

DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY SPOKEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

1 February 2024

QoN Number: 1

Subject: FTE Reporting - Staffing

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Chairs: In terms of FTE—and you might want to take it on notice—can you just outline it for us. The report had some details. The average staffing level for the migration program decreased from 2015-16 to 2020-21. In 2021-22 there were 1,959 staff allocated to support temporary migration visa-processing functions. There were 1,140 staff in Australia and 819 offshore. My understanding is that that's increased in the order of about 600 staff totally. Perhaps you could update us on that and take on notice the specific detail. That would be very helpful.

Answer:

In the 2021-22 Migration Program year there were **on average** 1,959¹ staff allocated to support Migration and Temporary non-humanitarian visa processing. This includes staff processing visa applications, as well as staff supporting processing through enabling functions such as program management and caseload risk and integrity outcomes.

Additional staff were recruited in support of Migration and Temporary non-humanitarian visa processing, following the announcement of an extra 500 visa processing jobs announced at the Jobs and Skills Summit in September 2022.

The increase in 730 FTE² between April 2022 (1,943) and December 2023 (2,673) (see Table 1, below) comprised the filling of existing positions that were vacant due to attrition, as well as newly funded positions.

¹ Average Staffing Level (ASL) is the 'average' of all employees over the program year, it factors in staff movements in and out of the program.

² Total number Full Time Equivalent (FTE) employees are directly employed by the Department at a point in time, reported at the end of the month ie FTE employees in the department on 31 December 2023

Table 1: Migration and Temporary Visa Delivery Staffing (Full Time Equivalent) since April 2022^a

Month	Immigration Programs Division	Immigration Operations Division	Offshore Regional Director Division	Total (FTE)
Apr 2022				1,943
May 2022				1,983
Jun 2022				2,047
Jul 2022	1,052	184	888	2,124
Aug 2022	1,059	189	912	2,160
Sep 2022	1,074	199	932	2,205
Oct 2022	1,090	216	949	2,254
Nov 2022	1,187	237	964	2,388
Dec 2022	1,207	232	980	2,419
Jan 2023	1,215	237	979	2,431
Feb 2023	1,284	249	994	2,528
Mar 2023	1,313	264	1,002	2,578
Apr 2023	1,317	259	1,011	2,588
May 2023	1,345	266	1,016	2,627
Jun 2023	1,349	270	1,022	2,640
Jul 2023	1,342	344	1,023	2,709
Aug 2023	1,350	340	1,011	2,701
Sep 2023	1,382	340	1,010	2,732
Oct 2023	1,383	340	1,007	2,731
Nov 2023	1,373	326	998	2,697
Dec 2023	1,351	312	1,010	2,673

^a This table shows the divisional resource distribution based on the cost centre structure as at 30 June 2023, which is not available for FY2021-22. Statistics are as at the end of each month.

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PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY SPOKEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

1 February 2024

QoN Number: 2

Subject: Partner Visa - average processing cost

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Chair: What's the average cost of processing a partner visa?

Mr Willard: We can provide some information about the budget allocated to the branch that handles the processing. We don't have that particular figure available here.

Chair: My recollection is that the Department of Finance, under regulatory impact statements and the costs and charging rules—and this is a user fee and charge, isn't it; it's not a tax?

Mr Willard: It's a tax.

Chair: It's a tax, is it?

Mr Willard: Yes.

Chair: So are you—

Mr Willard: Visa application charges are a tax.

Chair: They're a tax, so you don't have to do the regulatory impact statement; you just charge what you want.

Mr Willard: I think in the migration legislation there are some constraints on what you can charge. I think there are regulations that go to that.

Chair: So the department's not able to tell the committee how much, on average—and I get that there are a whole range of costs—it costs to process a partner visa?

Mr Willard: We could take it on notice and give you a figure.

Chair: That would be good.

Answer:

The Visa Application Charge (VAC) is a tax. As such, there is no direct correlation between the cost of processing a visa and the fee charged. Subsection 45B(1) of the Migration Act provides that the amount of the visa application charge (VAC) is the amount, not exceeding the VAC limit, prescribed in relation to the application.

The VAC limit is determined under the Migration (Visa Application) Charge Act 1997. Visa Application Charges (VACs) are set by the Government and adjusted annually, usually in line with the Consumer Price Index.

A range of policy considerations may be taken into account by the Government in setting individual VACs, however these are not restricted to the cost of assessing visa applications.

Partner and Prospective Marriage visa holders have access to a range of government services, including Medicare, on arrival to Australia as holders of the visa. In the case of a Partner visa applicant who lodges their application in Australia, access to Medicare is available on lodgement of the visa application.

There is no provision to waive the visa application charge as it is prescribed in the legislation, and must be paid in full at the time of application for the application to be deemed valid. An invalid visa application cannot be considered or assessed.

The Department does not record or track costs at visa level in its financial management information system to enable an average processing cost per partner visa to be derived. As an indication, the table below shows the current budget allocations for the Family Visas Branch in financial years' 2022-23 and 2023-24.

This forms part of the cost of processing a Family visa, including visa processing and support (non-visa processing) staff costs. This excludes costs-incurred by other parts of the organisation, including teams that support multiple visa branches.

The Department allocates resourcing in an agile manner to meet operational and government priorities.

Budget Allocation for Family Visas Branch

Program Year	Branch Budget
2022-23	37,341,411
2023-24*	43,989,444

* The figure provided reflects the current Branch structure.

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PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY SPOKEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

1 February 2024

QoN Number: 3

Subject: Dependant rule on child visas - processing

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Chair: I will loop back to the human impact and the policy thing that falls out of the waiting time issue. I'm just curious about what analysis you have done and whether that is seen in the audit and whether you've advised government—the previous government or subsequently. The now Leader of the Opposition, when he was minister, changed the dependant rule on the partner visas, as I recall, so that once your child turns 23 they can't come as a dependant. Now, there has to be a general rule. That's higher than some countries and lower than others, but that's the rule. A consequence of this, though, which has been known for years and years is in relation to people from certain countries—Afghanistan and countries in the Middle East and Africa being the general ones—where you've got a really awful processing time. I think the rule applied to applications lodged after late 2016 or 2017.

Mr Willard: I can't recall the specifics.

Chair: You can take it on notice, but it was sometime around then.

Answer:

On 19 November 2016, the *Migration Regulations 1994* (the Regulations) were amended to introduce an age limit for most dependent secondary visa applicants.

The Department is aware of cases where dependent children included in Partner visa applications are approaching, or have passed, the age limit they are required to meet under the Regulations, because of the effect of the now repealed Ministerial Direction 80, which provided the lowest processing priority to Family visa applications where the sponsor was a permanent resident who entered Australia as an Unauthorised Maritime Arrival.

- Wherever possible these cases are managed through priority processing by the department's dedicated processing team.
- The Department is exploring some specific options to support secondary visa applicants whose applications were affected by Ministerial Direction 80 prior to its revocation.

DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY SPOKEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

1 February 2024

QoN Number: 4

Subject: Partner Visa - Applications from within Australia opposed to offshore

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Chair: So we had the COVID bump, and my reading of the website says 16 per cent growth, back to a sort of normal level post COVID. But even during COVID it was still 44,000 a year. People were still getting married, and there were still Australians overseas and all of that kind of stuff. It's already 28 per cent above what it was in the previous year. It's reasonable to say we've seen growth in the rate of applications, so why are additional people applying from within Australia, as opposed to offshore?

Mr Willard: We're talking about relationships that form and people making applications on the basis of those relationships. The team might want to expand on this; some of my comments might be a bit speculative. There's been a big reduction in international travel for a period of time, and I'd expect it will take a little bit of time before that travel starts occurring again, people start meeting each other, and relationships form and result in partner visa applications. I'll let the team add anything in respect of that.

Mr Noble: I have nothing to add.

Chair: Take it on notice because you might want to check with the team.

Ms Bjerregaard: Absolutely. The grant of the visa can also happen in Australia.

There was a period of time when partner visas were granted offshore. They can now be granted onshore—

Answer:

Over the past 10 years, there has been a growing trend of prospective migrants applying for Partner visas within Australia. Between 2012-13 and 2014-15, 45-48 per cent of the caseload was lodged onshore. However, between 2018-19 and 2022-23 this shifted with 60-65 per cent lodged in Australia, and onshore lodgements comprise around 57 per cent of the total in 2023-24 as at 31/12/23.

A range of “push” and “pull” factors influence this trend, foremost of which was the alignment of the offshore Visa Application Charge (VAC), with the onshore VAC. This alignment resulted in an increase to the offshore VAC dis-incentivising offshore lodgement. At the same time, other temporary visas, for example, student and the expansion of the work and holiday schemes became more accessible with travel itself becoming easier over the years. This enabled prolonged periods of temporary residence in Australia and the formation of relationships onshore. Visitor visas have also become more accessible and remain relatively affordable, enabling a greater number of clients to travel to Australia.

The increased application rates for Partner visas onshore has coincided with increased offshore processing times and corresponding extended periods of separation. Prospective migrants are choosing to apply onshore enabling them to wait with their partner for a decision onshore while on a bridging visa, including through any review periods.

The Department has helped to facilitate this trend through the COVID pandemic when legislation was introduced to allow offshore applicants that found themselves onshore to be granted a visa without the need to depart. As this COVID concession period for offshore applicants comes to an end, the Department has progressed legislative updates that will enable this concession to become permanent.

DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY SPOKEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

1 February 2024

QoN Number: 5

Subject: Progress of Visa Processing times

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Mr Willard: That's an element. It's also evidencing relationships. There are all sorts of issues. Identity can be an issue. All those sorts of issues go into what you see in these time frames. There's no discrimination in the program on the basis of ethnicity or race or nationality, but there are criteria that are applied to everyone in the program in the same way—

Chair: I understand that I'm not going to see a document where the department or the government of the day says, 'I want you to actively discriminate against Muslims and black people, or people from these countries,' but the human experience is that that is exactly what happens. These stats, because of the visitor visa problem, actually obscure. If we were to try and measure the human reality of time I am separated from the person I love, these stats significantly understate or distort that problem. They don't reflect the reality of that experience. I'm not suggesting they were trying to, but I'm just making the point.

Mr Willard: I'm keen to put more information on the public record, just to demonstrate the issue. If it's helpful, I can take on notice some updating of these tables. This was a document produced in the context of the audit—

Chair: That would be fantastic if you could.

Mr Willard: We've made significant progress since then. I think, though, you will still see that processing times are different for different locations, and it goes to those factors that I was talking about around the complexity of application and the issues we have to deal with. To take your example, if there's an application from America and there's an application from Africa, and they are both presented in a way that they are able to be finalised, I'd expect they would both be finalised at the same time, if that's an assurance I could make.

Chair: Okay. It will be interesting to see the data.

Answer:

Historical and updated first stage Partner visa processing times by processing region are provided at Table 1 below. The processing times have been prepared using the standard departmental methodology of calculating processing times percentiles. The results differ from those in the ANAO Report, a copy of which is also provided below for reference (see Table 2). The Department has been unable to replicate the calculations used by the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) to determine the average processing times as outlined in table 3.7 of the ANAO Report. Further details are provided in the table notes.

Additionally, a breakdown of first stage Partner visa processing times for the top 5 nationalities finalised in each processing region is provided at Table 3 below.

Overall global Partner visa processing times have been reducing. The median processing time for first stage Partner (subclass 300, 309 and 820) visa applications in 2022-23 was 264 days (9 months). This is a reduction of 34 days when compared to the same period in 2021-22, and 184 days when compared to the same period in 2020-21.

In 2023-24 as at 31 December 2023, the median processing time for first stage Partner visa applications was 217 days (7 months). This is a reduction of 66 days when compared to the same period in 2022-23.

Visa applications are generally considered in the order in which they are received to ensure fairness and equity to all visa applicants. However, the time taken to visa grant varies according to the individual circumstances affecting each case. Visa processing times between individuals are dependent on a number of factors, including the quality and completeness of the applications, applicants' responsiveness to requests for information and the complexity involved in assessing genuineness, character, health and security requirements.

The Department continues to enhance its global load sharing model, with caseloads moved where the processing capacity and capability exists in the global network. This model ensures greater consistency in processing and program delivery and allows for agile responses to changing circumstances, including fluctuations in application volume in particular regions and where an urgent response to a global crisis is required.

Under the global load sharing model, finalisations in any given processing region are not limited to applications lodged from countries within that geographical region. This is evident in the finalisations and processing times data in Table 3 below. For example, significant numbers of Indian, Chinese and Lebanese applications have been processed in a number of different processing regions across the globe. Additionally, a significant number of Afghan applications have been processed in Australia by the Department's dedicated team responsible for processing complex cases.

In 2023-24, the Department remains focused on reducing the first stage Partner and Prospective Marriage visa pipeline – including a continued focus on older, complex cases on hand - as well as second stage applications.

As at 31 December 2023, there were 52,780 first stage Partner and Prospective Marriage visa applications on hand, down 9.8 per cent compared to 30 June 2023. This compares to a high point of around 98,000 applications onhand as at the end of October 2020.

- The reduction in applications on hand is despite a continued increase in lodgments. In 2023-24, as at 31 December 2023, 27,553 first stage Partner visa applications have been lodged, up 22.6 per cent compared to the same period last program year.

New streamlined and risk-based processing measures have been introduced for second stage processing. This has enabled the reduction of the onhand and is expected to reduce second stage Partner processing times over coming months.

- As at 31 December 2023, there were 29,335 eligible second stage Partner visa applications on hand, down 38.4 per cent compared to 30 June 2023.

Older and more complex Partner cases are also being processed, including those being prioritised by the dedicated team responsible for processing complex cases, predominantly for Afghans. These cases take longer to finalise which is reflected in processing times.

There is a significant reduction of aged onhand first stage Partner applications, particularly applications that are 24 months or older. As at 31 December 2023, 7,450 (14.12 per cent) first stage Partner onhand applications were 24 months or older, compared to 19,891 (30.75 per cent) on 30 June 2021 and 12,289 (21.00 per cent) on 30 June 2023.

The new visa processing time guide on the department's website ([Global visa processing times \(homeaffairs.gov.au\)](https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/global-visa-processing-times)) gives clients an indication of how long their visa application may take to process. This estimated timeframe is based on how long it has taken to process recently finalised applications.

Table 1: First Stage Partner 50th percentile (median) processing times by program year and outside Australia processing region

Region	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24 YTD to 31 Dec 2023
Africa Region	354	454	613	672	782	597
Americas Region	383	308	330	367	389	321
Europe Region	275	325	376	176	134	114
Mekong Region	365	476	467	450	576	283
Middle East Region	286	329	447	609	414	453
North Asia Region	312	322	376	383	205	337
Pacific Region	242	239	395	472	218	325
South Asia Region	225	381	513	367	327	445
South East Asia Region	444	586	379	378	179	202
In Australia	473	525	480	306	239	168
Outside Australia	274	344	382	285	324	374

Notes:

- First stage Partner includes subclasses 300, 309 and 820.
- Visa application processing times are represented as percentiles across visa grant and refusal decisions for primary applicants only. Visa applications that are withdrawn are excluded from the calculation.
- Average, also known as the mean, is a number expressing the central or typical value in a set of data, which is calculated by dividing the sum of the values of a set by the number of observations in that set.
- If a caseload has extreme outliers (i.e. a few cases that have taken a very long time to finalise) this can greatly influence an average to be higher than expected. In cases such as this, a percentile provides a more meaningful representation of processing times within a caseload.
- 'In Australia' includes all applications decided by visa processing offices in Australia. 'Outside Australia' includes all posts listed in the offshore regions listed above, those being outside Australia.
- Partner visa applications are generally processed in the order they are received. Processing times can vary depending on the individual circumstances of each case, noting decision makers must be satisfied that all legal requirements for the grant of a Partner visa have been met before the visa can be granted, including relationship, health, character and identity requirements.
- Additional factors that impact the processing of applications include the quality and completeness of those applications, applicants' responsiveness to requests for information, and the complexity involved in assessing genuineness, character, health and security requirements.

Table 2: Original table (3.7) from ANAO report

Table 3.7: Average processing times (in days) for first stage Partner visa applications

Region	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Americas	430	357	389	380
Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa	370	462	533	510
Mekong	467	491	577	662
Middle East	423	408	680	705
North Asia	358	414	576	558
Pacific	358	491	493	618
South Asia	391	492	465	483
South-East Asia	498	602	601	535
Offshore	424	474	564	561
Onshore	555	584	490	456

Table 3: First stage Partner visa processing times by processing region and top 5 applicant nationalities¹

Processing Region ²	Nationality	2021-22		2022-23		2023-24 to 31/12/23	
		50th Percentile (Median) (Calendar Days)	Finalised	50th Percentile (Median) (Calendar Days)	Finalised	50th Percentile (Median) (Calendar Days)	Finalised
Africa Region	Ethiopia	729	129	835	78	Processing times are not available ³	<30
	South Africa	140	135	171	68	Processing times are not available ³	<30
	Ghana	895	31	800	62	590	31
	Nigeria	524	110	254	62	Processing times are not available ³	<30
	Kenya	Processing times are not available ³	<30	801	53	Processing times are not available ³	19
	Other nationalities	758	385	874	387	698	119
Americas Region	United States of America	226	337	386	447	304	219
	Canada	103	288	156	155	Processing times are not available ³	<30
	Brazil	311	81	472	85	Processing times are not available ³	<30
	India	565	75	402	71	Processing times are not available ³	<30
	Colombia	429	80	677	55	Processing times are not available ³	<30
	Other nationalities	499	715	467	456	312	168
Europe Region	United Kingdom	90	1229	105	810	87	476
	China, Peoples Republic of (excl SARs)	222	82	122	302	111	212
	India	568	119	153	272	122	194
	Philippines	582	65	123	194	128	188
	United States of America	240	74	132	143	154	95
	Other nationalities	237	2743	142	2718	119	1709
Mekong Region	Vietnam	438	849	407	775	280	521
	Thailand	266	690	289	473	177	209
	Philippines	653	679	1016	277	Processing times are not available ³	<30
	Cambodia	721	149	808	182	597	104
	Myanmar	456	53	244	117	173	67

Processing Region ²	Nationality	2021-22		2022-23		2023-24 to 31/12/23	
		50th Percentile (Median) (Calendar Days)	Finalised	50th Percentile (Median) (Calendar Days)	Finalised	50th Percentile (Median) (Calendar Days)	Finalised
	Other nationalities	343	1764	801	735	640	78
Middle East Region	Pakistan	366	180	474	419	639	166
	Iran	636	138	369	225	372	182
	Turkiye	333	63	358	161	331	106
	Iraq	679	121	513	126	644	60
	Lebanon	646	193	396	124	438	140
	Other nationalities	643	494	415	356	527	175
North Asia Region	China, Peoples Republic of (excl SARs)	350	2485	204	2003	245	944
	United Kingdom	402	141	193	411	318	187
	India	610	169	232	372	415	371
	Hong Kong (SAR of the PRC)	401	218	424	285	309	125
	Philippines	465	48	186	275	330	203
	Other nationalities	376	1197	197	3059	358	1775
South Asia Region	India	301	1304	316	1275	436	521
	Sri Lanka	649	348	372	233	447	196
	Nepal	317	155	289	202	386	108
	Bangladesh	287	153	324	156	507	86
	Other nationalities	618	50	Processing times are not available ³	<30	Processing times are not available ³	<30
South East Asia Region	Philippines	289	855	201	1018	146	389
	Malaysia	319	181	228	194	140	89
	Indonesia	280	348	197	150	251	55
	China, Peoples Republic of (excl SARs)	Processing times are not available ³	<30	94	69	146	32
	Singapore	149	117	87	65	Processing times are not available ³	<30
	Other nationalities	367	2009	327	1889	445	939
South Pacific Region	Fiji	750	180	322	114	316	50
	India	Processing times are not available ³	<30	207	51	Processing times are not available ³	<30
	China, Peoples Republic of (excl SARs)	Processing times are not available ³	<30	185	37	Processing times are not available ³	<30
	United Kingdom	Processing times are not available ³	<30	258	32	Processing times are not available ³	<30

Processing Region ²	Nationality	2021-22		2022-23		2023-24 to 31/12/23	
		50th Percentile (Median) (Calendar Days)	Finalised	50th Percentile (Median) (Calendar Days)	Finalised	50th Percentile (Median) (Calendar Days)	Finalised
	United States of America	Processing times are not available ³	<30	257	30	Processing times are not available ³	<30
	Other nationalities	439	332	206	295	329	149
Onshore - NSW office	Philippines	219	62	174	135	Processing times are not available ³	<30
	Lebanon	Processing times are not available ³	<30	189	42	Processing times are not available ³	<30
	China, Peoples Republic of (excl SARs)	166	134	173	39	Processing times are not available ³	<30
	Thailand	194	43	238	30	Processing times are not available ³	<30
	Indonesia	241	35	Processing times are not available ³	<30	Processing times are not available ³	<30
	Other nationalities	229	1314	176	411	234	86
Onshore - QLD office	China, Peoples Republic of (excl SARs)	211	941	282	988	128	664
	India	300	954	275	643	147	456
	United Kingdom	225	1070	267	599	141	376
	Philippines	224	502	254	478	138	582
	Vietnam	310	544	357	449	223	351
	Other nationalities	232	6609	280	4786	156	3519
Onshore - VIC office	China, Peoples Republic of (excl SARs)	248	663	447	641	173	426
	Afghanistan	949	330	1704	531	1297	1235
	India	388	438	330	522	140	398
	Vietnam	361	470	659	440	190	383
	Philippines	392	388	307	396	151	413
	Other nationalities	297	5104	382	3559	185	2453
Onshore - WA office	China, Peoples Republic of (excl SARs)	211	474	260	645	126	542
	India	288	271	246	497	123	517
	Philippines	311	273	208	461	118	461
	Vietnam	296	197	280	380	148	320
	United Kingdom	191	469	195	338	106	298
	Other nationalities	232	2976	230	3228	116	2583

Notes

¹ Top 5 nationalities for each region are based on application finalisation totals (grants and refusals) in program year 2022-23.

² The Department has global workload management arrangements for the processing of partner visa applications, and caseloads may be transferred between processing regions or offices for operational reasons.

³ Processing times are not available where the number of visa decisions is too few in the specified reporting period to provide a reliable indicator of time.

DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY SPOKEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

1 February 2024

QoN Number: 6

Subject: Underlying volumes of Visa applications

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Mr Willard: The other context is the underlying volumes of applications which also is a story...

Chair: But isn't that the point of the global processing thing. If you get a higher volume, take away the Taliban problem, because that is a spike, if you get a higher volume you should be able to move them around...

Mr Willard: That is what we are doing. Some of the data is early days or pre global processing model. But I will undertake to provide as much information as we can on that issue, as I said I also expect you will still see a differentiation when you have a look at this way but the Department.

Answer:

The Partner program moved to a global processing model in 2020-21 with caseload distribution across all onshore and offshore locations that have migration program processing capacity.

Under the global processing model, applications are flexibly allocated and transferred if required, to regions that have capacity and relevant expertise. This approach provides greater consistency in processing and program delivery. It allows the department to respond in a timely and agile way to changing circumstances, including fluctuations in application volume in particular regions and where an urgent response to a global crisis is required.

Table 1 below lists top 10 nationalities of finalised first stage Partner applications within each region in 2023-24 (to 31 December 2023). This shows significant numbers of applications were processed and finalised in a different region to where applicants are likely to reside or where the applications were lodged. For example, while the North Asia region predominantly finalised applications within the region, they also finalised significant number of applications lodged by applicants in South Asia, South East Asia, Mekong and Europe.

Table 2 below lists on hand first stage Partner applications lodged by top ten nationalities within each region as at 24 January 2024. This shows significant numbers of applications are being processed by a different region to where the applicants are likely to reside.

Through adopting the global processing model, we also see a decrease in processing times globally as illustrated in Table 3, which shows the first stage Partner 50th percentile (median) processing times by region since 2018-19. Table 3 is also included in QoN 9.

The processing times have been prepared using the standard departmental methodology of calculating processing times percentiles. The results differ from those in Table 3.7 of the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) Report.

The Department has been unable to replicate the calculations used by the ANAO to determine the average processing times as outlined in table 3.7 of the ANAO Report.

Table 1

Finalised first stage applications breakdown by region and nationality - top 10

Africa		Americas		North Asia		Europe		Mekong	
Nationality	Count	Nationality	Count	Nationality	Count	Nationality	Count	Nationality	Count
Ghana	54	United States of Am	259	China, Peoples Rep	1179	United Kingdom	512	Vietnam	1022
Nigeria	45	Colombia	32	India	391	China, Peoples Rep	224	Thailand	263
Ethiopia	33	Brazil	26	Vietnam	283	Philippines	215	Cambodia	230
Congo, Dem Repub	28	India	25	Philippines	232	India	199	Myanmar	88
Liberia	27	China, Peoples Rep	24	United Kingdom	204	Vietnam	166	Philippines	34
Somalia	27	Canada	17	Thailand	175	Thailand	135	Lao Peoples Dem R	29
South Africa	27	Peru	17	United States of Am	156	United States of Am	97	China, Peoples Rep	21
Kenya	24	Mexico	15	Hong Kong (SAR of	145	Germany, Fed Repu	93	United States of Am	9
Republic of South S	22	United Kingdom	9	Taiwan	100	Brazil	67	India	8
Sierra Leone	16	Philippines	9	Korea, South	80	Russian Federation	66	Pakistan	6

Middle East		South Asia		South East Asia		South Pacific		Onshore	
Nationality	Count	Nationality	Count	Nationality	Count	Nationality	Count	Nationality	Count
Pakistan	256	India	634	Philippines	538	Fiji	62	Afghanistan	3397
Iran	219	Sri Lanka	247	Lebanon	403	India	32	China, Peoples Rep	1829
Lebanon	167	Nepal	125	Malaysia	127	Tonga	22	Philippines	1680
Turkiye	124	Bangladesh	120	Indonesia	80	China, Peoples Rep	20	India	1478
Iraq	88	Not Specified	32	Singapore	40	Philippines	15	Vietnam	1319
Syrian Arab Republ	50	Myanmar	11	China, Peoples Rep	36	Papua New Guinea	11	United Kingdom	951
Jordan	22	Afghanistan	>5	India	31	United Kingdom	10	Thailand	795
Palestinian Authority	21	Russian Federation	>5	United Kingdom	28	Vietnam	10	United States of Am	673
Sudan	20	Tanzania	>5	Somalia	26	United States of Am	10	Indonesia	534
Egypt	19	Kenya	>5	Vietnam	23	Indonesia	8	Pakistan	503

* Only top 10 Nationalities shown.

* To 31 Dec 2024.

* Application counts include secondary applicants.

* First stage partner applications include subclasses 300, 309 & 820

Table 2

Onhand first stage partner applications breakdown by region and nationality - top 10

Africa		Americas		North Asia		Europe		Mekong	
Nationality	Count	Nationality	Count	Nationality	Count	Nationality	Count	Nationality	Count
Ethiopia	243	United States of Am	383	China, Peoples Rep	1835	Pakistan	534	Vietnam	1530
Nigeria	149	Canada	115	Philippines	398	United Kingdom	338	Cambodia	961
Republic of South S	145	Colombia	88	Vietnam	348	Ethiopia	208	Thailand	345
Kenya	142	India	63	India	304	Philippines	199	Myanmar	143
Burundi	127	Brazil	57	Hong Kong (SAR of	236	Vietnam	191	Lao Peoples Dem R	28
Ghana	126	Peru	32	United Kingdom	210	China, Peoples Rep	159	Not Specified	10
Somalia	125	China, Peoples Rep	31	Thailand	186	India	105	Russian Federation	8
Congo, Dem Repub	106	Venezuela	28	United States of Am	178	United States of Am	105	Taiwan	8
Rwanda	97	Chile	27	Taiwan	154	Thailand	94	China, Peoples Rep	6
Uganda	74	Philippines	27	Afghanistan	135	Germany, Fed Repu	45	United Kingdom	>5

Middle East		South Asia		South East Asia		South Pacific		Onshore	
Nationality	Count	Nationality	Count	Nationality	Count	Nationality	Count	Nationality	Count
Pakistan	1897	India	2816	Lebanon	684	Fiji	113	Afghanistan	5313
Iraq	668	Sri Lanka	670	Philippines	680	Papua New Guinea	43	Vietnam	1177
Syrian Arab Republ	437	Nepal	579	Indonesia	201	Tonga	20	China, Peoples Rep	1147
Iran	329	Bangladesh	409	Malaysia	82	China, Peoples Rep	13	Philippines	1051
Egypt	300	Not Specified	111	Singapore	59	Philippines	12	Pakistan	918
Afghanistan	286	Myanmar	14	China, Peoples Rep	54	United Kingdom	12	India	660
Lebanon	168	Bhutan	13	Syrian Arab Republ	48	Vietnam	11	Sri Lanka	576
Jordan	166	Afghanistan	5	Afghanistan	40	India	11	Thailand	504
Turkiye	142	Egypt	>5	Myanmar	33	New Zealand	9	United Kingdom	484
Morocco	111	Morocco	>5	Somalia	30	Thailand	7	United States of Am	421

* Only top 10 Nationalities shown.

* Data as at 24 Jan 2024.

* Application counts include secondary applicants.

* First stage partner applications include subclasses 300,309 & 820

Table 3

First Stage Partner 50th percentile (median) processing times by program year and outside Australia processing region

Region	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24 YTD to 31 Dec 2023
Africa Region	354	454	613	672	782	597
Americas Region	383	308	330	367	389	321
Europe Region	275	325	376	176	134	114
Mekong Region	365	476	467	450	576	283
Middle East Region	286	329	447	609	414	453
North Asia Region	312	322	376	383	205	337
Pacific Region	242	239	395	472	218	325
South Asia Region	225	381	513	367	327	445
South East Asia Region	444	586	379	378	179	202
In Australia	473	525	480	306	239	168
Outside Australia	274	344	382	285	324	374

Notes:

- First stage Partner includes subclasses 300, 309 and 820.
- Visa application processing times are represented as percentiles across visa grant and refusal decisions for primary applicants only. Visa applications that are withdrawn are excluded from the calculation.
- Average, also known as the mean, is a number expressing the central or typical value in a set of data, which is calculated by dividing the sum of the values of a set by the number of observations in that set.
- If a caseload has extreme outliers (i.e. a few cases that have taken a very long time to finalise) this can greatly influence an average to be higher than expected. In cases such as this, a percentile provides a more meaningful representation of processing times within a caseload.
- 'In Australia' includes all applications decided by visa processing offices in Australia. 'Outside Australia' includes all posts listed in the offshore regions listed above, those being outside Australia.
- Partner visa applications are generally processed in the order they are received. Processing times can vary depending on the individual circumstances of each case, noting decision makers must be satisfied that all legal requirements for the grant of a Partner visa have been met before the visa can be granted, including relationship, health, character and identity requirements.
- Additional factors that impact the processing of applications include the quality and completeness of those applications, applicants' responsiveness to requests for information, and the complexity involved in assessing genuineness, character, health and security requirements.

DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY SPOKEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

1 February 2024

QoN Number: 7

Subject: Data and area by people with the same categorisation

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Mr Noble: To make a comment as well around the global case-load allocation that goes to, I think, your question, Chair, around fraud, integrity risk et cetera, in October 2023, out of an ANAO recommendation, we've also now got a global risk tiering system in place. There's no distinction there between onshore and offshore. That's another opportunity for us to make sure that, if we do move work around, we're very alive to those integrity concerns and our visa decision-makers in areas around the globe are supported with a universal view of risk.

Chair: Yes, that's fair. You've got language and that risk based knowledge. Fair enough. Auditor-General?

Mr Hehir: I wasn't quite certain whether the information that you requested went to the categorisation of the timeliness of the visa issues by risk category by region, which we didn't pick up in the report because I'm not certain the data was available as to time. If that data's available, that might give you comfort, if you could do that by area, that people with the same categorisation—

Chair: But, if it has any correlation with the significant spikes, you'd expect to see year by year a significant spike in the risk threshold. My anecdotal, gut feeling is that South Asia has been sitting at the top for years.

Mr Willard: That's a suggestion that is probably worth looking at. Again, I think it's in our interest to put out as much information as we can about this issue.

Chair: Yes, do that.

Mr Willard: I'm just not sure off the top of my head if we'd be able to do it in terms of the broad risk categorisation that applies, and then the regional impact. I'm not sure, but we can take it on notice.

Chair: Yes. I'm being very critical in the rear-view mirror and I'm making the point about human impact. But the committee would really welcome it if you could say, 'Actually, we're improving things,' and show it with some data as well as words. I'll leave that with you.

Ms Bjerregaard: Noting that, within those regions, of course, there are a whole range of nationalities that may be processed at that post because they happen to be residing in that particular region—so it would be a more detailed breakdown to provide that assistance, which we're happy to provide.

Answer:

In October 2023, the Department implemented a new risk-tiering model that delivers consistent prioritisation and risk-tiering processes across the Partner visa program irrespective of processing location onshore or offshore.

This model enables consistent, immediate and robust enhancements to risk matching criteria. It has extended the approach that was previously used in the offshore Partner visa program to the onshore Partner visa program.

This risk model identifies and flags potential risks that the department need to consider or address as part of the assessment process. Examples of risks flagged include: adverse migration history, migration agents of concern, and variations or changes to the applicant’s claimed identity (for example, name changes).

The new risk tiering model has simplified triage of new applications and enabled greater focus, flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness to new and emerging risks. It also works well with the global processing model and provides global consistency in the way risks are identified and managed in Partner visa processing.

The table below provides a risk breakdown of on-hand first stage Partner applications by region as at 24 January 2024. The Middle East region had the highest percentage of non-streamlined (high risk) first stage Partner applications (81.04 per cent), followed by the Mekong region (77.44 per cent) and South Asia region (74.83 per cent).

The risk profiles for the regions represent the caseloads processed by each region, which may have been transferred from another region due to the global processing model.

Onhand First stage application risk breakdown by region

	Africa		Americas		North Asia		Europe		Mekong	
Scrutiny	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Non Streamlined	1,119	61.75%	567	47.01%	2,804	51.95%	1,558	50.73%	2,386	77.44%
Streamlined	693	38.25%	639	52.99%	2,594	48.05%	1,513	49.27%	695	22.56%
Total	1,812	-	1,206	-	5,398	-	3,071	-	3,081	-
	Middle East		South Asia		South East Asia		South Pacific		Onshore	
Scrutiny	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Non Streamlined	4,179	81.04%	3,464	74.83%	1,412	64.83%	152	46.06%	18,123	69.39%
Streamlined	978	18.96%	1,165	25.17%	766	35.17%	178	53.94%	7,995	30.61%
Total	5,157	-	4,629	-	2,178	-	330	-	26,118	-

As data is drawn from a dynamic system environment, the information is correct at the time of publication and figures may differ slightly from previous or future reporting

** Data as at 24 Jan 2024.*

** Application counts include secondary applicants.*

** First stage partner applications include subclasses 300,309 & 820*

DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY SPOKEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

1 February 2024

QoN Number: 8

Subject: Additional information to the submission

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Chair: Okay. You've outlined in your submission, I think, or touched on maybe earlier in the discussion some improvements to client engagement and information. In the interests of time can you take that on notice and maybe give us a little bit more information if there's anything in addition to the submission, because that was a few months ago, and then if we've got further questions we can come back to you.

Mr Willard: Sure.

Answer:

Client engagement

In response to recommendation 1 of the ANAO Family Migration Program report (the ANAO Report) the Department of Home Affairs has developed a number of tools, policy and procedural guidelines to provide the ability to capture meaningful client feedback and clear guidance on how the Department responds to client feedback related to its immigration, citizenship and border control functions. This includes:

- A dashboard that displays total complaints per program, and the outcomes of those complaints (i.e. how it has been resolved). This work was completed in December 2023.
- A holistic client feedback model is under development to capture, categorise and analyse client comments through a range of feedback channels including the Department's Global Feedback Unit, Global Service Centre, and Parliamentary Liaison Network. This component will be completed in March 2024.

The Department has also introduced a community organisation roundtable as part of the annual consultation on the permanent Migration Program. This initiative was introduced in the development of advice to Government on the 2023-24 Migration Program.

The roundtable supplements existing consultation mechanisms with the broader community in developing the planning levels, such as publishing a discussion paper, engagement through the Department's Community Liaison Officer network, and consulting academics who specialise in researching the migrant experience. The views sought through this roundtable convey broader views from across the stakeholder groups they represent, rather than individual client engagements.

Beyond these client engagement mechanisms, the Department also participates in a range of other external forums, for example quarterly meetings with the Law Council of Australia and Migration Industry Australia. The Department uses these meetings to consult with industry and government stakeholders on proposed policy changes, explain Australian Government policy decisions, update stakeholders on program trends, and understand industry objectives, priorities and concerns.

Information

Between October and December 2022, the Department hosted a series of briefing sessions about the Family visa application processing in order to inform affected stakeholders. The Department engaged approximately 260 migration agents and legal practitioners who represented more than 5,000 Afghan Family visa applicants offshore. A second round of virtual sessions were run between 11 and 22 September 2023, covering all states and territories.

In June 2023, the Department hosted a Partner visa program session for the staff of MPs and senators. While the information covered general Partner visa issues, the session had a particular focus on how the Department was processing Afghan Partner visa applications.

The Department has also recently changed the way it reflects processing times for Partner visas on its website, presenting a more realistic processing time by differentiating applications that were previously impacted by Ministerial Direction 80. Applicants impacted by this now superseded Ministerial Direction have been contacted individually and their applications are now being processed.

DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY SPOKEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

1 February 2024

QoN Number: 9

Subject: Sponsorship framework - Character Issues

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Mr Noble: Thank you, Jodie. There are some provisions in our sponsorship framework for character issues, and there are certain situations where we can request those police certificates and broader criminal histories, if they exist, in sponsorship to make some of those assessments around obviously the vulnerable applicant who might be with that sponsor. I can take on notice the particulars there and provide the committee the exact detail.

Answer:

The sponsorship framework provisions require sponsors to:

- provide Australian and/or foreign police check(s) when requested; and
- consent to the Department disclosing convictions for relevant offence(s) to the visa applicant(s).

Under policy, police checks are requested for all male sponsors. Delegates are not required to request police checks from female sponsors provided there are no concerns in relation to the sponsor's character.

The sponsorship framework allows the Minister to refuse to approve sponsorship of applicants for Partner (subclass 309 or 820) or Prospective Marriage (subclass 300) visas if the sponsor has a significant criminal record in relation to relevant offence(s) or if the sponsor does not provide the requested police checks.

Not all offences that appear on a police check will come within the scope of the sponsorship framework. Matters involving violence against a person; the threat of violence; the harassment, intimidation or stalking of a person; the breach of an apprehended violence order, human trafficking, slavery or slavery-like practices (including forced marriage) are some of the relevant offences within the scope of the sponsorship framework.

Visa applicants and sponsors are advised in the visa application form and sponsorship form about the possibility that the Department may request police checks from the sponsor. The forms also inform them of the requirement for a sponsor to consent to the Department disclosing convictions for relevant offence(s) to the visa applicant(s), and the implication of not consenting and/or not complying with a request to provide police checks.

Subject to the sponsor's express written consent being provided, it is a matter of policy, to disclose any convictions for a relevant offence(s) to the visa applicant(s) to allow the applicant(s) to make a more informed decision about continuing with the visa application.

DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY SPOKEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

1 February 2024

QoN Number: 10

Subject: University Partnership

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Chair: Is there a structured research program or a partnership with a university, like in a longitudinal sense? When I used to run skilled business migration, this stuff was just normal. You do post-settlement surveys, and any bureaucrat can tell you what percentage of people are employed in their field three years after, but this is just a—
Mr Willard: I can take it on notice and draw it. I can't point to a particular partnership with a university, but we'll check on that. But we do have that continuous survey that we do, which gives us a picture in respect of the partner but also the skilled caseloads.

Ms Bjerregaard: I'll just add that a couple of years ago—and I'd have to check the dates—there was a series of consultations with communities and key stakeholders with regard to 'what if', regarding English language requirements or enhancing English for the partner visa program. There has been some level of testing, engagement and discussion about whether that is something that would be good, whether it's negative or positive, and how that would work. On balance, as Mr Willard said, access to the AMEP was the preferred pathway, as opposed to making that a requirement at the time.

Answer:

The Department of Home Affairs' Continuous Survey of Australia's Migrants (CSAM) examines employment and other settlement outcomes of recently settled migrants and their spouses, including Partner and other Family stream visa holders. CSAM is a series of longitudinal surveys first run in 2009, with migrants surveyed on up to three occasions to capture changes in their labour market status and measure how they have integrated into the Australian labour force.

Results from the most recent surveys, including the latest round conducted at the end of 2023, are expected to become available in 2024. CSAM reports are published on the Department of Home Affairs' website at: www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-statistics/research/live/continuous-survey-australia-migrant

While the Department currently has no specific research projects focused on Family Migration issues, collaboration with the university sector occurs across a range of issues. This work has included:

- designing a framework for academic experts to participate in the Ministerial Advisory Council on Skilled Migration subcommittee
- discussions with the ANU Migration Hub, University of Sydney and University of Adelaide on strengthening government-university partnerships
- supporting a research project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Canada in collaboration with University of Adelaide titled, 'Liberating Migrant Labour? International Mobility Programs in Settler-Colonial Contexts',
- consulting academia and civil society around migration settings during the development of the Migration Strategy, released in December 2023 – The Strategy outlines a new vision for Australia's migration system, with a policy roadmap containing key actions and new policy commitments and areas for future reform.

The Department will continue to explore opportunities to establish tertiary sector partnerships including those examining family migration issues.ⁱ

ⁱ Structured research and longitudinal studies are also discussed in QoN 11.

DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY SPOKEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

1 February 2024

QoN Number: 11

Subject: Partner Visa - English language threshold

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Mr Willard: Certainly, and Jodie reminds me that the issue has been canvassed previously in terms of consultations around it, and there was a high degree of concern. You'd have to consider the sort of circumstance that could lead to. There are sometimes good reasons why people may not be able to get over an English language threshold despite the fact they have a genuine relationship with an Australian citizen.

Chair: Yes.

Mr Willard: And what do you do in that circumstance?

Chair: There are always exemptions, as there are for the English language test for citizenship.

Mr Willard: Yes, there's a lot to consider there.

Chair: Ultimately, yes, I get that. I'll make the point, if you could take it on notice, that the policy issue I'm curious about, coming out of the report on policy and program design and implementation back into the big frame, is what structured, permanent, ongoing policy analysis and impact analysis you do. The impact and the performance framework are not just widgets and processing. They're the actual outcomes that the program is achieving—not just the fiscal outcomes but the social outcomes.

Answer:

The Department of Home Affairs' Continuous Survey of Australia's Migrants (CSAM) examines employment and other settlement outcomes of recently settled migrants and their spouses, including Partner and other Family stream visa holders. CSAM is a series of longitudinal surveys first run in 2009, with migrants surveyed on up to three occasions to capture changes in their labour market status and measure how they have integrated into the Australian labour force.

- The CSAM produces information about labour market outcomes, changes in employment outcomes, demographic and language characteristics, including English proficiency, and other characteristics including the level and field of study for post-school qualifications and housing arrangements.
- The first survey is conducted around six months after the grant of, or entry into Australia on, a permanent or provisional visa, depending on whether the visa

was granted while the person was in or outside Australia. A follow-up survey is conducted 12 months later and, since 2019, another survey is conducted a further 12 months later (at migrants' 2.5 year stage of settlement).

- Results from the most recent surveys, including the latest round conducted at the end of 2023, are expected to become available in 2024.
- CSAM reports are published on the Department of Home Affairs' website at: <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-statistics/research/live/continuous-survey-australia-migrant>

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) produces datasets and reports on a range of issues, including migrant settlement outcomes that are used by the Department of Home Affairs when developing policy proposals.

The Treasury's 'The lifetime fiscal impact of the Australian permanent migration program' (2021) estimated the fiscal impact of permanent migrants, including Family migration stream migrants, over their lifetime.

The Department undertook public consultations in 2021 which showed that there was limited support (around 35 per cent of stakeholders) for the introduction of the English language requirement for Partner visa migrants, with many stakeholders stating that increased accessibility to Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP) is likely to be more effective in supporting English acquisition among Partner migrants.

DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY SPOKEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

1 February 2024

QoN Number: 12

Subject: Decision records - lodged with the AAT

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Chair: Okay. Can I just ask you about the AAT and then, if we get a sec, child visas, and then I think we'll have to reconvene. We'll take stock and breathe and look at your answers. On the AAT, there was evidence at table 3.10. Section 352 of the act requires the department to forward the decision record of a case lodged with the AAT to the AAT within 10 working days. And yet that table shows that there were 11 family visa cases that were more than a thousand days overdue, which is bizarre, and there were 66 files in total overdue. Have you fixed that system? How can a case be a thousand days overdue to the court?

Mr Willard: I don't have an answer to that second part. I might just ask if we have anything we could provide or whether we'd need to take that on notice in respect of the AAT.

Mr Noble: In particular, in what was raised in the report, we'll take that on notice to provide a response, but I can assure you, Chair, that we do afford priority to all AAT processes. I'd be confident there are no systemic issues there.

Answer:

The Department of Home Affairs (the Department) and the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT) have established processes in place for the transfer of files under review. Currently the Department receives requests for files from the AAT via email, usually daily, as new review lodgements are received. The file requests are forwarded by the Department's Tribunal Liaison team directly onto the visa processing team where the visa application was refused.

The visa processing team examines the Departmental documentation and/or information for relevancy of material for the review of a decision by the AAT, issues a certificate of non-disclosure (s375, s375A or s376 of the *Migration Act 1958*) (the Act) where necessary and manages any protected information that may be found on a departmental file (s503A of the Act) appropriately.

The visa processing team sends the file to the AAT within the specified timeframe as set out in s352 of the Act, using the Digital File Exchange system.

The Department's Tribunal Liaison section monitors the file requests and where any file has not been sent to the AAT within the 10-day timeframe, the AAT will flag this with our Tribunal Liaison section who will send a follow up email to the relevant visa processing team urgently requesting the file be provided.

The Department has no reporting capacity regarding these AAT file requests as the requests are not automated, the process is manual and the data is held by the AAT. As such, we are unable to verify and follow-up the information that appears in table 3.10 of the ANAO's report.

The AAT's most recent report indicates there are 36 Family visa files overdue, with the longest being 199 days. Cross-verification of the records in Departmental systems indicate nine of these have been finalised and 27 remain in progress.

**HOME AFFAIRS PORTFOLIO
DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS**

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY SPOKEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

1 February 2024

QoN Number: 13

Subject: Policy and policy systems - AAT decisions

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Chair: This is another AAT question. This comes through my office, and I've lost count of the number of letters I used to write to Alex Hawke about it. In the old days, when the AAT made a decision and recommended that a visa be granted and remitted the case for decision, it seemed that it used to go to the top of the pile, because it had probably been hanging around for years. What's the policy and what's the system in place to give some priority or respect to the AAT decisions? There were just unbelievable numbers of AAT decisions, at least in the previous term of government—I've lost memory of the term before—where the fact that the AAT had made a recommendation to grant a visa didn't seem to mean anything.

Mr Willard: Generally they are prioritised.

Chair: Is that a formal policy position, unless there is a reason not to? I get that occasionally ministers use their character powers and there are exceptions, but that's still a decision.

Mr Willard: A remittal can be a finding that a particular criterion is met but not all the criteria are met, so there can be still work to do once a case is remitted, but I think that, as a general rule, they are prioritised. If we're not sure, we can come back on that.

Chair: If you could, just let us know what the position is, because it was an issue that I discussed, I think with Abul Rizvi, where he'd also observed that the department used to have a formal understanding, and it was actually an agreement that they could exceed the planning level if it related to just getting the AAT cases done, because that was the courteous thing to do to the court. No-one really minded too much. It seems to pass the common-sense test. If the court says, 'Yes, this is straightforward,' and you look at it and go, 'It's straightforward,' it just should go to the top of the pile.

Mr Willard: Yes. I would agree in broad terms. Can we come back just to make sure that detail is correct?

Chair: Okay.

Answer:

Priority of AAT remits is in place. Once the AAT remits a visa application to the Department directing that the applicant has met one or more criterion for the visa, the application receives priority allocation.

In relation to deciding the application, policy guidance for decision makers provides that a decision should be made as soon as practicable. As all criteria must be satisfied before the visa can be granted, cases must be assessed against the remaining criteria and in some circumstances, additional processing time is required to assess these criteria.

**HOME AFFAIRS PORTFOLIO
DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS**

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY SPOKEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

1 February 2024

QoN Number: 14

Subject: Citizenship audits

Asked by: Senator Linda Reynolds

Question:

Senator Reynolds: Can I just ask on notice, the folders that were found in the cadenza or compactus or whatever they were in, what happened to those?

Chair: that was the citizenship audits a few years ago

Answer:

Auditor-General Report No.25 of 2018-19, on *Efficiency of the Processing of Applications for Citizenship by Conferral* (page 39), refers to seven applications for which departmental records included notes of the application having been 'Filed Undocumented arrival drawer', 'placed into IMA tambour' or 'placed in "Undocumented Arrivals" cabinet'.

These applications for Australian citizenship had, at the time of the audit, already been finalised.

Since the audit was conducted, departmental practices have changed. Any paper applications for Australian citizenship are digitised and managed through corporate departmental systems, to ensure they are tracked and progressed as appropriate.

**HOME AFFAIRS PORTFOLIO
DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS**

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY WRITTEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

9 February 2024

QoN Number: 15

Subject: Process development - consideration of the community

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Has Home Affairs developed a process, as suggested by the report, to explicitly set out how it has considered the advice of the community while developing family migration program proposals?

A) Has Home Affairs now established a process to record consultation on Family Program migration proposals?

B) How does Home Affairs inform government of feedback from stakeholders collected on the annual migration program?

C) What activities does the department consider 'community engagement'? The audit report found an inconsistent application on the term. (para 2.66-2.74)

Answer:

The Department of Home Affairs has a process to record and analyse consultation with the public on the planning of the permanent Migration Program, including both Family and Skilled components, which occurs annually through targeted roundtables and public submissions.

A) The Department publishes a call for public submissions on its website that seeks views from the public on both Family and Skilled aspects of the Migration Program, among other relevant planning factors. It is open to stakeholders to provide a written submission that goes to a particular component or aspect of the Migration Program. The Department amplifies the request for public submissions through our Community Liaison Officer and Business Industry Regional Outreach networks.

Alongside the call for public submissions, the Department hosts a series of roundtable consultations to discuss the size and composition of the permanent Migration Program, including the Family stream. In consultations for the 2023–24 and 2024–25, the Department hosted specific community organisations roundtables. Roundtable consultations also seek feedback on all aspects of planning the permanent Migration Program. Attendees at roundtables are welcome to comment on the Skilled and/or Family components of the program. The Department also seeks views from state and territory governments throughout the consultation process.

The Department maintains records of all written submissions and roundtable consultations. Written submissions and discussions at roundtables are analysed and synthesised to provide a view of key themes and outcomes.

B) The Department provides advice to the Minister for Immigration, Citizenship, Migrant Services and Multicultural Affairs on the outcomes of public consultation shortly after its conclusion. Stakeholder views are used to inform advice to the Minister on the optimal size and composition of the coming Migration Program, which is set alongside the Government's Budget process.

C) The Department considers community engagement to be those activities undertaken by Community Liaison Officers in person, and by video conference, phone and email. Engagements may be one-on-one, with a small group from a single organisation or with multiple stakeholders or organisations at the same time.

The Department's Community Liaison Officer (CLO) Network has an essential role in supporting Australia's multicultural society by building and maintaining relationships with a wide range of cultural, ethnic and faith-based communities. The CLO Network supports a two-way information flow between communities and the Australian Government. This includes disseminating information to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities, reinforcing critical messaging, and understanding the impact of the messaging on CALD communities.

This engagement supports an inclusive multicultural Australia by enhancing the Australian Government's understanding of communities, informing policy and programs, and empowering communities to access Government information and services.

**HOME AFFAIRS PORTFOLIO
DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS**

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY WRITTEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

9 February 2024

QoN Number: 16

Subject: Visa for Children - factoring timing complexities

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Home affairs advised the ANAO that visas for children are generally complex and may take longer than a year to finalise.

A) How does the department currently factor this complexity into planning, as suggested by the audit report?

Answer:

The Department of Home Affairs' September 2023 submission to the Committee discussed how the Department manages visa program planning, including the Child visa program.

The time taken to process visa applications can vary according to the individual circumstances and complexities of each case. The quality and completeness of applications, applicants' responsiveness to requests for information, and the complexity often involved in assessing 'genuineness of relationship', character, health and security requirements, as well as verification of documentation, can influence processing times. Verification services are required in some visa caseloads which present with higher rates of fraud, and there are additional challenges in the provision of verification services which include limited agency presence online, decentralised record keeping of civil documents, language barriers and relationships with foreign government agencies.

Australia also has international obligations under the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction and is a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child 1991. There is a heightened obligation to ensure the authenticity of presented documents and information to mitigate the risks around custody and guardianship, illegal adoption, surrogacy and movement of children, including abduction, human trafficking and child exploitation.

Efforts have been made to focus on older applications, particularly for the Orphan Relative subclass. This is likely to show an increase in processing times as these applications are finalised. Improving DNA testing processes with external stakeholders has addressed wait times for applicants undertaking DNA testing for the Department's assessment of 'genuineness of relationship' criteria.

Planning is underway by the Department for the 2024-25 migration program planning year, with issues surrounding the Child visa program included in considerations. The Department will provide clear advice to Government of the impact on processing timeframes and on hand caseloads with regard to setting arrangements for the Child program.

**HOME AFFAIRS PORTFOLIO
DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS**

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY WRITTEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

9 February 2024

QoN Number: 17

Subject: Visa information - language availability

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Has Home Affairs taken any steps to ensure that information about visas is available in languages other than English on the department's website?

Answer:

The Department of Home Affairs currently provides information on its website about visas in languages other than English on a limited case-by-case basis. It has also begun development of an on-demand web translation capability to create a large-scale, rapid translation tool that will offer a significant improvement in engaging with CALD communities accessing the Department's website. Subject to funding, this will result in additional translated content on the Home Affairs website from 1 July 2024.

Visa information currently available on the Department's website in languages other than English:

- Lebanon Visa Support, available in Arabic.
URL: <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/help-and-support/hamas-israel-conflict/lebanon-visa-support>
- Afghanistan update, available in Dari, Hazaragi and Pashto.
URL: <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/help-and-support/afghanistan-update>
- Departmental forms, a limited number of forms are available in various community languages.
URL: <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/help-support/departmental-forms/pdf-forms#>

More broadly, information currently available on the Department's website in languages other than English:

- Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), available in various community languages.
URL: <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/settling-in-australia/amep/information-in-languages>
- Australian Cultural Orientation (AUSCO) Program, available in various community languages.
URL: <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/settling-in-australia/ausco/information-in-your-language>
- Community safety and services, available in most community languages.
URL: <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/covid19inlanguage/community-safety-and-services>
- Health, available in most community languages.
URL: <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/covid19inlanguage/health>
- Multicultural affairs statement, available in various community languages.
URL: <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/multicultural-affairs/about-multicultural-affairs/our-statement>
- 'Life in Australia' booklet, available in various community languages.
URL: <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/help-support/meeting-our-requirements/australian-values>
- Citizenship interview and test, available in various community languages.
URL: <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/citizenship/test-and-interview/our-common-bond>

**HOME AFFAIRS PORTFOLIO
DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS**

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY WRITTEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

9 February 2024

QoN Number: 18

Subject: Visa timeframe considerations

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Home Affairs told the ANAO that some family visas clients wait more than a year for a final decision or update on their application as a result of 'digital limitations' and 'difficulty breaking down information'.

A) Is the department considering how to provide applicants with helpful advice within meaningful timeframes?

B) Can the department summarise what has led to current IT systems not being acceptable for modern service delivery and what is being done to improve these systems?

C) Given the most frequent enquiry to the Home Affairs Call Centre is a client wanting to check the status of their visa applications, does Home Affairs consider improving the department's information systems a priority?

Answer:

A) The Department of Home Affairs is aware that some visa applicants experience extended delays awaiting the outcome on their applications. Since the release of the ANAO report, the Department has introduced a variety of caseload management tools and reporting to proactively monitor and manage aged caseloads.

This is evident, for example, in the management of the now revoked Ministerial Direction 80 impacted caseload. While the majority of these cases are being assessed in lodgement date/year order, more recent cases may be assessed outside of date order, where there are compelling and compassionate circumstances necessitating earlier processing. For example, priority processing would be afforded if an applicant has personal circumstances outside the norm requiring urgent travel, or dependent applicants who have turned 22 years of age and are at risk of aging out. The Department also regularly monitors health and character clearances that will expire and cannot be extended with an aim to ensure those cases are finalised prior to clearance expiry where possible.

Applicants impacted by this now superseded Ministerial Direction have been individually contacted and their applications are now being processed. In addition to these initiatives, the Department has also revised webpages in order to provide meaningful information to clients in an easy-to-access manner. The website includes:

- Frequently Asked Questions cover standard processing questions <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/partner-visa-frequently-asked-questions>
- Partner processing enquiry form <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/help-support/departmental-forms/online-forms/partner-processing-enquiry-form>
- A dynamic document checklist through ImmiAccount: clients are encouraged to provide fully documented applications in order for the Department to decide on their application in a timelier manner.

The Department's website has been updated and now conveys a more realistic processing time for on-hand and new applications, by excluding processing time data for applications previously impacted by Ministerial Direction 80.

The Department will continue to explore ways to provide applicants with helpful and timely advice on their applications.

B) The Department has a number of digital channels that support the delivery of services including the Home Affairs website, Virtual Assistant, ImmiAccount and other online portals.

ImmiAccount is the Department's online system that provides clients and organisations with a single entry point to access online services, including self-service lodgement of their visa and citizenship applications. ImmiAccount currently provides clients up to seven application progress status indicators. For some visa categories with high numbers of on hand applications, there may be extended periods in which there is limited or no change in status. In addition, some applications involve complex decision-making steps which cannot be readily translated to a 'status' display in an online system.

Despite these constraints, ImmiAccount is subject to regular system updates and enhancements. This includes improvements to streamline the user experience, the security of online personal and identifying information, and to ensure the system continues to be an efficient, effective and modern service delivery channel.

C) The Department continues to explore opportunities to further support client self-service through its digital and online tools, reducing the need to call for application status-related enquiries. A key role of the Global Service Centre (Home Affairs' call centre) is to assist clients to access the information they need via the Department's self-service online and digital channels such as the website, Virtual Assistant, ImmiAccount and other online portals. These online and digital self-service offerings are increasingly able to assist client with their status-related inquiries.

More specifically, the Department's website has been updated with a processing time estimation tool (the Global Visa Processing Time guide). The tool provides a visual representation which helps clients estimate how long their application is expected to take to finalise based on the most recent data available within the Department. The tool includes processing time estimates for a number of visa subclasses within the Family visa program, and has been well received by clients (based on feedback received since the introduction of the new guide).

**HOME AFFAIRS PORTFOLIO
DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS**

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY WRITTEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

9 February 2024

QoN Number: 19

Subject: Determined measurement on Family Migration Program visa processing issues

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Has Home Affairs determined how to measure the impact of the Family Executive Dashboard on Family Migration Program visa processing issues?

Answer:

The Family Executive Dashboard will identify processing inactivity and aged cases, and provides a snapshot of the overall health of the Family Migration Program. This dashboard is supplemented by a range of new additional products, such as targeted program health reports, that provide a strong reporting framework to monitor, analyse and remediate the Family Migration caseload.

Current reporting and data analysis process for the Family visa program involves the manual collation of caseload data across multiples suites of reporting. It is expected with the completion of the Family Executive Dashboard, it will become the primary reporting tool for the network, enabling a consistent, up-to-date comprehensive view on that caseload encompassing lodged, queued, finalization and on-hand caseload data. It is also expected that this will support identification, monitoring and targeted remedial action where necessary.

It is anticipated that Family Executive Dashboard reporting, coupled with further targeted program health reports, will be used to inform monthly discussions held across Senior Executive and Program Directors within the Immigration Group (which have been in establishment since April 2023) that surface, analyse and remediate Family Migration issues including processing inactivity.

**HOME AFFAIRS PORTFOLIO
DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS**

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY WRITTEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

9 February 2024

QoN Number: 20

Subject: Decrease in processing issues

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Have the number of processing issues decreased since the introduction of the dashboard?

Answer:

The introduction of the Family (Partner) Executive Dashboard in August 2023 has enabled a consistent, up-to-date comprehensive view of the global Partner caseload. The dashboard is a reporting tool that provides a holistic view of the caseload enabling identification, monitoring and targeted remedial action where necessary. While the complexity inherent in the Partner caseload remains, the dashboard provides visibility and activity insight key to strategic decision making and planning for the program.

One feature of the Dashboard that was not previously available to the Department is more granular management of the aged caseload, with a greater disaggregation of cases aged more than 24 months. These cases are now broken up into six further groups, (24 months to 30 months; 30 months to 3 years; 3 years to 4 years; 4 years to 5 years; 5 years to 10 years; greater than 10). This feature has enabled targeted action and monitoring of progress in relation to the most aged caseload.

Specific case factors that cause or exacerbate processing delays are outside the scope of the dashboard.

In 2023-24, the Department remains focused on reducing the first stage Partner and Prospective Marriage visa pipeline. The more detailed data on the aged caseload that the Dashboard provides is helping the department with its focus on older, complex cases on-hand as well as second stage applications.

Table 1 below illustrates a significant reduction of aged on-hand first stage Partner applications, particularly applications that are 24 months or older. As at 31 December 2023, 7,450 (14.12 per cent) first stage Partner on-hand applications were 24 months or older, compared to 19,891 (30.75 per cent) on 30 June 2021 and 12,289 (21.00 per cent) on 30 June 2023.

As at 31 December 2023, there were 52,780 first stage Partner and Prospective Marriage visa applications on-hand, down 9.8 per cent compared to 30 June 2023.

- The reduction in applications on-hand is despite a continued increase in lodgements. In 2023-24, as at 31 December 2023, 27,553 first stage Partner visa applications have been lodged, up 22.6 per cent compared to the same period last program year.

Also as at 31 December 2023, there were 29,335 eligible second stage Partner visa applications on-hand, down 38.4 per cent compared to 30 June 2023.

Table 1

On-hand First Stage Partner Applications by Age

Snapshot Date	30/06/21		31/12/21		30/06/22		31/12/22		30/06/23		31/12/23	
On Hand Age	On hand	% of Total	On hand	% of Total	On hand	% of Total	On hand	% of Total	On hand	% of Total	On hand	% of Total
14d or less	3,691	5.71%	1,352	2.25%	3,040	5.35%	1,888	3.29%	4,978	8.51%	2,254	4.27%
15d - 21d	817	1.26%	698	1.16%	862	1.52%	1,054	1.84%	1,088	1.86%	1,391	2.64%
22 d - 1m	1,200	1.86%	1,052	1.75%	1,446	2.55%	1,497	2.61%	1,871	3.20%	1,807	3.42%
GT 1m - 2m	3,205	4.95%	3,451	5.74%	3,540	6.23%	4,092	7.13%	4,734	8.09%	5,329	10.10%
GT 2m - 3m	2,779	4.30%	4,732	7.86%	3,222	5.67%	3,431	5.98%	4,025	6.88%	4,567	8.65%
GT 3m - 6m	6,962	10.76%	9,108	15.14%	7,795	13.72%	9,170	15.99%	9,080	15.52%	9,404	17.82%
GT 6m - 9m	4,893	7.56%	6,320	10.50%	6,172	10.87%	7,482	13.04%	6,501	11.11%	7,998	15.15%
GT 9m - 12m	4,206	6.50%	3,801	6.32%	4,089	7.20%	4,088	7.13%	5,230	8.94%	3,917	7.42%
GT 12m - 18m	9,779	15.12%	5,279	8.77%	5,347	9.41%	5,448	9.50%	5,617	9.60%	5,959	11.29%
GT 18m - 24m	7,263	11.23%	5,671	9.42%	3,365	5.92%	3,251	5.67%	3,102	5.30%	2,704	5.12%
GT 24m	19,891	30.75%	18,709	31.09%	17,921	31.55%	15,963	27.83%	12,289	21.00%	7,450	14.12%
Onhand	64,686		60,173		56,799		57,364		58,515		52,780	

* First Stage Partner visas include subclass 309 and 820 and Prospective Marriage (subclass 300).

**HOME AFFAIRS PORTFOLIO
DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS**

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY WRITTEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

9 February 2024

QoN Number: 21

Subject: Processes to ensure recommendations for improvements

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Has the Home Affairs established clear processes to ensure recommendations for improvements to the Family Program are followed through, as suggested by the Auditor General?

A) How is Home Affairs ensuring these improvements are monitored and evaluated to determine if visa assessment errors are decreasing?

Answer:

The Department of Home Affairs has clear processes to ensure recommendations for improvements to the Family Program are completed. The Audit and Assurance Branch within the Integrity and Security Division monitors and assesses closure of recommendations arising from all Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) performance audits. This process includes an independent quality assurance process before determining that a recommendation has been implemented and can be considered closed. The Audit and Risk Committee also formally reviews and endorses closure assessments related to ANAO recommendations.

A) Apart from the oversight provided by the Audit and Assurance Branch monitoring and evaluating the implementation of improvements, the Department also has established processes to ensure visa assessment errors are managed within acceptable thresholds.

The Immigration Group Line One Assurance Activities Procedural Instruction sets out quality checking requirements for program delivery areas within the Group and mandates the use of the Evidence of Quality in Performance (Equip) system for Quality Control and Quality Assurance activities. EQuIP operates as a centralised Quality Management system that enables a consistent approach to quality checking with the ability to quickly and easily report on the quality of work and the number of checks completed.

The system provides managers with valuable, real-time reporting that can be used to identify issues, trends and gaps in systems and processes within their team, location and program. Any vulnerabilities or systemic errors are identified quickly and addressed accordingly, strengthening the overall integrity and efficiency of visa and citizenship processing.

**HOME AFFAIRS PORTFOLIO
DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS**

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY WRITTEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

9 February 2024

QoN Number: 22

Subject: Measuring performance against Target 16

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Has Home Affairs changed how it is measuring performance against Target 16 in the Corporate Plan, and resolved the issues highlighted with the target in the audit report? (Para 3.120)

Answer:

Para 3.120 referenced the 2022-23 Corporate Plan targets. The Department of Home Affairs has updated targets set out in the Portfolio Budget Statements 2023-24 and 2023-24 Corporate Plan.

Target 16 in 2023-24 states that, aligned to the 2023-24 PBS target, median visa processing times for demand-driven migration and temporary visa applications are reduced across at least four categories, in line with Government priorities.

In addition to Target 16, the Department monitors visa processing efficiency via internal service standards that include efficiency in processing.

The Department has commenced development of the 2024–25 Performance Framework, including introducing an ‘efficiency’ component to Target 16. Efficiencies will consider relevant inputs that contribute to visa processing performance.

**HOME AFFAIRS PORTFOLIO
DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS**

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY WRITTEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

9 February 2024

QoN Number: 23

Subject: Means to determine the effects of activities

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Has Home Affairs established a means to determine the effects of activities such as increased recruitment, improved communication with applications, management of processing on the time taken to finalise applications? (para 3.126, p.70)

Answer:

Following the release of the ANAO report, the Department created a comprehensive monthly Program Health Framework to facilitate the Family program, among others, to engage with standardised internal evaluation metrics, targets and thresholds covering on-hand application volumes, processing times, productivity, quality management and other client service metrics. It is now an established and routine component of program management. This includes performance against service standards for client feedback being monitored and managed to ensure consistent compliance; sharing initiatives on staff development to enhance capability and capacity; and greater awareness of targets and progress towards them.

In August 2023, the Department published the Family Visa Program (Partner visas) Executive Dashboard (the Dashboard). This dashboard gives an overview of the overall performance of the Partner visa program as well as Partner first and second stage visa processing progress. It is a primary reporting tool for the Partner network, enabling a consistent, up-to-date comprehensive view of the Partner caseload. This supports identification, monitoring and targeted remedial action where necessary.

The combination of the Program Health Framework and the Dashboard enables the department to better measure and analyse performance following implementation of initiatives as well as reporting on quantifiable results. Furthermore it encouraged identifying opportunities for enhancement, collaboration and innovation across all visa programs.

The improvements in the Partner program evidenced in the above include:

- In 2023-24 as at 31 December 2023, 31,291 first stage Partner and Prospective Marriage visas have been granted, up 61.6 per cent compared to the same time in 2022-23.
- As at 31 December 2023, there were 52,780 first stage Partner and Prospective Marriage visa applications on hand, down 9.8 per cent compared to 30 June 2023.
- The reduction in applications on hand is despite a continued increase in lodgements. In 2023-24, as at 31 December 2023, 27,553 first stage Partner visa applications have been lodged, up 22.6 per cent compared to the same period last program year.
- In 2023-24 as at 31 December 2023, 37,764 second stage Partner visas have been granted, up 188.7% compared to the same time in 2022-23 when 15,966 second stage visas had been granted.
- As at 31 December 2023, there were 29,335 eligible second stage Partner visa applications on hand, down 38.4 per cent compared to 30 June 2023.
- In 2023-24 as at 31 December 2023, the median processing time for first stage Partner visa applications was 217 days (seven months). This is a reduction of 66 days when compared to the same period in 2022-23.

The Department has developed a number of tools, policy and procedural guidelines to provide the ability to capture meaningful client feedback and clear guidance on how the Department responds to client feedback related to its immigration, citizenship and border control functions. This includes a dashboard that displays total complaints per program, and the outcomes of those complaints (i.e. how it has been resolved). This work was completed in December 2023.

A holistic client feedback model is under development to capture, categorise and analyse client comments through a range of feedback channels including the Department's Global Feedback Unit, Global Service Centre, and Parliamentary Liaison Network. This component will be completed in March 2024.

DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY WRITTEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

1 February 2024

QoN Number: 24

Subject: Benchmarks or targets for efficiency

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Has Home Affairs now established benchmarks or targets for efficiency in finalising applications? The audit noted a 'time standard' represents an ideal standard.

Answer:

Yes. The Department of Home Affairs has established a range of performance targets for all visa programs, including visa processing time targets.

Following the release of the ANAO report, the Department created a comprehensive monthly Program Health framework for the Family program, to set standardised evaluation metrics, targets and thresholds covering on-hand application volumes, processing times, productivity, quality management and other client service metrics.

From April 2023, as part of the Program Health Framework, the Family Migration Program commenced monitoring visa outcomes on a monthly basis adjusting processing targets and caseload on-hand thresholds.

In July 2023, the Department included a standard set of evaluation metrics and monitoring expectations in the Immigration Program Management Procedural Instruction. This document mandates a standardised approach to program management, and outlines key principles and guidelines to be implemented across all visa programs.

The Program Health Framework is now an established and routine component of program management. It has already enabled action and resolution across key indicators, and provides a forum to share initiatives and learnings across all visa programs. Examples include, performance against service standards for client feedback being monitored and managed to ensure consistent compliance; sharing initiatives on staff development to enhance capability and capacity; and greater awareness of targets and progress towards them.

DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY WRITTEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

1 February 2024

QoN Number: 25

Subject: Standardised approach for evaluation

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

In response to Recommendation 4 Home Affairs stated it had mandated a standardised approach for evaluation, a monthly report on evaluation metrics, and a monthly departmental performance meeting.

A) Can Home Affairs expand on how these changes have resulted in improvements to the efficiency of visa processing for the Family Migration Program?

Answer:

Following the Program Health and evaluation-related changes, coupled with related policy changes, the Department of Home Affairs has seen improvements in the efficiency of Partner first and second stage visa processing:

- In 2023-24 as at 31 December 2023, 31,291 first stage Partner and Prospective Marriage visas have been granted, up 61.6 per cent compared to the same time in 2022-23.
- As at 31 December 2023, there were 52,780 first stage Partner and Prospective Marriage visa applications on hand, down 9.8 per cent compared to 30 June 2023.
- In 2023-24 as at 31 December 2023, 37,764 second stage Partner visas have been granted, up 188.7 per cent compared to the same time in 2022-23 when 15,966 second stage visas had been granted.
- As at 31 December 2023, there were 29,335 eligible second stage Partner visa applications on hand, down 38.4 per cent compared to 30 June 2023.

DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY WRITTEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

1 February 2024

QoN Number: 26

Subject: Implementing targets

Asked by: Julian Hill MP

Question:

Why did Home Affairs not implement targets for the citizenship or visa programs, as recommended by the 2019 ANAO audit of processing citizenship applications?

Answer:

Auditor-General Report No.25 of 2018-19, on *Efficiency of the Processing of Applications for Citizenship by Conferral*, included the recommendation that:

The Department of Home Affairs:

- a) re-introduce externally reported key performance indicators of the time taken to decide applications for citizenship by conferral; and
- b) expand its published processing times to also report the time being taken to decide applications for citizenship by conferral per month, including decisions to refuse citizenship.

The Department disagreed with the ANAO recommendation that it should publish further information, particularly around key performance indicators of processing times.

The entity response to the audit noted that, as each application for citizenship is assessed upon its merits and individual circumstances, in the Department's view, such information would not be meaningful and may be misleading to clients.

Instead, the Department has enhanced information on processing times to more clearly distinguish between the time taken from lodgement of an application to decision, between date of approval of an application to date of ceremony, and from date of application to date of ceremony. The 25th, 50th, 75th and 90th percentile processing times are given for each of these periods. Ceremony wait times are also published, for each local government area in Australia.

All processing times are available on the Department's website and are updated monthly. Processing times are intended to provide a realistic guide to applicants. Information is also provided as to what factors may affect processing times for individual applicants.

DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY WRITTEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

1 February 2024

QoN Number: 27

Subject: Standard timeframes and costs

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Since the audit, has the department identified standard timeframes and costs involved in processing applications of varying complexity? (para 3.67, p.55)

Answer:

The department has set internal standardised performance service standards that consist of targets and benchmarks to drive performance. Efficiency metrics include processing times and productivity service standards designed to encourage innovation and the pursuit of a world-leading immigration system. Performance outcomes are monitored and service standards are periodically reviewed to ensure that they remain fit-for-purpose.

Visa applications are assessed individually. As the level of the complexity of each application can vary, impacting resources and processing times, the department uses averages when setting measures and benchmarks.

Externally, the new visa processing time guide on the department's website ([Global visa processing times \(homeaffairs.gov.au\)](https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/global-visa-processing-times)) gives clients an indication of how long their visa application may take to process. This estimated timeframe is based on how long it has taken to process recently finalised applications. It provides applicants with a better and more accurate indication of processing times.

The cost of visa processing has various components, ranging from staffing costs (including processing, administration and support), to systems costs and property costs. These require careful and comprehensive analysis and calculation. Work is currently underway to analyse these components and inform the necessary calculations.

DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY WRITTEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

1 February 2024

QoN Number: 28

Subject: Update on the implementation of the new risk-tiering model

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Can Home Affairs please provide an update on the implementation of the new risk-tiering model for the onshore Partner caseload, anticipated to be implemented by October 2023? [Audit Recommendation no.2]

A) Can the department provide an update on the review of the Caseload Risk and Integrity Strategy, which Home Affairs stated would be reviewed in 2023?

B) What changes has the department made following the review of the Caseload Risk and Integrity Strategy?

C) Can the department provide further detail on what it is doing to ensure prioritisation and risk tiering process are fit for purpose and consistently applied across ALL Family Migration Program visa types, not just Partner caseload?

Answer:

The Department of Home Affairs has implemented a new risk-tiering model that delivers consistent prioritisation and risk tiering processes across the Partner visa program irrespective of processing location. The new risk-tiering model was implemented on 30 October 2023.

The new risk-tiering model provides a consistent approach to identify Partner visa applications that match against pre-determined profiles of concern and enables near immediate and robust enhancements to risk matching criteria.

The risk-tiering model will be subject to monitoring and enhancements post its implementation to ensure it maintains accuracy and accounts for any changes to risks in the Partner program.

To date, no significant issues have been identified with the way the new risk-tiering model is interacting with systems and processes, nor with the associated risk based allocations within the Partner program.

A) The Department is currently reviewing the Caseload Risk and Integrity Strategy to incorporate a clear focus on end-to-end risk management for Temporary, Permanent and Refugee and Humanitarian visa programs. The Strategy is also being updated to reflect an increased focus on strengthening the integrity of Australia's Migration System. The Department intends to finalise the Strategy by June 2024. This revised completion date will allow the Strategy to reflect an enhanced whole-of-immigration continuum approach.

B) In the second half of 2023, the Department further consolidated risk and integrity teams previously operating in the Refugee and Humanitarian visa program into the broader end-to-end caseload risk and integrity capability.

To date this has resulted in strengthened end-to-end management of risk flowing from the Pacific Labour Mobility Program to the onshore Permanent Protection Visa, and greater sharing of risk and integrity concerns across visa caseloads.

- For example, closer risk management of suspected sex workers in the Partner visa caseload who had previously applied for and been refused an onshore Permanent Protection Visa.

The revised Strategy will incorporate extra risk controls and feedback loops that have been enabled through this bolstered risk and integrity capability.

C) The Department's Caseload Risk and Integrity Capability supports the identification and treatment of risk in all Family caseloads. The capability reviews all visa programs to ensure risk settings are fit for purpose and consistently applied across visa processing teams.

There are currently 22 risk system profiles/alerts in place targeting the Child visa program and the Other Family visa program which allows applications to these programs to be assessed on the basis of their risk.

The Department also intends to review the other family visa caseloads for risk tiering in 2024-25, noting that these caseloads are lower in volume and therefore are relatively easy to manage through a more simple risk profile and alert based approach.

In relation to measures to ensure prioritisation and risk processes remain fit-for-purpose across all Family Migration Program visas, Family migration applications are processed in line with Ministerial Directions. The processing priorities (with highest priority first) as outlined in Ministerial Direction 102 (Direction 102) are below.

- family migration applications that have been subject to ministerial intervention
- applications by a partner or a dependent child
- applications by an orphan relative
- applications by a contributory parent or a contributory aged parent
- applications by a carer
- applications by a parent, aged parent, remaining relative or aged dependant relative.

Ministerial Direction 103 (Direction 103) provides for processing prioritisation of all Family visa applications received by the Department in line with program year caps. While Direction 102 sets out the overall priorities for Family visas processing, Direction 103 provides specific guidance to:

- The processing of applications for Family visas in the order in which they are received by the Department; and
- The finalisation of applications that are affected by the annual capping arrangement under the Migration Program.
- Direction 103 provides that the Department may backdate a queue date where processing has been affected by an unreasonable processing delay.

Under section 85 of the Migration Act 1958, the Parent and Other Family visa categories are capped each financial year.

All Parent and Other Family visa applications are assessed in lodgement date order. When a valid Parent and Other Family visa application is received, it undergoes an assessment against the core visa criteria, including health and character requirements where applicable.

An application that meets the core visa criteria is assigned a queue date and placed in the queue. The queue date assigned is the date the visa application is assessed as meeting the core visa criteria.

DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY WRITTEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

1 February 2024

QoN Number: 29

Subject: Monitoring other agencies response times

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

Could Home Affairs explain to the Committee why the department does not monitor how long it takes for other agencies to respond to requests for information, or how delayed responses impact visa processing times?

A) Does the department intend to create a formal agreements with other government agencies to ensure information is obtained in a timely manner?

Answer:

The Department monitors cases where external referrals are pending as part of the management of aged or aging cases. The Department engages with external agencies on these cases to progress an outcome if possible. Extended delays are most frequently related to integrity, serious character and/or national security concerns.

A) The Department maintains bilateral memoranda of understanding (MOU) with other entities including government agencies. These MOUs act as an administrative tool to document agreed relationships, expectations, roles and responsibilities between the Department of Home Affairs and its stakeholders. These agreements are intended, among other things, to ensure information is shared freely and in as timely a manner as possible.

DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY WRITTEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Public Accounts and Audit

01 February 2024

QoN Number: 30

Subject: Complaints dashboard and client feedback - Timeframes for completion

Asked by: Julian Hill

Question:

In Home Affairs submission responding in recommendation 1, the department noted it was refining a complaints dashboard and a product that would sort client feedback by theme. Can Home Affairs provide further detail about the status of these activities and if they are on track to be completed by December 2023 and March 2024 as expected?

Answer:

The Department of Home Affairs has developed a number of tools, policy and procedural guidelines to provide the ability to capture meaningful client feedback and clear guidance on how the Department responds to client feedback related to its immigration, citizenship and border control functions. This includes:

- A dashboard that displays total complaints per program, and the outcomes of those complaints (i.e. how it has been resolved). This work was completed in December 2023.
- A holistic client feedback model is under development to capture, categorise and analyse client comments through a range of feedback channels including the Department's Global Feedback Unit, Global Service Centre, and Parliamentary Liaison Network. This component will be completed in March 2024.

Once implemented, departmental program areas will be able to access insight into trends and tension points, which will encourage continuous service delivery improvement.