments (for example the Department of Finance and Administration) are always consulted, there are also mandatory requirements for specific organisations to be contacted on other particular subject matter, for example the Attorney-General's Department where there are legislation implications.

**14.** When they are received, coordination comments are incorporated into the submission before lodgement with the Cabinet Secretariat. The Cabinet Secretariat undertakes high security coordination tasks such as managing the cabinet submission process, servicing Cabinet and Cabinet committee meetings and recording their outcomes, and advising the Prime Minister on programming of Cabinet business.

**15.** A department/agency may be forwarded a draft Cabinet submission/memorandum from another organisation for provision of coordination comments. The department's CLO arranges for the relevant action area to provide comment on the proposal, with appropriate clearance by senior management, and then returns the comments to the initiating organisation.

**16.** Before consideration by Cabinet of a document initiated in a minister's own department/agency, the relevant program area is required to prepare and clear a briefing on the content of the Cabinet document for the portfolio's Cabinet minister (and for any other portfolio minister who may be required to attend Cabinet when the submission/minute is to be discussed). The CLO takes responsibility for submission of the briefing document to the minister's office.

**17.** Any briefing for a portfolio minister on another minister's submission would take account of the relevance that the submission has to the interests of the portfolio, and to the viewpoint of the portfolio minister on the matter.

**18.** Another means used by ministers to access Cabinet is by an 'under the line' request to the Prime Minister. In this case formal documentation prepared before the Cabinet meeting would be minimal but CLOs may still be required to coordinate agency briefing material, usually as a matter of urgency.

**19.** Decisions taken by Cabinet are called Cabinet 'minutes' and generally result from Cabinet consideration of Cabinet submissions, memoranda and other papers. Minutes can also result from the discussion of ad hoc matters (that is, without considering a submission).

**20.** Minutes are distributed to and within departments on a 'need to know' basis. The Cabinet Secretariat of PM&C is responsible for allocation of these documents, usually providing only one copy to the relevant department. Details of all staff that have access to each Cabinet document within an agency are recorded by the CLO. No copying of Cabinet documents is allowed. When necessary action is complete, Cabinet documents are stored by ministerial service units under strict security, or are destroyed (with the Cabinet Secretariat being advised accordingly in writing).

### *Legislation*

**21.** The Government's legislation program provides a detailed timetable to implement the Government's policies; the program may involve preparation of new primary legislation (Acts of Parliament) and/or legislative amendments.

**22.** The structure and prioritisation of a portfolio's legislation program requires the minister(s) to take a pro-active role in order to meet the Government's agenda. Steps involved in the legislation process commence with the need to determine whether new policy proposals or other circumstances require legislative implementation. The minister is required then to seek a place on the Government's legislation program for

introduction of legislation into Parliament. This requires consideration within the agency of the relative importance and urgency of each action requiring legislation, endorsement by the Executive of the agency of legislative priorities, and seeking the minister's endorsement to the portfolio's list of proposed legislative action. The minister is then required to submit the portfolio's bids to the Prime Minister.

**23.** The legislation development and submission process may be managed by either the CLO in a department or by a Legislation Liaison Officer, depending on the portfolio's workload in this area. The activity represents an important function in parliamentary workflow management and it is usually closely coordinated between a department's ministerial service unit and its Legal Branch (or similar).

**24.** Following receipt by the Prime Minister of bids from all ministers, the Parliamentary Business Committee of Cabinet considers the proposals and, having regard to relative priorities for legislation, determines the legislation timetable for each Parliamentary sitting period. It should be noted that the 'bidding' process administered by this Cabinet Committee may result in some proposals for legislative action not being approved for introduction in the Parliament due to their perceived lower priority when compared to other ministers' programs.

**25.** When legislative action is approved, portfolio departments and/or applicable agencies are responsible for managing the legislative process, including preparation of supporting information such as an Explanatory Memorandum on the policy intent of the legislation and also of a Second Reading Speech to be presented by the minister in Parliament—this represents the commencement of debate on the provisions of the proposed legislation.

#### *Coordination of Executive Council matters*

**26.** The *Constitution* provides for an Executive Council, a formal body presided over by the Governor-General. The Executive Council comprises all ministers, who are required to advise the Governor-General<sup>17</sup>; recent practice has been to appoint all Parliamentary Secretaries as Executive Councillors as well.

**27.** The work of the Executive Council covers a wide spectrum of the Commonwealth's administration. The Governor-General, acting on the advice of the Executive Council, may:

- make subordinate legislation, for example regulations pursuant to an Act, which are disallowable by either House of Parliament;

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<sup>17</sup> *Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia*, ss. 62–64

- make proclamations, usually concerning the commencement of various provisions of an Act;
- make and terminate appointments to statutory bodies, boards, commissions, councils and tribunals;
- create and abolish government departments and positions in them;
- commission officers in the armed services.

**28.** Executive Council approval can be seen as the final approving action in a series of processes required to effect a number of the functions of government as outlined above. Business for the Council is initiated by departments and relevant agencies, is submitted as an Executive Council Minute from the appropriate minister, and constitutes a recommendation for the approval of the Governor-General in Council. Each minute is allocated a consecutive agency number and must be accompanied by an explanatory memorandum initialled by the relevant minister; the explanatory memorandum briefs the Executive Council on the purpose of the minute.

**29.** Not all subordinate legislation is made by the Executive Council. For example, in the Defence context, the Minister for Defence may make Declarations under certain legislation, and authorised officials, such as the Chief of the Defence Force, may approve certain matters such as Discipline Rules for application to defence force personnel. These actions require ministerial policy approval, and therefore departmental and/or agency support is generally required to the same level as when decisions are to be made by the Executive Council. As is the case when subordinate legislation is made by the Executive Council, in most cases tabling of the Rules or Instructions in Parliament must take place and this is arranged through individual departments/agencies as required.

### *Question Time Briefs/Potential Parliamentary Questions*

**30.** Question Time Briefs (QTBs) (in some agencies entitled Potential or Possible Parliamentary Questions [PPQs] Briefs) are provided to the minister(s) (and also to the minister(s) representing the portfolio minister in the other chamber of Parliament) as a brief statement of factual background to an issue, including as well a series of talking points to allow direct response to possible questions raised in Parliament. The minister can respond accordingly to particular matters of concern with the benefit of summary written advice. It also means that by dealing with a matter expeditiously the minister may not have to follow-up with responses at a later time. These briefs are particularly required to cover high profile, current issues of a contentious nature likely to be raised in Question Time by Opposition Members or Senators during a particular sitting period, but

also provide information for responses to Government representatives as required.

**31.** While individual briefs are prepared for the commencement of a Parliamentary session to the extent that matters of concern can be anticipated, they are varied or added to during the session as sensitive issues arise and as circumstances change. Such variations may occur daily depending on the issue and its currency and often involve short timeframes for agencies to prepare and forward material. In some agencies these variations are identified separately as ‘Potential Parliamentary Questions’ (PPQs) while in others they are treated as updates to the QTBs.

**32.** New and revised QTBs are prepared by relevant policy and program areas in agencies; such areas are responsible for monitoring topical and sensitive issues within their areas of responsibility, although the request for a revised or new brief may also flow from the minister’s office in response to information received within Parliament House. Action officers and/or representatives of the action area are generally also required to be available before and during Question Time in case further variations or information are requested by ministerial offices.

**33.** Some agencies, particularly portfolio departments, also prepare Background Briefs (alternatively titled Sessional Briefs) that are less specific and time sensitive than QTBs but which serve as an *aide-mémoire* for ministers and their staff by providing ready access to information on a range of topics across the portfolio. These briefs may be used as speaking notes by the minister or his/her staff, for example in discussions with parliamentary colleagues, and are supported by a framework of information that puts the talking points in context. Such briefs are prepared for each Parliamentary session, in a consistent format, and are updated or added to as required, although not at the same frequency or intensity as QTBs.

### *Questions on Notice*

**34.** Questions on Notice (QoNs) are questions directed to ministers of the executive government (and to the Presiding Officers of the Parliament—President of the Senate, Speaker of the House of Representatives) that are placed by Members and Senators on the Parliamentary Notice Papers. Ministers provide written answers that are then published in Parliamentary Hansards. QoNs are often elaborate, and may be addressed to multiple ministers. They frequently involve extensive information gathering and coordination.

**35.** Ministerial service units record in agency internal management systems details of questions asked and pass requests to appropriate action areas for preparation of draft responses. Formatting rules and timeliness



requirements are set by the Parliament. Final responses, after clearance, are tabled in the appropriate House.

### *Ministerial Correspondence*

**36.** This term applies to all mail addressed to ministers that is related to portfolio issues (including ‘campaign’ correspondence—see paragraph 38 below). It does not include party political, personal or electorate matters—in these cases the portfolio department or agency does not provide a service in preparing a response to the correspondence. Correspondence to ministers is a primary means by which Australians have direct recourse to Government to have issues or personal cases addressed. Ministerial correspondence also allows some feedback to Government on, for example, the impact of its programs and policies. Accordingly, the handling of ministerial correspondence is accorded a high priority by ministers and their staff, and therefore also by agencies in the minister’s portfolio.

**37.** Agencies prepare responses for signature by the minister that the correspondence was addressed to, by another minister in the portfolio or a parliamentary secretary as applicable, by a ministerial adviser or by a departmental/agency official. The agreed allocation of areas of portfolio responsibility between the minister(s) and/or the parliamentary secretary, and particularly the characteristics of the respondent (for example correspondence from other ministers would normally be signed by the portfolio minister, while that from individuals may be signed by officials), determine who is to sign responses to ministerial correspondence. These arrangements are approved by the portfolio minister through his/her office, are administered by agency ministerial service units, and are subject to variation at the direction of the minister at any time.

**38.** With the endorsement of the relevant minister, the handling of large numbers of proforma or similar letters on specific portfolio matters (‘campaign’ correspondence) differs between agencies—some do not register such correspondence and do not respond to it, some register it and do not respond to it, or respond to only part of it, some register it and respond to all of it.

**39.** Because of the large volume and the diverse nature of ministerial correspondence received in most portfolios, ministerial service units administer detailed guidelines for the preparation of responses, particularly on the current directions of the minister as to the format of responses (for example salutations, first and final paragraphs and signature blocks) to be used. These guidelines may incorporate a ‘Style Guide’ with detailed direction on such matters as punctuation, abbreviations, spelling and capitalisation and the use of numbers in written responses, as well as

general exhortations on the need for succinctness and accuracy in the main text of the response. As a way of ensuring that responses meet the layout requirements of the minister most agencies provide action officers with access to computerised templates for responses that reflect the current guidelines.

**40.** Ministerial service units are responsible for administration of performance standards set down for ministerial correspondence, particularly in terms of turnaround times for the preparation of responses for signature, but also for quality aspects such as recording the proportion of draft responses returned from ministers' offices for redrafting by the agency. Performance standards may vary depending on who is to sign the response but a typical example is where draft responses are to be prepared for the minister's signature within 21 days of receipt in the agency and where the agency is to meet this standard in 95% of cases.

**41.** With the agreement of ministers a number of agencies are now answering some forms of ministerial correspondence with a telephone call from an appropriate action officer in the department/agency. Examples of where this has been considered appropriate in particular portfolios include correspondence relating to individual claims for Government assistance and grants and requests for readily available information material.

#### *Monitoring of Question Time*

**42.** During sitting periods for each House of Parliament, officers within departments and agencies monitor daily Question Time proceedings, and take note of situations where a minister, or a representative in the other House, gives an undertaking during Question Time to reply to a particular point later or to provide further information.

**43.** Should a minister do this, the agencies concerned are required to provide additional or amended information as a matter of extreme urgency so that the minister can table a further response either at the end of the same Question Time, or perhaps at the end of the next Question Time. This process is generally coordinated by the ministerial service unit and may be undertaken 'online' within agencies so that duplication of effort is avoided and so that timeliness in responding is enhanced.

**44.** In cases where information cannot be provided on the same or the next day, the minister has effectively taken the question 'on notice' and such situations are treated in accordance with the arrangements for QoNs (see above).

### *Scrutiny of Hansards*

45. Departments and agencies monitor Parliamentary Hansards during Parliamentary sitting periods in order to be able to provide appropriate briefings to the minister on matters that have been raised during, for example, adjournment and grievance debates that are usually held at the end of a sitting day. Notices of Motion that are placed on the Notice Paper are also monitored for the same reason.

46. Monitoring functions are usually undertaken in ministerial service units, and involve identification of the subject issues relevant to the matter raised in Hansard and provision to the relevant program area of the agency of a request for preparation of advice to the minister on the matter. In order to minimise duplication in the monitoring and response processes, some agencies are now putting appropriate Hansard extracts, and directions for action, 'online' so that all areas of the agency have access to the exact requirements that must be responded to.

47. Ministerial service units arrange despatch of material to the minister when it is complete and has been cleared at an appropriate level within the agency.

### *Management of Tabling in Parliament of Ministerial Statements, Government Responses, Reports etc*

48. Ministerial Statements represent an important way to announce, advance, defend and explain Government policies and decisions. The text of statements, including Government responses to Parliamentary Committee reports, requires Cabinet or Prime Ministerial approval, depending on the subject matter involved, and the timing of the tabling of statements is decided at Cabinet level or by the Parliamentary Business Committee.

49. Mandatory arrangements for tabling reports in the Parliament, such as annual reports for entities within the portfolio, include securing the minister's clearance of any tabling and media statements and managing other requirements such as providing the appropriate number of copies and meeting printing guidelines and timing deadlines (for example departmental annual reports are required to be tabled in Parliament on or before 31 October each year<sup>18</sup>). All reports are under embargo until they are tabled in Parliament.

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<sup>18</sup> *Public Service Act 1922*, subsection 25(8)

*Advice on appointments to and functioning of Government statutory/ non-statutory organisations, advisory boards, etc*

50. Membership appointments to statutory boards and committees within a portfolio are determined according to relevant legislative requirements—that is, appointments may require approval by the Executive Council or Cabinet, or may be authorised by a minister.

51. The making of appointments is a very significant Government activity with important long-term implications, and agency processes are designed to ensure that prospective appointments are handled in accordance with mandated requirements but also with sensitivity in view of the personal issues involved.

*Administrative support of Departmental Liaison Officers located in Ministers' offices*

52. Departmental Liaison Officers (DLOs) are provided by portfolio departments in each minister's and/or parliamentary secretary's office. Their role is to act as a central liaison point between departments/relevant agencies and ministers' Parliamentary Offices and to provide assistance with the smooth flow of ministerial and parliamentary papers. Administrative oversight of DLOs, such as arrangements for training, replacement and relief during periods of leave, is carried out largely by departmental ministerial service units.

*Management of the provision of departmental support to Ministers' offices*

53. Depending on arrangements agreed between departments/agencies and ministers' offices, examples here may include:

- technical, staffing and relief support
- provision of secure courier services to/from Parliament House and elsewhere
- control of the issue of Parliamentary passes
- provision of escort officers (Department of Defence)

54. These services support ministerial operations, and maintain linkages between the portfolio department and ministers' offices.

## Parliamentary workflow to support the Minister in work external to Parliament

*Public Affairs, including involvement in media releases and speech writing, briefings for meetings and visits, etc*

55. Ministers' offices and the public affairs areas of agencies monitor all media coverage of portfolio interests. In addition, both ministers' offices and public affairs units deal with media enquiries (which can include requests for interviews of ministers on television and radio, or with press correspondents). Depending on whether a minister has his/her own media adviser, public affairs units may provide advice and support on specific public affairs issues relevant to the requirements of the minister (see paragraphs 61–66 below).

56. Public affairs functions at the department/agency level may also involve other aspects of public communication, including advertising, marketing, public relations and market research. For example, when a new or revised government policy or program is introduced, advertising on television, radio and/or in the press can provide the public in general or specific groups in particular with information on the changed arrangements.

57. All government public communications programs and information activities are overseen by the Ministerial Committee on Government Communications (MCGC). The MCGC considers:

- communications and research strategies;
- all advertising projects;
- other departmental information activities which are significant and/or sensitive; and
- communications related research projects which are significant and/or sensitive.

58. The Government Communications Unit (GCU) (formerly the Office of Government Information and Advertising) provides a secretariat to the MCGC. The GCU provides consultancy services to Australian Government departments and agencies on all public communication and information matters. For example, the GCU assists its government clients to identify the need for a communications program, to clarify communications objectives, to design an effective program, to secure the right consultant to carry out the program, to arrange contracts and to obtain approval for the program from the MCGC.

59. Australian Government agencies fulfil their information dissemination obligations with the assistance of AusInfo. AusInfo has been established to ensure that government information is readily available to the Australian community and its administrative responsibilities relate to electronic and print publishing by government client agencies. AusInfo provides access to government publications through its Government Info Shops, prepares all *Commonwealth of Australia Gazettes* and produces the *Commonwealth Government Directory*. It also advises on style and standards as they relate to Commonwealth documents and facilitates online (Internet) access to government information, for example through its management of the Australian Commonwealth Government Entry Point and the Government On Line Directory.

60. More specifically, in terms of servicing the continuing requirements of a minister:

61. Media releases are issued to announce and promote policy initiatives or program changes, new administrative arrangements, funding decisions, visits to and openings of Government offices and agency outlets and major speeches. Media releases are also a means for a minister to respond to claims about a portfolio issue that has already been raised in the media or elsewhere.

62. Releases may be issued in the name of the minister, or under the name of the department or agency (after reference to the minister's office). The practice here is very much dependent on the viewpoint of the minister and on the particular issue that is being communicated.

63. Speech requests may be associated with opening or headline addresses for conferences, declarations of Government policy or announcement of Government initiatives; other major categories may include addresses associated with openings of new facilities and visits by ministers.

64. Ministers meet frequently with representatives of Australian and overseas government, public sector, business and community organisations. Individual agencies may be required to support such meetings either by sending an officer with suitable expertise to attend the meeting and/or by providing a meeting brief. Requests from ministers' offices for a briefing are handled in the same way as other briefs, as outlined above.

65. When ministers or senior Government officials such as a Secretary of a Department visit Government establishments, for example to open a new office, or private sector businesses or industries, etc, agencies may be tasked with preparation of a briefing and/or speech notes to support such a visit. Agencies may also be involved in the preparation of briefing

information for ministers or officials travelling overseas and for Federal, State and Territory parliamentarians visiting Government establishments.

**66.** A visit brief would include such information as a detailed itinerary for the visit, the roles and functions of the facility, any current major issues at the site and short details on the people that the visitor will be meeting.

## **Parliamentary workflow to provide services to the Parliament, Parliamentary Committees, and other Members of Parliament**

### *Advice, Submissions and Responses to Parliamentary Committees*

**67.** A parliamentary committee consists of a group of Members or Senators, or both in the case of joint committees, appointed by one or both Houses of Parliament. Categories of committees include:

- standing committees—appointed for the life of a Parliamentary session; as they have a continuing role, they are usually re-established in successive sessions; for example, the Senate Privileges Committee;
- select committees—appointed as the need arises, for a specific purpose, without a continuing role; once such a committee carries out its investigation and presents its final report, it ceases to exist; for example the former Senate Select Committee on Uranium Mining and Milling;
- joint committees—draw their membership from, and report to, both Houses of Parliament, enabling Members and Senators to work together on the same matter; for example the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade;
- statutory committees—established by Act of Parliament, that is, by statute; for example the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit.

**68.** Parliamentary committees perform functions which the Houses themselves are not well fitted to perform, such as carrying out investigations, considering reports, hearing witnesses, sifting evidence, discussing matters in detail and formulating reasoned, if not always bipartisan, conclusions. Committees contribute to better administration and policy making through their reports and recommendations.

**69.** The Parliament uses its committee system to obtain information from the Government, for example through receiving advice from public sector experts on the matters under investigation. The provision of information and advice to committees may take the form of personal appearances, for example of agency representatives who have particular expertise in or knowledge of the matters under investigation, as witnesses at hearings of a committee or in background sessions. Government bodies may also provide written information to committees, as a submission addressing a committee's terms of reference or in response to a request

from a committee for information on particular subject matter that is of interest to a committee in its deliberations.

**70.** An important function of committees is to scrutinise government activity. Committees oversight the expenditure of public money and they may call the Government or elements of the APS to account for actions and ask them to explain or justify administrative decisions. For this purpose, some continuing parliamentary committees cover a particular spread of subject matter within a group of government departments, authorities and other agencies, while others may cover the responsibilities of only one agency. Annual reports of, and Budget estimates of proposed expenditure by, government departments and authorities are referred to appropriate Senate Legislation Committees for any inquiry such committees may wish to make.

**71.** Committees have considerable powers, usually delegated to them by the House(s) appointing them, including powers to summon persons to give evidence and to produce documents. Consistent with the traditional understanding of ministerial responsibility however, the public advocacy and defence of government policies and administration within the context of committee processes is the preserve of ministers, not officials. Committee proceedings are ‘privileged’, that is Members and others participating, such as witnesses giving evidence, are protected from being sued or prosecuted for anything they may say during such proceedings. Written evidence received by a committee is similarly protected.

*Services to other Members of Parliament (MPs), including the shadow ministry and backbench committees*

**72.** Information material on various subject matter may be prepared by agencies for an MP following a request through a minister’s office or directly to the agency. For example, an agency may be requested to prepare a briefing for a proposed visit by an MP to a Government facility such as a Defence installation. Another example of the provision of services to MPs is the direction by Centrelink management that there be ongoing liaison by Centrelink local Customer Service Managers with their local MP.

**73.** Agencies can also be involved in preparing briefings for or liaising with members of the shadow ministry, or with backbench committees either government or non-government. Such contacts would normally require the approval of the relevant minister, and may be monitored on behalf of the minister through attendance of ministerial office staff at meetings or by clearance of written material provided on request.



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