

## **Opening Statement**

The Australian Government continues to provide critical support to Australians in need of urgent assistance, making billions of dollars in payments to customers impacted by COVID-19 and other disasters.

Most recently, the Australian Government has supported hundreds of thousands of flood-affected Australians in Queensland and New South Wales.

Services Australia emergency reserve staff, including specialist social workers, were on the ground at evacuation and recovery centres from 2 March, just 2 days after the activation of the emergency payment.

- All 3 of Services Australia's Mobile Service Centres were deployed to flood-affected areas.
- Officers, including more than 150 emergency reserve staff, have directly assisted over 20,000 people at more than 100 locations with lodging claims for AGDRP and connecting them to other forms of support.

Thousands of Services Australia staff and hundreds of additional APS staff were redeployed to process the record-breaking volume of calls and claims – with over 250,000 calls answered, over 1.3 million claims processed and over \$1.4 billion in payments made in the month to 31 March.

- For comparison, there were 230,000 claims and just over \$250 million in payments over several months during the 2019-20 bushfires. The volume here was significant.

I would like to take this opportunity to commend these officers for being out there, working closely with their communities to ensure they get access to the right payments as quickly and smoothly as possible.

And this applies both to the emergency staff who came from all over Australia to provide additional support, and to the local service officers, many of whom were impacted by the flooding in their communities but who continued to work despite disruption to ensure that support was available when needed the most.

I had the opportunity to meet some of the staff working on the ground when I visited recovery centres in Ballina and Lismore in mid-March, and heard first-hand about their experiences of this disaster response, what went well, and opportunities for improvement.

I would also like to thank those staff behind the scenes who pivoted to processing claims, to building the systems and technology, to designing and refining payments, to analysing and reporting on operations, all of whom made it possible to respond to the emergency so quickly and so effectively.

The Agency's ability to scale up so rapidly to meet these challenges is underpinned by its longstanding transformation program and its focus on transformation to deliver world-class digital services.

- For example, in response to these recent flood events, Services Australia developed an online claim form that enabled individuals to apply for AGDRP digitally.
- This ensured the high volume of claims was able to be addressed quickly.
- 95% of claims have been received online and many Australians received payments within 24 hours – and sometimes within minutes of applying.
- In previous disasters and emergencies where individuals have had to lodge claims via telephone, it has led to longer wait times for calls to be answered and for payments to reach those who need it most.

Services Australia's success in responding to the floods also reflects the Agency's and the wider APS's efforts to establish a flexible and agile surge capacity to meet demand, with thousands of staff within Services Australia, and hundreds more from other APS agencies, being retrained and redeployed in record time.

Over the last 2 years the Agency has received funding to support its pandemic and natural disaster delivery response.

Services Australia is expecting to return to a more normal level of operations.

The combined impact of COVID-19 measures winding down and less activity supporting job seekers is reflected in the staffing allocation in the 2022–23 Budget.

But Services Australia has demonstrated that it is able to surge staffing numbers to respond to urgent requirements.

The Agency will continue to improve capabilities and service standards – particularly its digital service offer which allows customers to access the information they need, when and where they need it.

And it continues to support Australians who require assistance through other channels, with increasing use of customer-centric initiatives such as using video chat to connect with customers and appointment based servicing in its face-to-face service centres.

Going forward, Services Australia will use the challenges of the past year to maintain focus on its vision of delivering connected government services that are simple, helpful, respectful and transparent for all Australians.

Thank you.

**FLOOD RESPONSE: KEY FACTS AND FIGURES (as of 31 March 2022)**

- Total claims received (AGDRP and DRA): 1.48 million
- Total claims processed: 1.31 million
- Total value of payments: \$1.43 billion
- Total calls received: 256,000
- Individuals supported: 1.54 million
- 95% of claims received digitally.