



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Home Affairs**



# **Department of Home Affairs submission to the Inquiry into aspects of the House of Representatives petitioning system relating to security and accessibility**

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions

23 February 2021

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## Introduction

The Department of Home Affairs (Home Affairs) provides this submission to the Committee's inquiry in response to the letter of invitation the Committee sent to Home Affairs on 4 January 2021.

In its invitation, the Committee indicated that it welcomes Home Affairs' views on any or all of the terms of reference, but would specifically welcome views on the suitability and practicability of using official records, such as through the Document Verification Service and Face Verification Service, for the purpose of verifying a petitioner's citizenship or residency status or age, if an age limit were to be introduced. Home Affairs notes the inquiry's terms of reference include, among other matters: self-declaration of citizenship and residency; the use of official records for verification purposes; and the introduction of an age limit. This submission provides information to assist the Committee's deliberations on these matters.

## Home Affairs' services

Home Affairs is the lead agency responsible for the National Identity Security Strategy, which provides a framework for inter-governmental cooperation to strengthen Australia's personal identification processes. Maintaining effective identity security is important, given one in four Australians will be a victim of identity crime at some point in their lives. In 2018-19, the estimated direct and indirect cost of identity crime in Australia was \$3.1 billion; a 17 per cent increase on 2015-16 figures.<sup>1</sup>

Home Affairs provides several identity-matching services to help Australians verify their identity, including the Document Verification Service and Face Verification Service. These services are provided through a partnership between the Australian Government and state and territory governments, under the 2017 Intergovernmental Agreement on Identity Matching Services.

Below is information on these services, and the potential to use them to verify a person's identity, age, citizenship or visa validity. All of the services rely on a person having the relevant identity documents or information. Appropriate privacy and security safeguards should accompany any use of these services.

### Document Verification Service

The Document Verification Service is a secure online system which, with a person's consent, matches their identity information against identity document records held by various Commonwealth and state and territory government agencies. The Document Verification Service conducted over 62 million transactions in 2020. It has been available to government agencies since 2009 and to the private sector since 2014. Use of the service attracts a connection fee and, where used by non-government organisations, a fee per transaction.

The Document Verification Service can verify 11 different types of identity documents:

- Australian passports;
- driver licences;
- citizenship certificates;
- certificates of registration by descent;
- ImmiCards;
- visas;
- Medicare cards;

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<sup>1</sup> C. Franks and R.G. Smith, *Identity crime and misuse in Australia 2019. Statistical Report no. 29*, Canberra, Australian Institute of Criminology, 2020, p vii, <https://aic.gov.au/publications/sr/sr29>, accessed 19 January 2021.

- Centrelink concession cards;
- change of name certificates;
- marriage certificates; and
- birth certificates.

Given the wide coverage of these documents within the Australian community, use of the Document Verification Service would allow the verification of the identities of a high proportion of Australian citizens and residents. Where a document contains date of birth, it would be possible to verify a person's age. However, not all citizens and residents hold (or have ready access to) a document in one of the classes listed above, or to a document that includes date of birth. This necessarily prevents the verification of the identity or age of these individuals using the Document Verification Service.

### **Verification of Australian citizenship**

The verification of Australian citizenship relies on substantiating the identity of the person in question. Home Affairs holds records on individuals who have engaged with the Department on citizenship issues, including applications for citizenship or requests for evidence of citizenship. However, many people acquire Australian citizenship automatically, for example by birth. In such circumstances there may be no evidence of citizenship held by Home Affairs and a further investigation into the individual's identity is required to confirm their citizenship status. It is also possible for individuals to have gained or lost Australian citizenship, including under historical legislation without their knowledge. Noting these complexities, Home Affairs strongly recommends careful consideration and consultation with relevant government stakeholders prior to any decision relating to the verification of citizenship status for parliamentary petitions.

### **Verification of residency status**

For permanent and temporary residents in Australia on a visa, visa records can be checked for validity through the Document Verification Service. A Document Verification Service check of a visa record will not return a positive match result where:

- the visa has expired, been cancelled or was never issued;
- the individual is currently offshore or never arrived in Australia (except in the case of permanent resident visa holders); or
- the person has acquired Australian citizenship.

### **Face Verification Service**

The Face Verification Service is not yet fully operational and is subject to the passage of the Identity-matching Services Bill 2019, currently before Parliament. Under the proposed Bill, a person would have to consent to the use of the Face Verification Service in these circumstances.

## **Conclusion**

One or both of the services outlined above could, in principle, be made available to support the verification of identity and other information relating to individuals signing online petitions. However, Home Affairs notes that this would introduce checking processes for online petitions that differ from those associated with traditional paper petitions which require only that a person include their name, signature and a self-declaration that they are a citizen or resident of Australia. Whether identity verification, and additional checks of age, residency or citizenship should be undertaken before individuals sign online petitions is a matter for the parliament.