



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

# Official Committee Hansard

JOINT COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND AUDIT

**Reference: Review of Auditor-General's reports Nos 35 to 52 (2005-06)**

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**JOINT STATUTORY COMMITTEE OF  
PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND AUDIT**

**Wednesday, 18 October 2006**

**Members:** Mr Anthony Smith (*Chair*), Ms Grierson (*Deputy Chair*), Senators Hogg, Humphries, Moore, Murray, Nash and Watson and Mrs Bronwyn Bishop, Mr Broadbent, Dr Emerson, Dr Jensen, Miss Jackie Kelly, Ms King, Mr Laming and Mr Tanner

**Members in attendance:** Senators Nash and Watson and Ms Grierson and Mr Anthony Smith

**Terms of reference for the inquiry:**

To inquire into and report on:

Review of Auditor-General's reports Nos 35 to 52 (2005-06)

**WITNESSES**

<b>BRADFORD, Ms Kerri, Senior Director, Performance Audit Services Group, Australian National Audit Office.....</b>	<b>1</b>
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<b>WASLIN, Mr Tony, Assistant Secretary, Payment, Integrity and Assurance Branch, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations .....</b>	<b>1</b>
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**Committee met at 12.19 pm**

**BRADFORD, Ms Kerri, Senior Director, Performance Audit Services Group, Australian National Audit Office**

**BROWNE, Dr Margaret, General Manager, Business Integrity, Centrelink**

**CURRAN, Ms Lynne, Group Manager, Specialist Services and Income Support, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations**

**GEMMELL, Mr Bill, Section Manager, Payment Integrity, Social Security Relationships and Compliance Branch, Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs**

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**RULE, Ms Catherine, National Manager, Compliance and Review, Centrelink**

**WASLIN, Mr Tony, Assistant Secretary, Payment, Integrity and Assurance Branch, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations**

**WHALAN, Mr Jeff, Chief Executive Officer, Centrelink**

**CHAIR (Mr Anthony Smith)**—Welcome. I declare open today's public hearing, which examines a report tabled by the Auditor-General on 31 May this year, No. 43 of 2005-06, entitled *Performance audit: assuring Centrelink payments—the role of the random sample survey program: Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, Department of Education, Science and Training, and Centrelink*.

I welcome representatives from the National Audit Office; Centrelink; the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs; the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations; and the Department of Education, Science and Training. As usual, I would ask you to remember that only members of the committee can put questions to witnesses, if this hearing is to constitute formal proceedings of the parliament and attract parliamentary privilege. Secondly, given the short time available today, I ask that you keep your statements and comments relevant and succinct. We have had a briefing already from the audit office on the report. We are familiar with the report and we are familiar with your responses to it. Our questioning will be about the processes and procedures you have adopted since the report and since your response to the recommendations.

I remind you that the hearings today are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. The evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, as usual, and will attract parliamentary privilege.

If you are agreeable, I would not mind moving straight to the questioning. There are a number of you here before us, and we appreciate your time. We have had a look at the audit report and there are a number of aspects to it.

**Ms GRIERSON**—It might be best if we hear from everyone as to how they have responded and what progress they have made.

**CHAIR**—Yes. We will take that as the first question.

**Ms GRIERSON**—We will start with Centrelink.

**Mr Whalan**—Four of the nine recommendations have been completed. The response is that they have been completed and five are underway.

**Senator NASH**—Could you indicate which ones?

**Mr Whalan**—I will go through each one briefly. Recommendation 1 is about transparency and notes in particular the annual report, which is about to be published. It provides revised wording which reflects the recommendations from the ANAO. Our internal reports have also been revised as per the recommendation. If you are interested, I am happy to give you a copy of the extract from the annual report, which has not yet been published.

**CHAIR**—We will take that as an exhibit at the end of the meeting.

**Mr Whalan**—I am just going to those that are completed. No. 6, which was about including information on recruitment and training materials for the reviewers, has been completed. We have basically produced new recruitment and training materials which have been used since 1 July. Reporting schedules have been developed. Reports have been circulated to national support staff and to the policy departments by each of the 15 areas we operate under.

No. 7 is the review of the design of the questionnaire. We have basically worked with each of the policy departments present here to revise the questionnaires that are given to customers selected in random sample surveys. They have been agreed and deployed. Once again, I can give you copies of those revised questionnaires if they are of interest. They were deployed on 1 July.

Item No. 9 is about a more consistent approach, a more national approach. We now have national selection criteria which are used for the selection of all reviewers. There is a national training package. We used to train people slightly differently in different parts of Australia; we now have one national package which we use to train all staff. We have put in place new performance assessment procedures for all staff in this area, and all of that went live on 1 July as well. They are the four that are completed. There are a couple which are ongoing. We will never complete them because we are basically being asked to keep focused on doing things in a different way. Then there are I think three others which we will complete in 2007.

**Mr Rosenberg**—We are on track with the relevant recommendations. We have certainly taken No. 2, which is the one about reporting data, into account and the proof of the pudding will be fairly obvious in our next annual report, which will have the appropriate qualifications around the reporting of data. Regarding recommendation 4, which is the one about taking care around data skewing when interrogating the data for emerging risks, we have increased our capacity in FaCSIA to do better interrogation of the data and work more closely with Centrelink to ensure that we are clear where skewing might occur. As for No. 5, we have put more procedures in place, including working with all of the other agencies on a more collaborative approach. Regarding No. 7, I can reiterate what Mr Whalan said. We have certainly been working with Centrelink on ensuring that we have a better design of the questionnaires.

**Ms Curran**—We would like to reiterate those comments and say how useful the ANAO report was; we welcome the scrutiny of our programs. I think that because it has been a collaborative approach there is not much more to add, other than to say that you will see, in our annual report, us taking the recommendations into account. The questionnaire, as Mr Whalan said, has been completed and we continue to work with Centrelink on the process and the methodological issues that the ANAO canvassed.

**Dr Mercer**—It is very similar for us. We have endorsed the report. We are in the process of implementing all of the recommendations. We can provide our annual report, which will show how we have picked up the definitions.

**CHAIR**—You can provide that to us today, can you?

**Dr Mercer**—We cannot today; it is at the printers at the moment. There is one extra thing to note on recommendation 7. We have been streamlining our questionnaires, so we have taken these recommendations into account. We have a new random sample survey for Abstudy which commences next year, so we have had the advantage of being able to tick that off.

**CHAIR**—Thanks; that is very useful.

**Ms GRIERSON**—Mr Whalan, in reading the audit report and the findings, I have to ask myself: is it worth doing this process? Has there been a proper cost-benefit analysis of this? How much has it cost? What are the savings and the benefits? Does it weigh up, or would Centrelink be better to direct its resources at the first step of encounter with clients? A third of the people in the survey have multiple errors and, when an error starts at the process, it compounds and continues, so I have to ask you: have you considered, as much as we want to find maximum compliance outcomes, whether this is the right way to do it?

**Mr Whalan**—I think there is no choice but to do both. The policy departments need assurance about whether the money is being spent in accordance with government decisions—

**Ms GRIERSON**—Which is the process you use.

**Mr Whalan**—and to do that you need a sufficient sample to look across the range of payments. This mechanism is principally about assurance, and I think it adds value. We actually derive a lot of other benefit from it. We learn as we go about areas that we ought to improve,

either in terms of administration or in terms of advice to the public et cetera, so there are a lot of other spin-offs from it. I do not think we have a choice other than to do this.

**Ms GRIERSON**—Can you give me an example of a significant change to the way Centrelink does things that occurred because of this process? I know that is more about the operational side of things.

**Mr Whalan**—Dr Browne can give some more practical examples.

**Dr Browne**—What I would say about that is that the main benefit to us is being able to break down the analysis and look at the reasons why errors occur. For example, the largest source of error is really customers misreporting, or not reporting at all, on their earnings. That is the largest source of error. We have undertaken a few things that will help to start to address that. There is the government funded campaign called Support the System that Supports You, which is having a very large impact. A huge number of customers are ringing us to update their records. We have a number of examples of employers electronically reporting salary directly to Centrelink and we want to move further down that track. We now have the capacity for automated voice reporting, so people can ring up on the telephone, which is much easier than having to wait in a queue. We have introduced customer accounts, which are sent out to customers regularly so that they ought to be able to look at and update them. There are a number of things like that.

**Ms GRIERSON**—That is one aspect that has changed for Centrelink. Has anything else changed? The other ones have required changes by other people—behaviour changes by employers or customers. Has Centrelink had to change training? Have they had to change forms? Have they had to change initial interview processes?

**Dr Browne**—All of those things. We have a number of measures that we use to bring our staff to the highest level of performance possible. There are two sources of error, as you would appreciate: administrative errors and customer errors. By far, the largest source of error is the customer, but we have a number of initiatives in Centrelink, such as our Getting It Right campaign, where we emphasise particular aspects of the process with our staff. Forms have been revised; training has been comprehensively revised. It is a constant thing for us.

**Ms GRIERSON**—Continuous improvement is a good thing to aim at, isn't it?

**Dr Browne**—Yes.

**Mr Whalan**—This is a key source of information. It is only one source—

**Ms GRIERSON**—We have looked at some of the other sources.

**Mr Whalan**—about where we should improve.

**Senator NASH**—One of the things that the ANAO have pointed out, and I think this is one of their main points, is that the survey is good but it does have inherent limitations, and that in the reporting of the results those inherent limitations should be very clear to people. I take it that you agree with that, but what are you doing to ensure that that happens?

**Mr Whalan**—Do you mean how we try and ensure that we reduce those limitations as much as possible?

**Senator NASH**—No. When you are reporting and you have a figure of, say, 96.5 per cent, given that the survey itself does have its limitations—it is not as clear cut as giving you a 96.5 per cent figure, because of the vagaries of customer information and that type of thing—I gather it is the ANAO's view that that people should be made aware of that inherent limitation. My question is: what are you doing to make people aware that the survey does indeed have limitations?

**Mr Whalan**—Being more explicit—

**Dr Browne**—The main thing we have done is develop a far more comprehensive description of what payment correctness means. Mr Whalan referred to the fact that, in our forthcoming annual report, we have put that quite lengthy description, which we will table at the end of the meeting. Basically, it makes the figure clear and describes how it is arrived at, what it is not, what it includes and what it does not include. Probably the most important thing is that it makes it clear that the figure of 96 per cent—and it has always been 95 per cent and upwards—is only about Centrelink's payment correctness, that is, the correctness of our decision making. The explanation we have put in now shows quite clearly that it does not include customer error. Therefore, I think that is much more transparent.

**Senator NASH**—I understand the figure and how it works with regard to that particular figure, but payment correctness, using the ordinary term, was actually around 70 per cent.

**Dr Browne**—Yes, that is right.

**Senator NASH**—Does Centrelink see that as good enough? Do you have a target for the actual correctness of payment that you would like to see? Is 70 per cent good enough for Centrelink?

**Mr Whalan**—It depends on what you can control. We are more interested in improving what we can control, noting that, as you would be aware, the majority of the gap between broadly 70 and 100 per cent is due to people either deliberately or unintentionally not providing the most recent piece of information.

**Senator NASH**—What percentage of that 30 per cent does that apply to?

**Dr Browne**—The Centrelink proportion of the 30 per cent is 3.4, if you subtract 3.4 from, I think, 29.9. It is not actually shown in the table here. That is only a rough approximation because the methodologies are quite complex.

**Senator NASH**—I think I also read somewhere—and I gather it is not part of this process—that you did determine that some of the customer errors indeed went on to be determined as Centrelink errors rather than customer errors. How is that defined and what type of errors are they?

**Ms Rule**—Sometimes when you do a survey of a customer you can find more than one error. There were some instances where a customer had made a mistake and some where we had also made a mistake. What we did was count those as Centrelink errors. So, where there were two or more errors, we counted both of those errors as Centrelink errors rather than trying to split the errors and attribute some of them to the customers. We did not want to double count things and we thought the more reasonable approach was to count them as Centrelink errors.

**Senator NASH**—What would be an example of a Centrelink mistake? You talk about errors and mistakes and things. What are two or three most common mistakes made by Centrelink?

**Ms Rule**—The types of things that get picked up in the survey are where information is provided by a customer and somebody from Centrelink enters that information into our system and they might make a keying error—

**Mr Whalan**—A misspelling of a name.

**Ms Rule**—There might be a misspelling.

**Mr Whalan**—In the transcription of a birth date; the transcription of two numbers.

**Ms Rule**—Those are the types of errors and some of those will impact on a customer's payment—for example, if there is an error in a declaration of earnings versus a spelling of a street name, which will not impact on their payment.

**Senator NASH**—Within the survey, if you are asking a question and you get a response from a customer, saying, 'But I called Centrelink and told them that,' how do you determine whether they are telling you the truth?

**Ms Rule**—Some of that is a judgement call. We train our staff in interview techniques and we structure the questionnaires in a way to try to test the information that the customers are giving us, but there is a certain degree of judgement that our staff have to exercise, which is where the issue of non-disclosure has been raised in the audit report.

**Dr Browne**—I would also add that we do plan to introduce a receipting process so that where a customer actually says, 'I told Centrelink,' we will ask: 'Provide us with the receipt number and we will go and check all of that.'

**Mr Whalan**—So there are now receipts for call centres. This is a receipt.

**CHAIR**—You have them at call centres, don't you?

**Mr Whalan**—If you phone in you get a receipt, and if you come in face-to-face you do not necessarily get one. We are introducing that.

**Senator NASH**—Is there much of a cost attached to that receipting mechanism?

**Mr Whalan**—Yes, it will cost us some millions of dollars; I do not have a figure.

**CHAIR**—Thank you for giving us the update and for being in agreement with the audit report and the progress in implementing the recommendations. I have a few general questions and I know Senator Nash has an interest in the subject and perhaps Senator Watson as well. If we step back a second, it is fair to say that you have agreed there are some deficiencies, you are working to improve them and you are working them all the time. When the access card is introduced, are you confident that your systems will be robust enough to cope with what is going to be a very major project?

**Mr Whalan**—Yes, Senator, we are.

**CHAIR**—I am not a senator.

**Mr Whalan**—Sorry, Mr Chair.

**CHAIR**—That is all right. It is not the most—

**Mr Whalan**—Not the biggest compliment you have had?

**CHAIR**—I have nothing against ‘senator’. I was called a lawyer earlier this week which was quite insulting. Let me put it more bluntly. When you look forward to the access card, does it fill you with eagerness or dread?

**Mr Whalan**—I think it is a positive initiative and it does not fill me with dread. One thing it is going to do is to improve the quality of the proof of identity arrangements for each individual. We are currently quite robust in how we do proof of identity, but we have not always been. In the past we had a much simpler approach to proving identity. I think there is great value in making sure that we are really clear about the individuals.

**CHAIR**—At an administrative level, though—and perhaps you might tell us otherwise, but our understanding is that—at a certain point in time over a two-year period, your staff will conduct interviews with every Australian who needs an access card. What has been reported is that there will be 16 million 15-minute interviews over a two-year period. Will you be getting more resources for that? Could you cope with that today?

**Mr Whalan**—I just note that the detail of that is not settled. The second point I would make is that we already have a lot of the information that you would require to enrol yourself, for example, in an access card, in respect of millions of Australians. So for a lot of people it will be quite a simple process.

**CHAIR**—So someone like me who, obviously, has a Medicare card would be a Centrelink client in one form or another these days? I had a son and quite obviously I am not a veteran. You are saying that you would pretty much have most of the information?

**Mr Whalan**—Maybe we could take a hypothetical person. If someone is a recent Centrelink customer and we have done their proof of identity checks in the last few years—

**CHAIR**—Which you have.

**Mr Whalan**—then we have a lot of the information we would require to actually sign them up to the card. Would there be extra resources? Yes, there will be resources provided to whichever organisations are signing people up.

**Senator WATSON**—Did you look at the possibility—if we were to move to this new card—of using the Medicare card with a photo? You can get photos on the Medicare card now, and that has details of all dependants. What would be the shortcomings of that approach?

**Mr Whalan**—That is probably not a question for me, Senator. I am representing Centrelink, and the Department of Human Services has responsibility for the access card. I can talk to you about the delivery, but even there a lot of things are not settled.

**Senator NASH**—My question follows on from the chair's question about the access card. I note the three per cent error, but that, obviously, is error with dollar impact. I think there is another nine per cent or so that is error without dollar impact, which is around 12 or 13 per cent. Firstly, are you comfortable with it being at that level? And, secondly, would that administrative error in terms of the access card be an acceptable level of error to maintain in terms of being able to deliver the access card, when a lot of it may well be error that, while not having a financial impact, may still cause some difficulty?

**Mr Whalan**—I have a comment here. One thing for which you have to give huge credit to the ANAO is their level of thoroughness and the extent to which they go back over a long period of time in terms of records of individuals, just as we do in these random sample surveys. Often when we are talking about an error here we may have had, for example, 20 interactions with Senator Nash and, on one of those interactions, we may have mis-keyed the name, mis-keyed the address, et cetera. So it is down at that sort of level. In terms of signing people up and proof of identity and issuing access cards, we are really good at it, and Medicare is really good at it. If anything, and I am projecting forward now, what that card would do is reduce the numbers of errors. For example, I would expect that people would be able to swipe the card and, rather than us keying in information every time they visited, there would be an automatic transfer of that information and up they would come. So you ought to be confident.

**CHAIR**—Just to go to my earlier question and Senator Nash's point, I accept that for some millions of Australians, perhaps, most of the information will be there, but in an administrative sense you are still going to have to take their photo—someone is.

**Mr Whalan**—Correct.

**CHAIR**—They will have to go to a designated place and get their photo taken.

**Senator WATSON**—Could you do that at Centrelink?

**CHAIR**—Will that be done at Centrelink?

**Mr Whalan**—Once again, this is not settled.

**CHAIR**—I understand that.

**Mr Whalan**—We will give people a lot of choice about where they can get it done. What I expect will happen is that in rural areas we will go out to people—and when I say ‘we’, it might not be Centrelink taking the photograph—

**CHAIR**—It might be Vic Roads or the NRMA.

**Mr Whalan**—I do not know who it will be, but I am very confident that we will give people choice and convenience about where they—

**CHAIR**—That is great at one level, because the point I am getting to is that I can see a potential difficulty either way. Either you manage the whole process and everybody comes in and they get a photo, which would be administratively cumbersome and would be difficult for the public and take some time—

**Mr Whalan**—That is right.

**CHAIR**—or you do exactly what you say, which would seem at face value to be the commonsense approach, but that, of course, opens it up to you having many people dealing with bits of information and you are sending photographs in that then have to be verified.

**Mr Whalan**—I did not want to mislead you in that sense. When I talked about a choice I expect that it will be Australian government organisations doing the sign-up and the choice will be around giving people choice of more locations than currently exist. If we were talking about the north of Tasmania, for example—

**CHAIR**—It might be post offices.

**Mr Whalan**—It may be that—

**CHAIR**—Senator Watson is particularly interested in the north of Tasmania.

**Mr Whalan**—It may be that there is a visiting van that goes to each of the shows and offers people the choice to sign up there if they do not want to go into their local office.

**Senator WATSON**—The important thing is for there to be a photo facility in every office.

**Mr Whalan**—There will be.

**Senator WATSON**—That is good, because that is the most convenient point.

**Mr Whalan**—That is the minimum. My point is that there will be choice beyond that. Because this is not settled, I am telling you what I believe will occur.

**CHAIR**—That is okay. We know it is not settled. You do not have to keep repeating that—there is not even any legislation yet, so it is not settled. I would not be concerned on that front. This is digressing a bit, but we have seen recent newspaper reports about inappropriate access by Centrelink officers to information. How is that going to be stamped out?

**Mr Whalan**—One comment I would make about that is the majority of those accesses were actually at the request of members of the public. Let me explain what that is about.

**CHAIR**—So you are saying that you can have an inappropriate access where the client or the customer themselves says, ‘Look at something,’ and the fact that the officer has looked at it at their request can be deemed—

**Mr Whalan**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—How?

**Mr Whalan**—We have an ironclad rule that no staff member is to deal with the records of someone with whom they are associated. This is principally relatives and other people with whom they are associated. If they do it—

**CHAIR**—Brother, cousin, sister, uncle.

**Mr Whalan**—it is a conflict.

**Senator NASH**—Does that include friends as well or acquaintances or is it just family?

**Mr Whalan**—It is generally families. It would only apply beyond that if you had a financial relationship with the individual. It does not matter about friends—

**CHAIR**—Let us cut to the chase: it is someone who has a Centrelink problem and who is banging their head against a wall and they ring a relative and say, ‘Can you look this up and see what the heck’s going on here.’

**Mr Whalan**—That is right, and you cannot do that, with exceptions. If you have a brother with a disability or an elderly aunt, someone who cannot act on their own behalf, we have arrangements in place where you can have nominees. You can formally nominate someone else to deal with your record. Other than that, for us it is a breach of our code of conduct and the majority of people in those figures fall into that category. There are still a lot of people who are not in that category, and we basically have a zero tolerance approach and we are very public about it.

**CHAIR**—You have dismissed some people, haven’t you?

**Mr Whalan**—Yes, we have.

**CHAIR**—And you have demoted some people?

**Mr Whalan**—Yes, we have. And a number of people have chosen to leave before they may have faced that. We think it actually puts us in a better position. We get a bad press out of it, and we do not like that at all, but we actually think it puts us in a better position, being upfront and being tough about it.

**CHAIR**—I think the zero tolerance approach is the right one. I do not raise that in an unfair way. Even though there have been some bad cases of that and you have acted on them, I do not think there has been any accusation that you have not acted on bad cases. Some of the state authorities have had similar or worse problems really, and I come back to the motor registration laws where there are all sorts of allegations. The reason I mention that is, of course, that is a whole layer of other privacy that is going to be part of the access card in one way or another. Ultimately it might not be something that is going to be required by legislation, but we are going to open up the option for people to add things on to the card, aren't we?

**Mr Whalan**—I am not aware of that.

**CHAIR**—Okay, that is great. The annual report is what we should look to, and you will forward copies at the right time—we do not need them ahead of time—to the secretariat. Did you want to get something listed as an exhibit?

**Mr Whalan**—I am happy to. I have an extract from our report, which is not yet published.

**CHAIR**—But you are happy to do that?

**Mr Whalan**—Someone will advise me whether I am breaking any laws about that.

**CHAIR**—Do not feel you have to. It will become a public document here, so it is your choice. You might want your annual report to be released when your annual report—

**Mr Whalan**—It will be out in two weeks, so I will hold it.

**CHAIR**—You do not want to release it here? Okay.

**Mr Whalan**—I will give you a copy of those revised questionnaires.

**CHAIR**—We are always happy to help. You will get a good run if you release it through us.

**Ms Curran**—Could I just say that whilst the focus of the ANAO report is on payment correctness, transaction correctness and transactional error, for the policy departments, the rolling random sample survey is actually really important for payment accuracy, and that is what the policy departments report on. That goes to Mr Whalan's point around the assurance needed to parliament for quite extensive and large amounts of money that are paid out through Centrelink. The RSS is actually an integral part of our overall compliance framework.

Resolved (on motion by **Senator Nash**, seconded by **Senator Watson**):

That this committee authorises publication, including publication on the parliamentary database, of the proof of the transcript of the evidence given before it at the public hearing this day.

**Committee adjourned at 12.54 pm**