



Australian Government
Australian Public Service Commission

AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSIONER

Mrs Lucy Wicks MP
Chair, Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit
c/o jcpaa@aph.gov.au
PARLIAMENT HOUSE
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mrs Wicks

Thank you for the invitation to make a submission to the *Inquiry into the Implementation of COVID-19 measures based on Auditor-General Reports Nos. 20, 22, 23, 24 and 39 (2020-21)*.

Please find the submission from the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC), in relation to the Auditor-General Report No. 20 (2020-21) *Management of the Australian Public Service's Workforce Response to COVID-19*.

The APSC supports the 2020 findings and messages made by the Auditor-General that found management of the APS workforce response to COVID-19 was effective, and governance arrangements established across the APS and by the APSC were largely appropriate.

Since that time, the APSC COVID-19 Taskforce has continued its operation, working with the Chief Operating Officers Committee on the development of whole-of-APS guidance for APS agencies and their employees.

In April 2021, the APS Surge Reserve was established. It provides a permanent function for undertaking large-scale APS deployment to critical functions and has been actively used through the course of pandemic this year.

I am pleased to update the Committee on this work.

Yours sincerely

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of Peter Woolcott AO.

Peter Woolcott AO
8 October 2021



Submission

Inquiry into the Implementation of COVID-19 measures based on Auditor-General Reports Nos. 20, 22, 23, 24 and 39 (2020-21)

8 October 2021

The Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) makes this submission in relation to Auditor-General [Report No. 20 \(2020-21\)](#) *Management of the Australian Public Service's Workforce Response to COVID-19*.

This submission addresses the scope of the inquiry with particular reference to:

- a. Australian Public Service (APS) workforce management and the deployment of resources to priority areas, and
- b. COVID-19 related guidance on workforce measures.

APS workforce mobility

National Framework for Public Sector Mobility

The [National Framework for Public Sector Surge Mobility](#) supports the fast and efficient movement of employees between public sector jurisdictions. It was updated and endorsed by Commonwealth, State and Territory Commissioner in April 2021.

APS Mobility Framework

Mobility is a key element for a future-fit APS and is underpinned by the [APS Mobility Framework](#), released by the APSC in April 2021. A deliverable under the [APS Workforce Strategy 2025](#), the framework helps APS employees, managers, executives and HR practitioners use mobility as a strategic workforce tool. To support this, the Framework identifies three uses of mobility which, when aligned with Government, agency and whole-of-APS enterprise priorities, have significant potential to deliver value to agencies: to address surges or peaks in demand, to bring cross-disciplinary expertise to complex problems, and foster capability development.

APS Surge Reserve

To best support the Australian community during COVID-19, APS capabilities are being dedicated to the most critical government services. In 2020, more than 11,000 APS employees worked in a different team and over 2,500 employees worked in a different agency to support the COVID-19 response.¹

¹ 2020 APS Employee Census

Building on this experience, a permanent APS Surge Reserve was established in April 2021, providing an ongoing framework for large-scale APS deployments, ensuring the APS could mobilise resources to critical needs, particularly during a crisis.

As at April 2021, more than 2,000 employees had volunteered to join the APS Surge Reserve.

The APS Surge Reserve features:

- APS employees who have volunteered ahead of time to assist in a crisis;
- activation decisions by Secretaries Board, on advice from the Australian Public Service Commissioner; and
- contributions from every portfolio, as well as preparedness planning to rapidly deploy and on-board personnel.

In response to a given crisis, portfolio departments and agencies are asked to advise which of their reservists are available for deployment, based on business need and employee availability.

The APS Surge Reserve complements, rather than replaces, existing agency specific and well established disaster response and management arrangements. APS Surge Reservists will deploy for short periods (initial terms of up to 8 weeks) to help colleagues address a surge in demand for government services or support.

In March 2021, a small scale deployment of APS employees was undertaken to mobilise 45 APS staff to the Department of Health to provide assistance to the COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout.

On 16 July 2021, Services Australia requested an activation of the APS Surge Reserve to assist in delivering COVID-19 Disaster Payments to Australians unable to earn an income due to a COVID-19 lockdown, hotspot or period of restricted movement.

- More than 600 APS staff from across the APS have temporarily deployed to Services Australia to assist in processing claims, with the first deployed from 19 July 2021.
- These employees have worked alongside their colleagues at Services Australia to process more than 3.1 million claims.
- Over \$5 billion has been paid to assist Australians who are unable to work and earn income while affected by lockdowns.
- This is a national effort, with APS employees involved from across the states and territories.

As the APS Surge Reserve is a relatively new initiative for the APS, the APSC expects to continue to evaluate, review, and refine the arrangements for operation of the APS Surge Reserve.

- A review of the operation of the 2021 APS Surge Reserve deployment to Services Australia will be conducted, with further enhancements to the APS Surge Reserve arrangements to be considered in early 2022.

In addition to the APS Surge Reserve operations, the APS has also rapidly redeployed employees to the areas of highest need and remains ready to support other areas of need, if called on. The APSC works across the Commonwealth and with other jurisdictions to support the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic response. The APS has deployed staff to WA Health, NSW Health and ACT Health, based on requests from those jurisdictions to assist in their contact tracing efforts.

The Commission will continue to support the effective use of employee mobility within and between agencies through targeted initiatives and advice. Over the next 12 months, the APSJobs platform will be improved to support the management of the APS Surge Reserve membership and to make the advertising and application process for temporary roles – including those to support surge needs not large enough to justify a Surge Reserve deployment – simpler and easier for agencies and employees.

COVID-19 guidance for APS agencies and their employees

The APSC COVID-19 Taskforce has continued its operation since the publication of the ANAO Audit Report *'Management of the Australian Public Service's Workforce Response to COVID-19'* (the Report) in December 2020. The COVID-19 Taskforce now operates within the Workplace Relations Group at the Commission, as opposed to previous cross-agency collaboration, and remains under the supervision of the same SES Band 1. The COVID-19 Taskforce also continues to report to the Chief Operating Office Committee on the development of COVID-19 related guidance for APS agencies and their employees.

Guidance published by the COVID-19 Taskforce since the December 2020 includes a number of circulars:

- On 29 September 2020, 'Circular 2020/9: Returning to Usual Workplaces' was published providing agencies with information about returning employees to the usual (pre-COVID) workplaces where there was limited to no community transmission. The advice also focused on the continued need to maintain COVID-19 safe work practices, business continuity planning and reacting to localised outbreaks.
- On 8 February 2021, 'Circular 2021/01: COVID-19 vaccinations' was published outlining the Government's expectations that agencies provide maximum support to employees to get vaccinated against COVID-19 and that vaccinations were strongly encouraged. On 3 June 2021, this Circular was updated to reflect that vaccinations were being made mandatory as a result of National Cabinet decisions and state/territory public health orders and that agency heads could make directions mandating vaccinations.
- On 9 September 2021, 'Circular 2021/05: COVID-19 Vaccinations for Commonwealth officials travelling overseas' was published. It recommended official overseas travel only be permitted where it has been a minimum of two weeks since the Commonwealth official was fully vaccination with a Therapeutic Goods Administration recognised COVID-19 vaccine.
- On 6 October 2021, 'Circular 2021/09: COVID-19 vaccinations in Australian Government workplaces' was published. It outlines a range of factors for agencies to consider in requiring employees to be vaccinated, including public health orders and other legal requirements, and whether a direction would be lawful and reasonable under the circumstances.

In addition to the publication of these circulars, the COVID-19 Taskforce has continued to operate the *COVID-19 (Coronavirus) - information for Commonwealth employers* GovTEAMS community. This Community is available to agency human resource practitioners and other officials working on COVID-19 related matters. As at 5 October 2021, the community contains 961 members across 166 APS agencies, non-APS Commonwealth entities and, state and territory jurisdictions.

The COVID-19 Taskforce also continues to maintain an email enquiry inbox to answer agency human resource practitioner queries related to the Commission's circulars. The COVID-19 Taskforce receives only a small number of queries to this inbox on a regular basis, estimated at about 5-10 emails per week.