



Australian Government
Department of Home Affairs



Department of Home Affairs Submission to the Inquiry into Policy and Program Design and Implementation

Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Department of Home Affairs welcomes the findings of the Management of Migration to Australia — Family Migration Program, Auditor-General Report No. 16, 2022-23 (the Family Migration Program report) published by the Australian National Audit Office in March 2023.

The ANAO's Family Migration Program report was a timely and valuable contribution to the management of the Family Migration Program, finding as it did, that improvements were needed in governance, prioritisation and risk, stakeholder consultation, reporting and business processes. The Department has acknowledged this in its response to the audit.

Through program year 2023-24, the Department will implement a more targeted, efficient and outcomes-focused migration system; a system that is simpler to navigate for clients, embeds responsive client service and maintains effective governance, oversight and risk management.

On 2 September 2022, the Minister for Home Affairs, the Hon Clare O'Neil MP announced three eminent persons would lead a comprehensive review of Australia's migration system to ensure it better meets existing challenges and sets a clear direction for the coming decades. In February 2023, the Review conducted Family and Community roundtables directly engaging with stakeholders such as the Multicultural Youth Advisory Network, Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils and the Australian Multicultural Council. In addition, the Review received 483 submissions that covered a range of different topics including Family Migration Program settings.

The Australian Government is now developing a Migration Strategy taking into account all feedback and stakeholder roundtables, which is to be released later in 2023.

The Department has been making inroads into the complex and aged caseload highlighted by the ANAO in its Family Migration Program report. Immediately after the fall of Kabul, the Department established a dedicated onshore specialist unit to progress Family stream applications lodged by Afghan nationals, including Ministerial Direction 80-impacted Partner visa applications lodged offshore with complex and protracted visa processing histories. At the end of July 2023, based on operational data, there were around 6,900 aged Partner (subclass 309) and Prospective Marriage (subclass 300) visa applicants on hand with this unit. This is a 21 per cent drop when compared to the over 8,800 Middle East complex and aged Partner visa applications onhand in September 2021.

It has not been only the complex and aged Partner applications that have been finalised. The total number of Partner visa applications onhand has almost halved from approximately 98,000 in October 2020 to approximately 52,000 in August 2023.

Beyond the macro reform announced across the migration system, the Department has made advancements within the Family Migration Program since the ANAO report around: governance; prioritisation and risk; stakeholder consultation; and systematic business processes and reporting.

Governance

The Department has embedded within the Immigration Programs Division structures and process to define and monitor consistent business processes and frameworks. This work is ensuring consistency and supporting timely delivery across visa programs including in the areas of client and stakeholder feedback; program and system design and planning; and performance, integrity and program health metrics.

One key governance initiative, now part of standard practice is monthly program health meetings. The Family Migration Program actively participates in these meetings that establish and monitor program targets and thresholds, monitor and evaluate program performance against agreed internal measures, and drive strategies for continuous improvement.

Supplementing these frameworks, the Department routinely undertakes Quality Control checking (conducted prior to an application being finalised) and Quality Assurance activities (conducted after all processes have been completed). These checks strengthen assurance activities in the Family Visa Migration program, building capability and developing trust across decision-making teams.

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Prioritisation / Risk

The Caseload Risk and Integrity Strategy endorsed in 2020 has strengthened the approach to risk, ensuring greater consistency across programs, including the Family Visa Migration program and associated processing locations. Through 2022-23, risk settings across the global Partner network were reviewed for consistency and accuracy. Consistent risk tiering processes for the global Partner visa program will be implemented by October 2023.

Stakeholder consultation

Through 2023-24 and beyond, the Department will be consulting Family Migration Program stakeholders through a variety of channels gathering their feedback and gauging sentiment on Family Migration Program settings. Feedback will be used to inform these settings over the coming program years coupled with feedback provided through the Migration Review.

Reporting

A reporting framework has been developed for the Family Migration program and is now available for departmental use. The Family Executive Dashboard identifies processing inactivity and aged cases, and provides a snapshot of the overall health of the Family Migration Program. This dashboard has been supplemented by a range of new additional products that provide a strong reporting framework to monitor, analyse and remediate any issues in the Family Migration Program.

PROGRESS AGAINST RECOMMENDATIONS OF REPORT NO.16 2022-23

RECOMMENDATION 1

The Department of Home Affairs establish processes for capturing meaningful client feedback from all sources to enable it to identify opportunities to improve the provision of service to clients of the Family Migration Program.

Department of Home Affairs response: *Agreed.*

The Department agrees with the broad direction of this recommendation. The Department is satisfied that such processes are currently in place, but will work to strengthen the way in which the feedback is used to inform potential service delivery improvements across multiple client cohorts. As advised during the audit, the Department seeks regular feedback to understand the needs and customer service experience of our clients, and to support efforts to identify and implement service delivery improvements. This includes analysing feedback from the in-page feedback function across the Department's websites, the online Virtual Assistant, and through more formal complaints, compliments and suggestions mechanisms coordinated by the Department's existing Global Feedback Unit (GFU). The Unit is the Department's central point for receiving, tracking and facilitating responses to formal client feedback and also performs a key external accountability role through regular engagement with the Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman. In 2021-22, following the Department's voluntary participation in a survey conducted by the Ombudsman's Office, the Department's feedback function was assessed by the Ombudsman as 'delivering'. The Department will continue to work to enhance the contribution of the GFU to whole-of-Department service delivery improvements.

Progress update:

The Department has developed policy and procedural guidelines to provide clear guidance on how the Department responds to client feedback about its immigration, citizenship and border control functions. This includes Family Visa processing.

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The Department is refining existing processes and developing additional reporting products and functionality to provide a more holistic view of client contact relating to program delivery. These client feedback products include:

- A dashboard being refined that displays total complaints per program, and those that were responded to within service standards.
- Client feedback product being developed that will capture client comments through a range of client feedback channels such as the Global Feedback Unit and the Global Service Centre, sorting these pieces of feedback by theme then providing to program areas for continuous service delivery improvement.

By the end of 2023-24, the Department will further improve the client experience by incorporating three layers of client feedback:

1. Quantitative: through holistic reporting.
2. Qualitative: For example, regular reporting on the three most frequently raised issues and discussion in monthly performance meetings on how to best address them.
3. Thematic analysis of the client feedback provided to program areas.

Timeframe for completion: **December 2023** (Dashboard), **March 2024** (Qualitative Reporting and Thematic Analysis)

RECOMMENDATION 2

The Department of Home Affairs ensure its prioritisation and risk-tiering processes are fit for purpose and consistently applied within Family Migration Program visa types, irrespective of the location of processing.

Department of Home Affairs response: *Agreed.*

The Department agrees with the broad direction of this recommendation. The Department is satisfied that such processes are currently in place to ensure that prioritisation and risk tiering processes are fit for purpose and effective, but agrees that governance could be strengthened to ensure greater consistency across programs and processing locations. The endorsement of the Caseload Risk and Integrity Strategy in 2020 laid the foundations for a consistent approach to risk-tiering and prioritisation across the global delivery network. This strategy outlines review mechanisms for risk controls across all temporary and migration visa programs, and is complemented by a Caseload Risk and Integrity Partnership Agreement which sets out the key priorities and outputs in this area. This document will be reviewed in 2023 to incorporate a more comprehensive governance framework. The Department has provided a range of evidence to demonstrate the strong progress in implementing the Caseload Risk and Integrity Strategy, including the regular review of risk controls and risk tiering processes in the Partner visa program. With specific reference to the Partner program, a new approach to risk-tiering for the offshore Partner caseload was implemented in 2020 to enhance consistent risk-tiering of this caseload. Given the success of this model, it is currently being replicated for the onshore Partner caseload.

Progress update:

Since the release of the ANAO report, the Department has undertaken testing in the onshore Partner caseload of the risk-tiering model implemented offshore to ensure consistent risk based prioritisation process, irrespective of location. The offshore risk-tiering model provides a systematic approach to identify visa applications that match against pre-determined profiles of concern enabling near immediate, systematised and robust enhancements to risk matching criteria.

The Department expects this risk-tiering model to be implemented for the onshore caseload by the end of October 2023.

Timeframe for completion: **October 2023**

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RECOMMENDATION 3

The Department of Home Affairs develop an overarching policy and governance framework for its case allocation model to guide allocation decision-making and ensure that this supports effectiveness and efficiency in the handling of Family Migration Program visa applications.

Department of Home Affairs response: *Agreed.*

The Department agrees with the broad direction of this recommendation. Written guidance is currently provided in regards to the work management/case allocation tool, but would be usefully complemented by the addition of a broader governance document setting out the high level principles underpinning case allocation. The Work Management Procedural Instruction already includes broad best practice principles for use of the work management/case allocation tool. This is also covered in training provided on the work management tool. A Community of Practice has been established to further refine these principles and ensure that the tool is being used to deliver further efficiencies. Learnings from the Community of Practice will inform the development of broader principles underpinning case allocation. Further work on this, including greater oversight of the use of the case allocation tools, is being built into the current project to bolster and document critical program management capabilities and responsibilities.

Progress update:

Since January 2023, the Department has held six Community of Practice meetings with the onshore and offshore network to determine overarching policy, governance and principles for case allocation. In particular, Community of Practice meetings discussed:

- current case allocation policies with a view to strengthen and ensure alignment to broader governing principles for active case progression.
- mechanisms to improve monitoring and evaluation of current processes across onshore and offshore caseloads.
- current risk tiering through prioritisation and allocation matrixes that use streamlined and standard settings and how this can inform overarching governance principles for caseload allocation.
- identify improvements through analysis of Quality Assurance / Quality Control error rates to strengthen processing practices and where required inform the update of supporting documents (process maps; Procedural Instructions; Standard Operating Procedures).

Program areas are encouraged to regularly review the information and lessons from the Community of Practice meetings.

In April 2023, through the Community of Practice, the Department developed written guidance and governance principles for posts processing Partner visas, which detailed case allocations, processes and recommended treatments of cases.

In June 2023, the Department distributed to the processing network guidelines for prioritising Partner and Prospective Marriage visa applications on compassionate and compelling grounds. The compelling and compassionate guidelines were developed to ensure consistency among the global partner processing network in interpreting and applying provisions of the legislation.

By December 2023, the Department will develop an overarching framework with guiding best-practice principles that support existing case allocation tools. The Framework will be guided by the Family Program Service Design and Immigration Programs Business Improvement Strategy to deliver united and holistic outcomes.

Timeframe for completion: November 2023

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RECOMMENDATION 4

The Department of Home Affairs establish a standard set of monitoring and evaluation metrics to support analysis and continuous improvement in the efficiency of Family Migration Program visa processing.

Department of Home Affairs response: *Agreed.*

The Department notes there are established processes for analysing and evaluating efficiency and delivering continuous improvement. This is demonstrated by the development of new reporting tools, which has been accompanied by improved efficiency in a large range of visa programs. The Department also notes that its key focus is on the efficiency of the entire visa processing network, rather than individual offices — especially given that the global processing model means that visa applications may move between offices during processing. The Department agrees that a more clearly documented set of metrics for internal use would bolster its ability to measure and drive efficiency in visa processing. The Department will continue to mature the development of internal metrics related to efficiency and service delivery processes, noting that efficiency of Visa Processing at large is already captured within the Annual Report/Corporate Plan.

Progress update:

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

Following the release of the ANAO report, the Department created a monthly Program Health report to provide the Family Migration Program, among others, standardised evaluation metrics. From April 2023, the Family Migration Program has been actively involved on a monthly basis engaging with targets and thresholds around evaluation metrics. This engagement informs monthly departmental performance meetings with Program Management staff to discuss and monitor program health and performance.

The Program Health report along with monthly departmental performance meetings are enabling lasting and holistic improvements in the efficiency of Family Migration Program visa processing.

Timeframe for completion: **October 2023**

RECOMMENDATION 5

The Department of Home Affairs establish processes to identify, analyse and remediate potential processing inactivity to support the improvement of efficiency in its business process for finalising Family Migration Program visa applications.

Department of Home Affairs' response: *Agreed.*

The Department broadly agrees with this recommendation as a general principle however notes that it already regularly reviews its processes and has tools in place to ensure cases progress in a timely manner. The Department assesses that changes to departmental systems to acquit this recommendation would not likely generate benefits or efficiencies commensurate with the effort required. This assessment takes into account the systems environment, the complexity of implementing this recommendation and the potential implications of deprioritising other critical systems changes that deliver more substantial improvements to visa programs. The Department will continue to explore options to improve visa processing and associated reporting within the constraints of existing ICT systems, while capitalising on opportunities to improve these systems when they arise.

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ANAO comment on Department of Home Affairs' response

In its analysis of Home Affairs' caseload data, the ANAO identified periods of time during which the department may not be processing applications as quickly or efficiently as possible (see paragraph 3.141). It has recommended the department determine means of identifying and addressing this. Home Affairs states in its responses that changes to departmental systems to acquit the ANAO's recommendation would not likely generate benefits or efficiencies commensurate with the effort required. The ANAO interprets this response as the department disagreeing with the recommendation.

Progress update:

Since the release of the ANAO report, the Department has established a new reporting framework, business processes and systems initiatives to address processing inactivity and the aged caseload, and to support improved efficiencies towards finalising Family Migration Program visa applications.

In April 2023, the Department commenced work on a report that would, among other things, identify the aged caseload and give us an overview of trends and how Family Migration Program visas were tracking. In August 2023, the Department published the Family Executive (Partner visas) Dashboard, which in addition to providing an overview of Partner first and second stage visa processing and the health of the Partner visa program, also highlights processing inactivity. One feature of the Dashboard that is enabling more granular management of the aged caseload is a greater disaggregation of cases aged more than 24 months. These 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 years).

The Family Executive (Partner visas) Dashboard reporting, coupled with further targeted program health reports have been used to inform monthly discussions since April 2023 that surface, analyse and remediate Family Migration Program visa processing issues.

Timeframe for completion: **Completed**

RECOMMENDATION 6

The Department of Home Affairs establish systematic processes for detecting and remediating aged cases across all parts of the Family Migration Program caseload to ensure applications are appropriately finalised, wherever feasible.

Department of Home Affairs response: *Agreed.*

While the Department already has a number of existing reports and processing tools in use to monitor the age of cases across Family visa programs, it would welcome systems enhancements to further strengthen its reporting capability. The Department will continue to explore opportunities for systems enhancements to improve its capacity in this area, noting that core systems are over 30 years old and several Family visa programs still require paper-based visa lodgement.

Progress update:

Since the release of the ANAO report, the Department has established a new reporting framework, business processes and systems initiatives to address processing inactivity and the aged caseload, and to support improved efficiencies towards finalising Family Migration Program visa applications.

In April 2023, the Department commenced work on the Family Executive Dashboard, designed to provide program health reports on the Family Visa branch programs, which will among other thing, identify processing inactivity. In August 2023, the Department published the Family Executive (Partner visas) Dashboard, which details the health of the Partner visa program as well as highlighting processing inactivity. The Dashboard is still in the development stage for Parent, Child and Other Family (PCOF) visa programs, with expected completion by December 2023.

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The Department is also progressing functionality in its main case management system, allowing for processing efficiency and increased accuracy for the identification and management of critical and/or priority PCOF cases for capped and queued programs, with completion expected in Quarter 4 of program year 2023-24.

Timeframe for completion: **December 2023** (Dashboard), **June 2024** (improved functionality in case management system).