Australian Government

Department of Home Affairs

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DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS
Opening Statement
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Since its last appearance before this Committee on 2 March 2020, the work of the Department has of course been profoundly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Home Affairs has played its part in this effort and continues to do so – including in relation to international travel, border protection, emergency management and coordination, and countering misinformation. Home Affairs has led the coordination of the Australian Government's non-health response to COVID-19, including by way of liaison with States and Territories, local government, industry and the not-for-profit sector through the work of the National Coordination Mechanism. The Department has also been used by the Government in flexible and indeed novel ways – for instance in relation to the aged care response in Victoria.

Since March, our borders have been closed to all but returning citizens, permanent residents and exempt travellers. Australian citizens and permanent residents have also been prohibited from *leaving* Australia, unless provided an exemption. Home Affairs continues to support the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to facilitate the return of Australians from overseas.

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I wish to advise the Committee that the Department's contribution to post-COVID economic recovery will be enabled by a Whole-of-Government Permissions Capability, which will over time become the principal platform by which digital services will be delivered by the Australian Government in relation to 'permissions' – that is, government services such as visas, import/export permits, licences, accreditations, declarations and registrations. In the first instance, and specifically in the context of post-COVID recovery, Ministers Tudge and Robert have announced that Home Affairs, working with

the Digital Transformation Agency, will acquire a new digital system to support the quick and secure collection of passenger information, by way of a new Digital Passenger Declaration. This will be the initial use case for the Whole-of-Government Permissions Capability. This digital system will replace the well-known Incoming Passenger Card and separate COVID-19 health declarations, which are typically paper-based. An open market Request for Tender for the new system, which will be publicly funded and operated, will be released before the end of October 2020. This RFT will also encompass delivery of a simple digital visa product.

Looking beyond these use cases (the Digital Passenger Declaration and the simple digital visa product), future use cases – subject to Government approval – could include employment suitability clearances; the licensing of companies to import and sell licit tobacco, along with associated compliance measures; police checks; permits to export or import certain goods; Australian Government security accreditations (for example, an Aviation Security Identification Card); and complex visa products. As a result of the change in the Government's policy to broaden the market approach and procure under a very different commercial model, the Department terminated the Global Digital Platform tender process.

When coupled with the other work that is underway in relation to biosecure international travel, including by way of supporting public health contact tracing systems, the advent of the Digital Passenger Declaration will be a key component of a COVID-safe international border which is able to operate at scale, and in a manner which supports the nation's public health and economic imperatives.

On the matter of post-COVID economic recovery, the Department is the host of the new cross-agency Global Talent and Business Attraction Taskforce, partnering with the Australian Trade and Investment Commission (AUSTRADE). The Taskforce, has been established to attract successful businesses and exceptional talent with the potential to create Australian jobs, and boost our international competitiveness. The Taskforce is headed by the Prime Minister's **Special Envoy for Global Business and Talent Attraction**, who in this capacity is a senior officer of the Department.

Australia's Immigration Program will also play a critical role in the economic recovery from the pandemic, including supporting key export industries, as well as in building people-to-people links, in the future. While the post-pandemic migration trajectory is still uncertain, returning to more normal numbers of visa holders with work rights entering Australia will assist in boosting economic recovery by filling skills gaps, increasing investment, and promoting new and emerging industries. An eventual

easing of travel restrictions will boost key export industries such as tourism and education, which have been hard hit by the border closures.

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For a combination of reasons – to do with it being three years since I first gave consideration to our functional arrangements, combined with the enduring impact of extreme weather and COVID-19 – since we last appeared I have made significant changes to the Department's functional groupings. The **Social Cohesion and Citizenship Group** deals with counter-terrorism, countering foreign interference, citizenship, and social cohesion (which embraces multicultural affairs, community engagement and countering violent extremism). The **Immigration and Settlement Services Group** deals with visa programmes, immigration policy, planning and compliance, refugees, humanitarian entrants, settlement services (the latter coming under the **Coordinator-General Migrant Services**). The **National Resilience and Cyber Security Group** deals with critical infrastructure, identity and biometrics, cyber security, digital and technology policy, the departmental intelligence function, international policy and regional processing and resettlement in connection with Operation Sovereign Borders. The **Strategy and Law Enforcement Group** deals with strategy and planning, data, law enforcement policy, and aviation and maritime security. In addition, the **Chief Operating Officer Group**, **Technology and Major Capability Group**, and **Legal Group** provide crucial enabling and support functions.

Further, as we await the recommendations of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, the Department is implementing interim arrangements to support the delivery of nationally-coordinated emergency management and coordination activities throughout the 2020-21 high-risk weather season. From 1 November 2020, a new **Emergency Management and Coordination Group** will be established comprising the functions of Emergency Management Australia, the National Coordination Mechanism and a newly-established EMC Plans and Capability Division.

To assist the Committee today, Mr Grigson will respond to operational matters relating to emergency management including last year's natural disaster season and preparations for the next. Mr Ablong will respond to the policy elements of emergency management, as well as funding matters.

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On 6 August 2020, the Government released its Cyber Security Strategy 2020, investing $1.67 billion in building new cyber security and law enforcement capabilities, assisting industry to protect itself and raising community awareness on how to be secure online. The strategy includes introducing a new framework to uplift the security and resilience of key critical infrastructure entities, build situational awareness and enable Government to effectively prevent, defend against, and recover from nationally-significant cyber incidents. The Government intends to legislate this framework, should Parliament agree.

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