

## Adequacy of divisional office employment structure

*The dispersed nature of our organisation with its large divisional network, along with the cyclical nature of the AEC's business, means that some standard public sector models and approaches to fixing staffing levels and classifications would not work well in the AEC...The essential requirement for the AEC is the flexibility in determining business locations and staffing levels best suited for delivering effective electoral services and meeting client and stakeholder expectations in different metropolitan, regional and rural locations.<sup>1</sup>*

### Introduction

- 2.1 The primary function of an Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) divisional office is to administer federal electoral events for that division and to carry out tasks between elections that support that function, such as ensuring that the electoral roll is accurately maintained. AEC State offices provide support to their divisions and coordinate this work across the state.
- 2.2 In this regard, the AEC is somewhat unique as an organisation, because its business cycle is influenced by the relatively unpredictable timing of key electoral events and federal elections which determine workload peaks and impact significantly on staffing requirements. The impacts of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, pp. 24-25.

election cycle are a key consideration for the AEC in determining the most appropriate staffing model for divisional offices:

The election cycle means a major organisational gearing up in terms of staffing for electoral events. A staffing model that was solely aimed at maximizing resources during an election period could result in excessive staff levels during non-election periods...We need to employ and manage large numbers of temporary staff for short or defined periods and then revert to being a smaller organisation after the electoral task they are employed for has been managed. Prior to a Federal election we need to substantially augment our on-going staff with temporary staff to assist managing the election.<sup>2</sup>

2.3 This chapter looks at a range of issues arising from the divisional office employment structure. These include:

- the current staffing model for AEC divisional offices;
- issues for the AEC as a consequence of the divisional office structure, including:
  - ⇒ career opportunities for staff;
  - ⇒ the appropriateness of staffing levels for the actual work of divisional offices;
  - ⇒ staff retention issues; and
- staffing requirements for habitation reviews.

## **Staffing configuration of AEC divisional offices**

2.4 Currently, there are 150 AEC divisional offices in 135 locations across Australia. At 30 June 2006, 440 of the AEC's 794<sup>3</sup> employees were employed in divisional offices.

2.5 The structure of a typical divisional office includes one APS6 (Divisional Returning Officer or DRO), one APS3 (Divisional Clerk) and an APS 2 (Divisional Assistant). Table 2.1 shows the classification and distribution of divisional office staff at 30 June 2006.

---

2 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 7.

3 The 794 figure includes 717 ongoing and 77 non-ongoing staff.

Table 2.1 Divisional office staff (ongoing & non ongoing) – head count at 30 June 2006 <sup>(i)</sup>

State <sup>(ii)</sup>	Number Divisions <sup>(iii)</sup>	APS6	APS5	APS4	APS3	APS2	Total Staff
NSW/ACT	52	54	0	0	42	50	146
VIC	37	41	0	0	22	47	110
QLD	28	25	2	2	23	31	83
WA	15	13	4	1	11	20	49
SA	11	16	0	0	9	11	36
TAS	5	6	0	1	5	4	16
<b>Total</b>	<b>148 <sup>(iv)</sup></b>	<b>155</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>440</b>

(i) The number of staff is a “head count” and so includes staff on leave.

(ii) Does not include the Northern Territory, as the amalgamated structure does not make it possible to readily distinguish divisional office staff. NSW figures include the Divisions of Canberra and Fraser in the ACT, as the NSW State Manager also administers the ACT.

(iii) Prior to redistribution in December 2006.

(iv) Excludes Lingiari and Solomon in the Northern Territory.

Source: *Australian Electoral Commission, Submission no. 16, pp. 13-14.*

2.6 In 2006-07 the AEC implemented a divisional office staffing profile of 3.2 full-time equivalent staff (FTE) which equates to 2.6 FTE for ongoing and non-ongoing staff, supplemented with a further 0.6 FTE for temporary employees.

2.7 To coincide with the 3.2 FTE staffing profile, the AEC introduced a process of “workload sharing” to combat the diversity of workload across its divisional offices, where some offices are tasked with processing up to three times the amount of enrolment transactions of others.<sup>4</sup> Electoral Commissioner, Ian Campbell, explained the rationale behind the staffing profile:

If we allocated resources at a common level right across the country for our 150 divisional offices, we would have to have some sharing of work between divisions, otherwise we would have a great inequity in the agency where one division with 3.2 would be working flat out – head down, backside up, to use the colloquialism – whereas the people in the next division would not be working as hard because the flow of work was not there. So we agreed that we would fund all offices at roughly the same level, which is 3.2, as mentioned in our submission, but we would start a process of workload sharing. We are still in the process of unfolding that. That is then an issue of saying to staff: ‘You work for the AEC. Therefore if the AEC has a requirement, because the

4 See Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 7.

workload is really bursting at the seams somewhere else and this division has capacity, then we expect to have assistance.’<sup>5</sup>

- 2.8 Brian McKivat, who is employed as a DRO but gave evidence in a private capacity, explained how this process is being rolled out:

...generally speaking, the view of the current management of the AEC is that they would rather see workload being moved from one site to another site than see staffing levels increased at a particular site. For example, we were told that, if you had a workload that was estimated to be 3.8, you would have 0.6 of your work taken away from your office and transferred to another office which was rated as having a lower workload.<sup>6</sup>

- 2.9 The principles of workload sharing apply across both stand-alone divisional offices and co-located offices.

- 2.10 The AEC also emphasised that workload sharing is a completely different issue to the issue of co-located divisional offices (discussed in the following chapter), drawing attention to the fact that the two were introduced at different times.<sup>7</sup>

### Criticisms of ‘workload sharing’

- 2.11 The AEC’s move to level the playing field so that the workload across divisional offices is evenly balanced appears to be based on sound reasoning, yet the scheme was criticised in submissions from a small number of AEC employees and also by the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) whose membership comprises many AEC employees.
- 2.12 The CPSU believes that workload sharing has been introduced to accommodate gaps created by long-term vacancies. Evidence to the inquiry indicated that some divisional offices function for lengthy periods with vacant positions, which often remain unfilled in non-election years, or otherwise are filled by a mixture of part-time and casual staff.<sup>8</sup> The committee was also told that the staffing configuration (the mix of permanent, temporary and casual staff) across each divisional office is inconsistent:

---

5 Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 22.

6 Mr B. McKivat, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 44.

7 Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 24.

8 Community and Public Sector Union, *Submission no. 11*, p. 3.

If you are lucky enough to have three permanent staff in your office, you will be given 0.2 casual. If you have two, you will be given 1.2 casual to bring you up to the 3.2 figure.<sup>9</sup>

- 2.13 It was put to the committee that this use of part time and temporary staff is creating confusion:

Now that many ongoing (permanent) positions are being shared by part-time and temporary staff there is now a requirement for temporary staff to perform the functions of a permanent staff member. New part-time APS2 staff are finding it difficult to learn all the duties of the position as they are only in the office 5 days per fortnight. There is now confusion over job ownership at the APS2 level and clearly the roles of an ongoing (permanent) staff and temporary staff have become unclear. In the past temporary staff were employed to assist the APS2 and worked under APS2 supervision.<sup>10</sup>

- 2.14 The CPSU argued that while the 3.2 FTE staffing profile may be adequate in theory, the reality is that when the formula is applied inconsistently across divisional offices it 'provides very different outcomes in terms of ability to complete work and staff morale.'<sup>11</sup>

- 2.15 The CPSU also claimed that the current staffing arrangement can affect the capacity and stability of a divisional office.<sup>12</sup> CPSU National Secretary, Stephen Jones, told the committee:

...the commission has failed to properly and adequately fill vacancies as and when they arise, which means the work falls upon the remaining staff within those offices. Short-term acting and casual appointments are in no way a long-term basis on which to staff such an important function. We have a concern that the new electoral arrangements that will have effect at this election will exacerbate those issues. We have raised some concerns within our submission, and I have read some of the other submissions that have been put before you about the use of casuals for filling ongoing work requirements within the divisional offices. They are no basis on which to meet the baseload work requirements.<sup>13</sup>

---

9 Mr B. McKivat, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 44.

10 Mr B. McKivat, *Submission no. 6*, p. 3.

11 Community and Public Sector Union, *Submission no. 11*, p. 3.

12 Community and Public Sector Union, *Submission no. 11*, p. 3.

13 Mr S. Jones (Community and Public Sector Union), *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 34.

## Issues for the AEC

### Career opportunities for divisional office staff

- 2.16 The committee was advised that career opportunities within the AEC for employees in a divisional office are limited.<sup>14</sup> This is particularly the case for experienced Divisional Clerks (APS3 officers) who face a substantial rise to progress to an APS6 level position (DRO). This means that they are often passed over for promotion by more highly qualified applicants from other government agencies or from the private sector and can significantly affect the morale of those seeking advancement.
- 2.17 Furthermore, for many divisional office staff there are limited opportunities to seek employment outside the AEC in their localities, meaning they have little alternative but to remain in these positions for significant periods of time.<sup>15</sup>
- 2.18 The CPSU told the committee:
- At the APS3 level, to get on you have to leave the office or wait for the divisional returning officer to be promoted, to retire or to resign. Even in the event that a vacancy does become available at the divisional returning officer level, we are advised that those positions are filled more often than not by an outside applicant. So to get on you have to move.<sup>16</sup>
- 2.19 Opportunities for advancement have also been affected by the AEC having had a stable workforce of DROs over the last 20 years, contributing to the AEC's status as the oldest agency in the public service, based on the average age of its staff.<sup>17</sup> The committee was advised that many DROs are now nearing retirement age and the AEC expects that the rate of turnover in staff anticipated will result in a number of people being appointed from outside the AEC.<sup>18</sup>
- 2.20 Table 2.2 below shows the average age of ongoing divisional office staff.

---

14 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 16.

15 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 16.

16 Mr S. Jones (Community and Public Sector Union), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 37.

17 As reported in the Australian Public Service Commission's 'State of the Service Report' 2005-06. See *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 19.

18 Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007.

Table 2.2 Divisional office ongoing staff age at 30 June 2006

State (i)	25 – 34	35 – 44	45 – 54	55+	Total Staff	Average Age
NSW/ACT	7	23	69	38	137	49.97
VIC	5	22	49	31	107	49.85
QLD	8	14	30	21	73	48.23
WA	1	13	21	8	43	48.51
SA	3	2	20	5	30	48.67
TAS	1	8	5	1	15	43.27
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>194</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>405</b>	<b>48.08</b>

(i) Does not include the Northern Territory, as the amalgamated structure does not make it possible to readily distinguish divisional office staff. NSW figures include the Divisions of Canberra and Fraser in the ACT, as the NSW State Manager also administers the ACT.

Source: Australian Electoral Commission, Submission no. 16, p. 15.

2.21 It was suggested that the AEC has in the past been highly supportive of those divisional office staff looking to further their careers within the organisation. According to Brian McKivat, staff at the APS2 and APS3 levels have often been given the opportunity to perform the duties of higher-lever positions when these positions have become temporarily vacant. However, Mr McKivat explained that such opportunities have become less common under the new working arrangements:

Over the past few years there has been very little or in fact no funding provided for the backfilling of positions and staff at the APS2 and APS3 level now do not have the same opportunities to develop their skills and experience. As a consequence of this, staff at these levels are now finding it harder to compete for promotion.<sup>19</sup>

2.22 The CPSU's view is that where vacancies occur in divisional offices, selection processes should be undertaken as a matter of priority to fill the positions. During the selection process, the CPSU suggested that staff should be given the opportunity to temporarily perform higher duties, adding that 'it should not be a long term strategy to avoid filling positions in non-election years.'<sup>20</sup>

2.23 The CPSU also strongly advocated promoting from within where appropriate, so that the AEC can capitalise on the 'enormous investment' it puts into staff training:

19 Mr B. McKivat, Submission no. 6, p. 3.

20 Community and Public Sector Union, Submission no. 11, p. 3.

...if you have a careful look at the duty statements for the divisional returning officer, the divisional clerk and the divisional assistant, you will see that there is a natural progression of experience, training and functionality between each of the three roles.

It is not our submission that we should redesign these offices to ensure maximum career opportunities for everybody...what we are certainly saying is that we can do it better than we are doing it right now. Where career opportunities should be available, and where that is consistent with the public interest, it should be done and it can be done.<sup>21</sup>

- 2.24 However, Brian Peisley cautioned that the jump from an APS3 to APS6 was not always a smooth transition, noting that in many cases, promoted employees 'struggle with the complexity of the duties and the management of the staff'.<sup>22</sup>
- 2.25 Despite evidence alluding to a perception that the jump from an APS3 to an APS6 cannot be filled by internal recruitment, the AEC denied that there is any active policy to recruit externally and maintained that recruitment is conducted on the basis of merit.
- 2.26 In support of this, the AEC pointed out that 11 of the 51 new DROs appointed for the forthcoming election had come from within the agency.<sup>23</sup> The AEC also indicated that many of its staff at the APS2 and APS3 levels were content with their positions and did not seek career advancement, as evidenced by the fact that many employees do not apply for promotion when positions are advertised.<sup>24</sup>

## Appropriateness of staffing levels and APS classifications

- 2.27 It was evident from submissions and acknowledged by the AEC itself that there is no one-size-fits-all with regard to divisional offices due to the diversity of workloads and the diversity of regions across Australia in which divisional offices are located.<sup>25</sup>
- 2.28 The workload of divisional offices has changed significantly and the volume of work has increased substantially, particularly in recent years.
- 

21 Mr S. Jones (Community and Public Sector Union), *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 39.

22 Mr B. Peisley, *Submission no. 5*, pp.8-9

23 See *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 18.

24 See *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, pp. 20-21.

25 See Mr B. McKivat, *Submission no. 6*, p. 4, Mr B. Peisley, *Submission no. 5*, p. 4. See also *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 14.



- 2.29 The AEC partly attributed this increase in workload to technological change and changes to electoral legislation, which have added layers of complexity to enrolment processing, but acknowledged that it is also a reflection of the AEC's efforts to meet rising client and stakeholder expectations.<sup>26</sup>
- 2.30 The increased demand has had an impact on staffing arrangements. However, it was reported that while staffing numbers at the national office have increased, the opposite is true for divisional offices. Mr McKivat stated:
- At the national office level there has been a large increase in staff and contractors due to these increased demands. The national office staffing levels has also increased where functions once carried out in the state offices have been transferred to the national office...Unfortunately at the divisional office level or the coal face of the AEC staffing levels have been reduced.<sup>27</sup>
- 2.31 Mr McKivat argued that the number of staff and the APS staffing levels in divisional offices are issues which 'need to be addressed.'<sup>28</sup>
- 2.32 The issue of divisional office workloads was described by the CPSU as 'an ongoing and underlying problem' and prompted calls for a review into the classifications currently applied to divisional office staff, particularly those working at the APS2 and APS3 levels. The CPSU stated:
- When you turn your mind to the duty statements that are now being published, against which persons are being employed, you will see that the responsibilities of those positions now exceed the responsibilities and work that was expected of those people when the positions were originally conceived. So we think there is an urgent need for a review to occur. We would not be surprised if the outcome of that review were to lead to a reclassification, at least, of the divisional clerk position and the divisional officer assistant position. We think that is in the interests of the persons filling those jobs and in the interests of staff retention and career opportunities within the divisional offices.<sup>29</sup>
- 2.33 Brian McKivat also questioned the implementation of any staffing model in the absence of a thorough workload review across the divisional office network:

---

26 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, pp.5-6.

27 Mr B. McKivat, *Submission no. 6*, p. 5.

28 Mr B. McKivat, *Submission no. 6*, p. 4.

29 Mr S. Jones (Community and Public Sector Union), *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 35.

As far as I am aware no thorough workload review has ever been conducted for each divisional office and until such a review is completed it is very difficult to determine the correct number of staff and the structure of staff required in each divisional office.<sup>30</sup>

- 2.34 Concerns were expressed about the movement of AEC employees to other organisations because of frustrations that their job classifications do not recognise their increased workload. It was argued by the CPSU that the community and the general public lose out when this happens.<sup>31</sup>

## Retention issues

- 2.35 Almost half of the separations by ongoing divisional office staff in 2005-06 were by employees under the age of fifty (see Table 2.3). This was noted with some concern by the AEC as an indication that the organisation had some retention issues, which the AEC partly attributes to the limited opportunities for career advancement discussed earlier in this section.

Table 2.3 Divisional office ongoing staff separations – 2005-2006

State (i)	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60+	Total Staff	Total <50
NSW/ACT	1	0	1	2	0	1	0	1	1	7	5
VIC	0	0	3	0	1	1	8	1	0	14	5
QLD	0	0	1	1	2	0	2	0	0	6	4
WA	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	4	2
SA	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	4	2
TAS	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	3	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>18</b>

(i) Does not include the Northern Territory, as the amalgamated structure does not make it possible to readily distinguish divisional office staff. NSW figures include the Divisions of Canberra and Fraser in the ACT, as the NSW State Manager also administers the ACT.

Source: Australian Electoral Commission, Submission no. 16, p. 15.

- 2.36 The AEC recognises the increase in staff separations are also a reflection of the trend for the next generation of employees, who are displaying a greater interest in career mobility and are not necessarily content to remain in the one agency for an extended period.<sup>32</sup>

30 Mr B. McKivat, *Submission no. 6*, p. 5.

31 Mr S. Jones (Community and Public Sector Union), *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 40.

32 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 15.

- 2.37 The AEC acknowledged that the increasingly short tenure of divisional office staff is likely to have significant impacts for the organisation, which has previously benefited from a stable workforce possessing a substantial corporate knowledge base.<sup>33</sup> The high rate of turnover will place an increased emphasis on the training and development of new staff.
- 2.38 This in itself poses problems for the AEC, which acknowledged that a three-person office makes it difficult to implement effective learning and development programs. In a three-person office there is usually only one person available to provide one-on-one training which can result in poor practices being passed on.<sup>34</sup> Divisional office employees already have limited opportunities to attend formal training programs because of the cost and time associated with travel to State Offices.<sup>35</sup>
- 2.39 Retention of casual staff is also an issue for the AEC. Casual staff are usually provided with significant training but when casuals are not offered enough work, the committee was told that they tend to look for positions in other organisations, taking their corporate knowledge with them. Mr McKivat stated:
- Every time you bring in a casual, you have to train them. That involves a fairly long and lengthy training process. So we are losing money. We are losing value for money by using casual staff because much of the time is spent on training them up in the fairly complicated computerised enrolment environment that we work in.<sup>36</sup>
- 2.40 Mr McKivat also noted that the AEC's reliance on casuals rather than employing more permanent staff did not appear to be 'an efficient way to operate'.<sup>37</sup>

## Committee conclusions

- 2.41 Effective electoral administration is a critical component of a healthy democracy, and it has been a timely exercise for the committee to review aspects of the administration of the AEC with a federal election approaching.

---

33 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, pp. 16-17.

34 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 17.

35 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 17.

36 Mr B. McKivat, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 44.

37 Mr B. McKivat, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 44.

- 2.42 Without an extensive body of evidence to draw on, it is difficult for the committee to ascertain whether the issues raised during the inquiry are symptomatic of widespread unrest, or whether they represent isolated cases of staff struggling to adjust to significant reform.
- 2.43 While the committee understands the need for the AEC to maintain flexibility in its staffing arrangements, it does appear that many of the administrative changes undertaken have been driven by the need or desire for cost savings. It is imperative that any cost saving measures are carefully considered so there is no adverse impact on the AEC's ability to continue to deliver its objectives and to maintain its accessibility to the public and community expectations.
- 2.44 The terms of reference required that the committee consider whether the current staffing arrangements of AEC divisional offices meet career expectations for employees. Again, it is difficult for the committee to draw comprehensive conclusions from the limited information available.
- 2.45 While there is limited opportunity for career progression for divisional office employees, it is the committee's view that this is an unfortunate by-product of the divisional office structure, which is necessary to provide the best level of service to AEC stakeholders.
- 2.46 Concerns have been raised about the recruitment of external applicants in favour of promoting from within, however there was no evidence to suggest a deliberate policy to recruit externally, with the AEC confirming that selection is based on merit.
- 2.47 Nonetheless, the committee acknowledges the suggestion that the recruitment of external candidates can have detrimental consequences for the morale and motivation of staff unsuccessful in seeking promotion. The committee was therefore concerned to learn that an effective avenue to bridging this divide, that is, the opportunity for staff to perform higher duties when temporary vacancies arise, has diminished under recent changes to working arrangements.
- 2.48 The committee encourages the AEC to adopt the practice, where appropriate, of filling temporary vacant positions in divisional offices by appointing suitable staff to perform higher duties until the position has been filled through a formal selection process, in line with APS guidelines.
- 2.49 It was suggested by the CPSU that the issue of whether APS staffing levels are appropriate for the work being carried out by divisional offices may be resolved through a classification review. The committee notes the AEC's

comment that certain standard public sector models and approaches to fixing staffing levels and classifications would not work well in the AEC.<sup>38</sup>

- 2.50 The committee notes that the AEC's Corporate Plan for 2007-08 includes the development of a new workforce planning strategy and action plan as one of its business priorities. The intent behind the strategy and action plan is to 'improve the AEC's staff recruitment processes, retention strategies and learning and development programs to meet current and future business needs'.<sup>39</sup> The committee is encouraged that the AEC has identified staff recruitment and retention as issues which need to be addressed as a matter of priority.
- 2.51 However, the committee believes that concerns over the current staffing arrangements in divisional offices raised during the inquiry were sufficient to warrant further investigation. While the committee is not in a position to draw definitive conclusions on the basis of evidence it received, it believes that it is necessary for the Auditor-General to examine the issue of workforce planning in the AEC in further detail.

### Recommendation 1

- 2.52 **The committee recommends that the Auditor-General conduct an audit of workforce planning in the Australian Electoral Commission, with a view to determining whether the Commission's workforce planning strategy is supporting effective practices in human resource management for divisional office staff and achieving efficient and effective outcomes.**

## Staffing requirements for ongoing habitation reviews

- 2.53 The appropriateness and reliability of the system used by the AEC for managing the electoral roll and the validity and accuracy of the roll is an issue which is continuously raised in submissions to inquiries by this committee. The terms of reference for this inquiry required that the committee investigate what level of staffing would be required to meet ongoing habitation reviews. Habitation reviews explains the process whereby AEC officers doorknock residences to confirm enrolments for

38 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, pp. 24-25.

39 Australian Electoral Commission, *Corporate Plan 2007-08*, p. 8.

those addresses and to identify where any amendments to information recorded on the electoral roll may be required. Mr Kirkpatrick stated that:

The electoral roll will continue to carry names and addresses of people who do not live at those addresses unless Habitation Reviews are carried out regularly and systematically...<sup>40</sup>

- 2.54 It is important to note that the AEC no longer conducts biennial global habitation reviews. The AEC found that the costs of habitation reviews were escalating exponentially and also that the electoral roll became increasingly out-of-date in between reviews. Another major criticism of the habitation review in the past was that around 65 per cent of resources were expended during each review confirming enrolments that had not changed. Furthermore, since habitation reviews were timed to provide the most up-to-date roll for federal elections, this did not necessarily fit in with State and Territory election cycles and it was felt that a more continuous method of roll update was required.<sup>41</sup> The AEC's alternative means of maintaining an up-to-date roll is the Continuous Roll Update (CRU) program, which was introduced in 1999 primarily to address the shortcomings of the biennial habitation review.
- 2.55 The AEC believes the CRU program involves a more targeted approach, focusing on areas where there is evidence to suggest that electoral roll information is outdated or incorrect.<sup>42</sup>
- 2.56 The major activity under CRU involves electoral roll data being matched against data obtained from other organisations and government agencies to identify specific addresses where people are moving either to or from, and to identify any anomalies in roll data.<sup>43</sup> Examples of data used in the data matching process are Australia Post Redirection Advices and Centrelink Change of Address Advices.
- 2.57 Fieldwork conducted under the CRU program is generally either non-response fieldwork or growth fieldwork. Non-response fieldwork involves a targeted doorknock whereby officers contact specifically identified addresses – such as those where persons have not responded to AEC correspondence – rather than all addresses within a specified area. Growth field work is similar to that conducted under the full habitation reviews, which targets all addresses within a selected area identified as an

---

40 Mr B. Kirkpatrick, *Submission no. 3*, p. 1.

41 Australian Electoral Commission website:  
[http://www.aec.gov.au/Enrolling\\_to\\_vote/About\\_Electoral\\_Roll/Roll\\_review.htm](http://www.aec.gov.au/Enrolling_to_vote/About_Electoral_Roll/Roll_review.htm).

42 Australian Electoral Commission, *Continuous Roll Update Review Report*, June 2007, p. 1.

43 Australian Electoral Commission, *Continuous Roll Update Review Report*, June 2007, p. 1.

area of high growth or turnover, rather than specific addresses. Generally, this fieldwork is carried out by casual staff.

- 2.58 In its submission, the AEC advocated a multifaceted approach to roll review, drawing on the findings of a 2007 review of the CRU program which identified areas where performance might be improved.<sup>44</sup> The review identified that various aspects of the CRU regime appear to be a more cost effective arrangement in achieving enrolment updates than the habitation review, and that enrolment workloads are generally much more evenly spread over the year under CRU.<sup>45</sup>
- 2.59 The AEC has been undertaking a target enrolment strategy since March 2007, which has involved officers going to more than one million addresses where the AEC knew there were residents who were not on the roll. The AEC advised that the hit rate across the country of actually receiving cards from targeted addresses was '31 or 32 per cent'.<sup>46</sup>
- 2.60 According to the AEC, field staff have reported an increasing culture of resistance at the door, and the AEC considers that habitation reviews are not necessarily any more effective than other methods of attracting enrolment.<sup>47</sup> However, the AEC did indicate that a recent exercise revealed a possible correlation between the type of review officer recruited and their success rate in obtaining forms from residents:
- Certainly in our recent exercise in New South Wales in the division of Blaxland we found evidence of the commissioner's point about the type of review officers. A special effort was made to recruit review officers to go around and doorknock, reflecting the demographics of the particular division. Interestingly enough, we are finding that the return rate of the actual forms there is much higher. As of last week, it was in the order of 58 per cent for that division.<sup>48</sup>
- 2.61 The AEC indicated that it would be further investigating the significance of this outcome, and acknowledged that it may result in a more focused effort on the review officers the AEC seeks to attract.<sup>49</sup>
- 2.62 It was suggested during the inquiry that the current level of staffing for habitation reviews may be adequate for some divisions, but not for

---

44 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 10.

45 Australian Electoral Commission, *Continuous Roll Update Review Report*, June 2007, p. vii.

46 Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 12.

47 Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 12.

48 Ms B. Davis (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 13.

49 Ms B. Davis (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 13.

others.<sup>50</sup> The committee was told that the conduct of habitation reviews may be more effective if the AEC were to employ permanent officers to undertake this role, although it was acknowledged that temporary staff would still be required in non-metropolitan areas.<sup>51</sup>

2.63 The CPSU advised that its members considered the current staffing levels for habitation reviews to be adequate, provided that all positions are filled and an adequate pool of casual staff is available for conducting field work.

2.64 Mr Peisley suggested that the committee should consider the broader question of what methods the AEC should be employing to encourage people to enrol and to vote, on the basis that 'short, sharp review periods and sending letters to people we know are not on the roll, does not work effectively.'<sup>52</sup> He added:

I sometimes wonder whether every time the electorate sees a letter coming from the Electoral Commissioner it is put straight into the bin. There will come a point when we will need to go back to doorknocking every house and saying, 'Who lives in this house?' To do that, maybe we need to be smarter. If we had a permanent doorknocker or someone who was employed to go out and do the whole of an electoral division over a 12-month period...they could slowly but surely work through an area. This is my belief; this is not the commission's belief. Maybe there are smarter ways.<sup>53</sup>

## Committee conclusions

2.65 While the CRU program has only been in place since 1999, it is clear that it presents a more cost-effective arrangement for the AEC than the more labour-intensive biennial habitation review. The question for the committee is whether the CRU is more effective in ensuring an electoral roll of the highest integrity and accuracy, bearing in mind the AEC's evidence that a 100 per cent accurate, up-to-date electoral roll is unattainable.<sup>54</sup>

2.66 On evidence available to the committee, and by the AEC's own admission, there is plenty of scope for continuous improvement in CRU processes. It is encouraging that the AEC is continuously looking at ways to refine and enhance its CRU program.

---

50 Mr B. Peisley, *Submission no. 5*, p. 7.

51 See Mr B. Peisley, *Submission no. 5*, p. 7, and Mr B. McKivat, *Submission no. 6*, p. 4.

52 Mr B. Peisley, *Submission no. 5*, p. 7.

53 Mr B. Peisley, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 10.

54 Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 15.



- 2.67 Nevertheless, it is important that the most effective means of ensuring an accurate roll are not compromised in the interests of producing efficiencies.
- 2.68 The committee notes there were some concerns that the move away from the global habitation review has further diminished the ability of the AEC to maintain an up-to-date electoral roll. There was insufficient evidence for the committee to conclude that there is a more reliable and accurate process of maintaining an up-to-date electoral roll than the CRU.
- 2.69 The committee anticipates that this issue will continue to be investigated following the next federal election when its successor undertakes its regular inquiry into the conduct of that election. It is expected that the committee will continue to assess whether the implementation of CRU is continuing to meet stakeholders' needs and expectations.

