

Opening statement

- Events over the past year, and especially the last few months, have emphasised the changing nature of service delivery since Services Australia was established in February 2020.
- Over that period the agency has supported Australians through a number of emergencies and disaster – bushfires, floods and cyclones included. Most recently of course, the impacts of COVID-19 have changed many citizen’ needs and Services Australia has adjusted to deliver in this changed environment.
- Supporting Australians throughout the pandemic has meant upgrading and continually updating our digital capability, breaking service delivery records in response to extraordinary levels of demand. Digital is now emphatically the preferred channel for the vast majority of our customers.
- For example, in the week ending 17 October there were 39 million digital transactions, almost twenty times the number of calls handled in the same period. And demand for face-to-face services continues to fall – from 16.7 million service centre visits in 2018-19 to 14.5 million in 2019-20, and with the impact of COVID restrictions down to 9.7 million in 2020-21, a decrease of over 40 per cent in three years.
- While this means we need sustained focus and resourcing for our digital channels, declining demand for face-to-face services and telephony is an opportunity to improve customer experience by focusing on more tailored services to support people at key points their lives – transitioning into work, recovering from disasters or moving into aged care, among others.

- The demands on the agency have been extraordinary in recent months. In less than four months this financial year, between 1 July and 26 October 2021, we processed over 4.9 million COVID-related claims alone – more than the full-year total of 3.5 million claims across all social security and welfare payments in the last year prior to COVID (2018–19).
- Customer demand for digital service delivery was already a prominent trend and has dramatically accelerated during the pandemic.
 - In 2020–21 there were 1.4 billion online interactions, an increase of 126 million or 10 per cent on the previous financial year
 - Between 1 July and 30 September 2021 alone the Agency received over 275 million digital contacts, a 26 per cent increase on the same period in 2020.
 - Similarly, between February and October this year the number of active myGov accounts linked to Medicare grew by 48 per cent – from 9.9 million to 14.7 million. In just one week, to 17 October, this number jumped by 900,000 – an indication of the scale of demand for digital services.
- In response to this demand, we have been changing the way we do business, building on our recent transformation work to scale up our digital service delivery and improve the customer experience.
 - For example, 94 per cent of claims for COVID Disaster Payment were lodged online, a process that took customers just 10 minutes. This was a shift from the traditional telephony-based claiming which would take 30–45 minutes, and helped us get much-needed payments to customers quickly.

- We are seeing customers taking up online systems in preference to phones for simpler activities. In the three months to 30 September 2021, 83 per cent of work was completed in digital channels.
- While digital has become the primary form of engagement, we continue to support Australians who require assistance through other channels, with COVID impacts driving high levels of demand in non-digital channels as well.
 - From 1 July to 30 September 2021, we received over 26 million contacts through service centres and telephony, an increase of 60 per cent on the same period last year.
 - And of course our Service Centres remained open throughout lockdowns, managing the added COVID workplace health and safety requirements to ensure that face-to-face support was available safely to customers who needed it.
 - We also mobilised our surge workforce capacity to ensure timely processing of COVID-related claims, with over 4,600 additional staff mobilised as at 30 September 2021.
- Now, with vaccination rates reaching or nearing targets and restrictions beginning to ease, the Agency has shifted its delivery focus to meet demand for proof of vaccination along with continuing support for claims.
- Again, the focus is largely digital, in line with customer expectations.
 - Over 11.5 million Australian have already downloaded their digital vaccination certificates.

- In just 15 days (to 21 October), there were 4.4 million connections of vaccination certificates to state check-in apps in New South Wales and Victoria.
- And over 535,000 Australian have downloaded their international vaccination certificates, with 320,000 downloads in just the three days to 21 October.
- Most customers accessing their digital vaccination certificates have done so without assistance, again reflecting the high level of digital interaction and my agency's capacity to meet this demand.
- Adding to the demand around COVID vaccination certificates, there is a surge in work related to the winding down of COVID restrictions as recurring COVID Disaster Payments cease and eligible customers return to making weekly claims, while others re-join the workforce or, where necessary, transition to other income support payments.
- Throughout this period, of course, the extraordinary demand generated by the pandemic has had to be balanced against our business-as-usual support for Australians, and the current surge is being carefully managed with an eye to the forthcoming emergency and natural disaster season.
- Services Australia staff have responded to the demand over recent months under often difficult circumstances.
 - Over 2,000 staff were retrained and redeployed from their usual roles to ensure COVID-related claims were processed in the shortest time possible.
 - As well as our Services Centres remaining open throughout lockdowns, other staff in essential roles continued to work from the office, operating under stringent safety rules.

- And many of our office-based staff transitioned successfully to working from home, even those performing unfamiliar roles such as processing claims as part of the surge workforce.
- Over the next few weeks we will continue to welcome those who have been working from home back to the office.
- The agency also drew on support from the wider APS, welcoming over 400 staff from other departments and agencies who helped process the surge in COVID-related claims.
- While managing the additional demand on our resources generated by the pandemic, the Agency has also maintained its focus on making government services simple so our customers can get on with their lives.
- Going forward, we will use the challenges we have faced over the past year as an opportunity for continued transformation. The pandemic has driven customer expectations of digital services, and we will continue to enhance our digital offer and tailor our specialised and personalised services for vulnerable Australians to deliver connected government services that are simple, helpful, respectful and transparent for all Australians.