



REPORT TO THE JOINT COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND AUDIT

Report No. 494

Inquiry into the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Crisis Management Arrangements

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Recommendation 1 of report 494 states that

The Committee recommends that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade provide it with an update on the status of projects planned or commenced in response to the Australian National Audit Office's findings, including progress of implementing the recommendations, by the end of August 2023.

This Executive Minute provides an update on DFAT's progress in implementing the agreed recommendations from the ANAO report on *Overseas Crisis Management and Response: The Effectiveness of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Management of the Return of Overseas Australians in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

This performance audit was published by the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) in June 2022 and DFAT agreed to implement seven of the nine recommendations.

ANAO RECOMMENDATION 1 – Substantially Implemented.

DFAT consolidate its policy and guidance for crisis management, drawing on the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework. The framework should set out key crisis management functions and assign clear accountability for these, and for the development and assurance of key capabilities.

DFAT has established an International Crisis Management Framework (ICMF) which aligns with the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework. The ICMF promotes effective crisis management, accountability, and transparency by capturing the Department's international crisis management functions, key decision makers and crisis management mechanisms and capabilities. The framework's ability to be implemented in practice is being piloted before finalisation, with many of the principles and requirements already guiding DFAT's crisis response.

It will be finalised after further refinements from an ongoing lessons learnt processes from the Department's response to the Sudan crisis and more recent activations of our crisis management arrangements (e.g. the events in Russia in late June 2023 and Niger in August 2023).

In line with the Department's earlier submissions to the Committee, the Department's crisis response capabilities are now supported by an expanded surge crisis workforce, strengthened crisis workforce training, and a third crisis centre to provide redundancy during concurrent crises or if primary crisis facilities are unavailable.

ANAO RECOMMENDATION 2 - Implemented

DFAT establish whole-of-department preparedness guidance to support crisis response and capability planning processes, linked to assessments of risk and supported by means of measuring and reporting on effectiveness.

DFAT has implemented this recommendation as reported in November 2022.

DFAT's crisis planning documentation is published internally through the Department's intranet and is accessible to all DFAT staff. A Contingency Planning and Crisis Preparedness Section assists posts to develop planning documentation, including Crisis Action Plans (CAP). All posts have a CAP to provide the framework for the post's response to incidents, events or crises that may affect the continuity of the mission or broader Australian interests in the country of accreditation.

DFAT benchmarks crisis preparedness regularly to compare understanding of global and emerging risks with Defence, other agencies and consular partner nations. After each crisis, a lessons learnt analysis is undertaken for agencies that responded and is used to inform and improve crisis response and capability effectiveness.

DFAT's Crisis Preparedness Assurance Team (CPAT) visit program to overseas locations involves consular and humanitarian planners, as well as ADF personnel. These teams provide skilled planning expertise on the ground to assist overseas post and broader Departmental contingency planning. These teams deliver enhanced benchmarking capabilities and informed assessments on future crisis risk. Posts are selected on a risk basis, in consultation with Defence.

ANAO RECOMMENDATION 3 – Implemented

DFAT establish a data and information strategy and capability to strengthen its capacity to rapidly and effectively source, analyse and use data from all sources for crisis planning and response.

DFAT has developed an Interim Consular and Crisis Management Data Strategy ahead of a forthcoming DFAT Data Strategy. The Consular and Crisis Management data capability will be underpinned and further developed through the activities of the strategy that support data leadership, strengthening data culture and improving data access and systems.

Specific initiatives include the appointment of a Divisional data advocate; undertaking a data-focused capability assessment and data stocktake; and specific data training and activities to ensure data is shared and stored securely, consistent with privacy and governance requirements.

DFAT's consular data capability has also been enhanced by the creation of a specialist data analyst team who are delivering improved data reporting and analysis for crisis response and planning as well as ongoing consular services.

ANAO RECOMMENDATION 4: Substantially Implemented.

DFAT plan for and build a fit-for-purpose crisis management workforce strategy and ensure appropriate systems are implemented to support the management of staff during crisis response.

Development of the crisis workforce strategy is in its final stages of consultation and is near to completion. The workforce strategy reflects input from across DFAT, as well as external agencies including National Emergency Management Agency, Department of Defence, Australian Federal Police and Emergency Management Victoria. Further engagement will occur as the strategy is implemented.

The strategy has determined three key priority areas: enhance crisis surge capacity; build skills and experience; and strengthen health and wellbeing support throughout the crisis lifecycle. There are

14 action items with specific individual objectives that directly contribute to these priority areas and the strengthening of DFAT's crisis workforce management.

It is important to note that the need for enhanced tools and systems was also a strong theme to emerge throughout the development of this strategy. These enhancements have been incorporated into the above priority areas. The strategy will be implemented over a three-year period and will require broad departmental effort to successfully deliver the outcomes and integrate them into departmental and APS arrangements as required.

ANAO RECOMMENDATION 6 – Implemented

DFAT develop clear policies and procedures for assessing and recording vulnerability to ensure it is able to appropriately demonstrate the basis of its decision-making on the provision of benefits to the public.

DFAT's previous submission outlined our initial response of updating existing consular policy on vulnerable clients and adding system markers to client records to indicate whether a vulnerability required more intensive support. Assessment of client vulnerability during a crisis is also now addressed in the International Crisis Management Framework (ICMF).

The ICMF applies DFAT's existing policy for managing vulnerability to crisis affected clients. This policy requires staff to assess personal vulnerability (unaccompanied children; disability; mental illness); situational specific vulnerability (persons in a zone of armed conflict); and further defines certain case types (victims of sexual assault) to be automatically treated as vulnerable. Once clients are assessed as vulnerable, DFAT applies crisis specific case priority handling markers to these clients through its crisis case management system.

The ICMF requires vulnerability to be assessed even if crisis conditions preclude detailed interviews with consular clients and the completion of the full vulnerability assessment for each client. A condensed vulnerability assessment process may be used to focus on quickly identifying major or crisis-specific vulnerabilities in the circumstances of the crisis.

ANAO RECOMMENDATION 7 - Implemented

DFAT capture and retain accurate and complete data from its engagement with clients in accordance with government information management standards, and for the purposes of monitoring its effectiveness in engaging with the public.

DFAT has improved its recording of accurate and complete consular client data from its engagement with clients and its reporting on that engagement to monitor effectiveness, including by crisis managers. DFAT delivers daily reporting during a crisis on call management to crisis managers and this is reviewed, including during 'lessons learnt' exercises. DFAT has also enabled better record keeping from client engagement in its crisis client registration system (encompassing both self-registered and operator-registered clients) and has optimised its data reporting from that system.

DFAT has also implemented an ongoing robotics process automation (RPA) program to automate record filing from DFAT's case management system into corporate record-keeping systems which has provided assurance complete client records are captured accurately and retained in line with record keeping requirements. DFAT's data analytics and reporting capability (Recommendation 3) and its new consular complaints handling and feedback model and new online feedback form on Smartraveller (Recommendation 8) also help report on and monitor effectiveness of client engagement.

ANAO RECOMMENDATION 8 - Implemented

DFAT establish a complaints handling model that enables it to appropriately manage consular complaints across the department, during periods of standard operations and crisis, in accordance with Commonwealth requirements and better practice principles.

DFAT has established a new consular complaint handling model with simplified processes and guidance materials for consular staff across its global network. The revised process aligns with the Commonwealth Ombudsman's Better Practice Guidance on Complaints Handling.

Improvements include a simplified public-facing online webform on Smartraveller which will enable better capture of key data (name, location, reason for inquiry, complaint type/category) and improved workflow of correspondence for response. In addition, a consular complaints management tracking tool has been implemented to track individual complaints from receipt to resolution and to help to inform refinements to consular policy, service delivery and performance.



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Secretary
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