

Divisional offices with shared premises

Introduction

- 3.1 The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) has had divisional offices sharing premises since 1974. Currently there are 46 divisional offices out of 150 sharing premises across 18 different sites (see Table 3.1 on p. 24).
- 3.2 The AEC indicated that two further 'co-locations' were expected to take place in August 2007.
- 3.3 The committee's predecessor examined the issue of co-located offices in its report on the conduct of the 2001 federal election. Noting that co-locations could offer 'administrative efficiencies', the committee was not satisfied that the AEC had addressed 'longstanding concerns' about:¹
- potential loss of local knowledge;
 - reduced service to electors, MPs and candidates;
 - diminished capacity to conduct electoral education; and
 - reduced number of permanent staff conducting elections.
- 3.4 On this basis, the committee recommended that co-locations of AEC divisional offices 'not proceed'.²

1 Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, *Report of the Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2001 Federal Election and Matters Related Thereto*, June 2003, p. 216.

2 Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, *Report of the Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2001 Federal Election and Matters Related Thereto*, June 2003, p. 216.

Table 3.1 Divisional offices in shared premises

Offices	State	Location	Date
Canberra / Fraser	ACT	Canberra City	1996
Banks / Blaxland	NSW	Bankstown	2007 ⁽ⁱ⁾
Bennelong / Berowra / Bradfield / North Sydney	NSW	Chatswood	2003 ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾
Fowler / Prospect	NSW	Fairfield	2007 ⁽ⁱ⁾
Hunter / Paterson	NSW	East Maitland	2004
Macarthur / Werriwa	NSW	Campbelltown	2000
NSW State Office / Grayndler / Sydney / Wentworth	NSW	Haymarket	2000 ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾
NT Office / Lingiari / Solomon ^(iv)	NT	Darwin	2000 ^(v)
Blair / Oxley ^(vi)	QLD	Ipswich	1997
McPherson / Moncrieff ^(vi)	QLD	Southport	1988
QLD State Office / Bonner / Brisbane / Griffith / Lilley / Moreton / Ryan	QLD	Brisbane	2004 ^(vii)
Fadden / Forde / Rankin	QLD	Beenleigh	2003
Boothby / Hindmarsh / Kingston	SA	Oaklands Park	1996
SA State Office / Adelaide / Sturt	SA	Adelaide	2003 ^(viii)
Bass / Lyons	TAS	Launceston	1974
TAS State Office / Denison / Franklin ^(vi)	TAS	Hobart	1987
Casey / Chisholm / Deakin / Menzies	VIC	Ringwood	1998
VIC State Office / Melbourne / Melbourne Ports ^(ix)	VIC	Melbourne	1999
Hasluck / Pearce ^(vi)	WA	Midland	2001
WA State Office / Perth	WA	Perth	2002

⁽ⁱ⁾ Anticipated date of collocation.

⁽ⁱⁱ⁾ Bradfield and North Sydney collocated in 1991. Bennelong joined collocation in 1999 and Berowra joined collocation in 2003.

⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾ NSW State Office, Grayndler and Sydney collocated 1998. Wentworth joined collocation in 2000.

^(iv) Divisional offices and Northern Territory office are amalgamated.

^(v) Northern Territory Office has always shared premises with the divisional office(s) in Darwin.

^(vi) Divisional offices are amalgamated.

^(vii) QLD State Office and Brisbane collocated in 1996. Lilley and Moreton joined collocation in 2000, Bonner and Griffith in 2003 and Ryan in 2004.

^(viii) SA State Office and Adelaide collocated in 1997. Sturt joined the collocation in 2003. From 1989 to 1997, SA State Office and Adelaide were both located in the Commonwealth Centre, but on different floors.

^(ix) VIC State Office and the collocated divisions of Melbourne and Melbourne Ports are on different floors and do not have share features such as a common counter.

Source: Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 4.

- 3.5 In mid-2002, following an AEC/ Department of Finance and Administration (DOFA) resourcing review of the Commission, and the expectation by DOFA that the AEC would explore all possible cost-saving measures, the AEC investigated the geographic rationalisation of a number of divisional offices.³
- 3.6 Eight clusters of offices were identified and recommended for amalgamation, however, according to the AEC, in 'practical terms', these were co-locations:
- ...the traditional divisional organisational silo would give way to work cells based [on] either AEC business functions, such as an enrolment cell and elections cell, or some other cross-divisional organisational arrangement. It was envisaged that cost savings would be achieved by creating staffing structures in these collocations that would achieve salary savings.⁴
- 3.7 Following amendments to the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* in 2006, a divisional office may now only be located outside its divisional boundaries with the written approval of the Special Minister of State.
- 3.8 The AEC noted that the diversity of electorates, cyclical nature of its work and unpredictability of election dates necessitated a flexible approach to structuring its workforce:
- The cyclical nature of our business necessitates a flexibility in management response, and human and financial resources need to be carefully positioned to enable the AEC, to deliver the electoral services required by our clients and stakeholders...it is axiomatic that a fully distributed network comprising an individual office with only three staff in each division may not always be the best solution.⁵
- 3.9 This need to maintain flexibility forms the basis for the Commission's current policy on co-locations, where they are considered appropriate.

'Co-located' versus 'amalgamated' divisional offices

- 3.10 There is a degree of disputation over the use of the terms 'co-located' and 'amalgamated' when referring to AEC divisional offices in shared premises. The AEC was at pains to point out that the two – albeit similar – terms describe different work structures, along the lines of their

3 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16a*, p. 27.

4 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 27.

5 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 5.

respective dictionary definitions. That is, to 'place together' as opposed to 'form one structure.'⁶

- 3.11 In a **co-located** office, two or more divisional offices share the same accommodation, including computers, public areas and amenities.⁷ There is no change to the staffing arrangements of the divisional offices within the co-location – each has the same staffing profile as a stand-alone divisional office (an APS6, APS 3 and APS2) with combinations of ongoing, non-ongoing and temporary staff.
- 3.12 In addition, co-located offices often share some work. For example, a co-located office may have a single roll management team or at elections, one team may process all postal ballots for the divisions involved. However, there is a Divisional Returning Officer (DRO) designated for each of the separate divisions at all times.⁸
- 3.13 An **amalgamated** office involves two or more divisional offices sharing the same premises with a combined, single staffing structure. The number of staff is usually the same but the classification structure is not restricted to the standard divisional office set-up of an APS2, an APS3, and an APS6. There is a staff member on site with responsibility for the management of all the functions at the site, but during an election a DRO is appointed for each division within the amalgamated office. The AEC explained:
- It follows that, while all amalgamated offices must also be collocated, not all collocated offices are amalgamated, and in fact very few are.⁹
- 3.14 The AEC advised that its formal amalgamation program ended in 2004, but previously amalgamated offices are still in operation. As Mr Campbell told the committee:
- 'Amalgamated' is a dead word.¹⁰
- 3.15 The above are to be distinguished from the practice of **workload sharing** in which high volume or complex work (usually enrolment work) is shared across divisions, to ensure even workloads. Workload sharing does not signify amalgamation, and in theory, divisions do not need to be co-located for the practice to take place (although in reality, this is often

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

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

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

9 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 3.

10 Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 23.

the case). Workload sharing was introduced with the new 3.2 FTE staffing model (discussed in Chapter 2) over 2006-07.

Amalgamation by any other name: what does co-location really mean?

- 3.16 There is some scepticism, particularly amongst AEC employees, about the practical application of ‘co-locations’, particularly with the advent of workload sharing. Brian McKivat, an AEC employee and prior staff representative, noted:

I believe that the Committee must ask the AEC to clearly define the term “co-location” ... it now seems that the definition of “co-location” has changed quite significantly since the original advice to Members of Parliament. The staffing levels in a number of co-located offices have now been reduced and “new working arrangements” have been introduced. These new working arrangements, in some cases, now mean that divisional staff are no longer working in stand-alone divisions.¹¹

- 3.17 Mr McKivat noted that AEC staff were ‘generally’ supportive of the original principle of co-locations. However, he added:

But what has happened now... is that the AEC has decided to go a lot further than that. They have thought: ‘Now we have six people working at one site why don’t we try and pull down the barriers? Why don’t we mix the two divisions in together?’¹²

- 3.18 Sue Michie, a former AEC employee, also voiced her confusion regarding AEC terminology:

I was always a little bit confused about the difference between workload sharing and amalgamation. I could not see very much difference between them. Basically, I always got the understanding that workload sharing would be: if one division is having trouble trying to complete something and you are in a co-located site then somebody else, maybe from another existing division at that location, will come in and give a hand – which I think is always what we were doing when we were all under one roof at Chatswood.¹³

11 Mr B. McKivat, *Submission no. 6*, p. 2

12 Mr B. McKivat, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 46.

13 Mrs S. Michie, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 16.

3.19 Further muddying the waters, the AEC was at pains to explain that the Chatswood office is a co-located office, when the committee was also told that it was:

...more clearly and indisputably an amalgamation of these divisions and their functions.¹⁴

3.20 The Chatswood office was the source of much contention during the inquiry, and is discussed in further detail later in this chapter.

3.21 The committee, too, had difficulty understanding the practical differences between the various terminology, particularly as it appears that workload sharing implies a restructuring of staff into 'cells' rather than divisions.

3.22 The AEC argued that co-location was not the pivotal issue for the Commission, but rather, ensuring the AEC maintains the flexibility to continue to deliver effective electoral services and meet client and stakeholder expectations.¹⁵

3.23 The AEC noted that its stakeholders are a key consideration when new co-locations are investigated.¹⁶ This necessitates finding suitable accommodation in locations relevant to the public, easily accessible by public transport. Savings on property and technology are not reported to be significant, given the high rent in capital cities.¹⁷

3.24 Brian Peisley, an AEC employee of more than 20 years, appearing before the committee in a private capacity, questioned the public interest in site-selection in AEC offices:

When the divisions choose a site for co-location it is where they get the best rent; it is not where it is ideal to provide the majority of the services from.¹⁸

'Regionalisation'

3.25 Mr Peisley promoted a policy of 'regionalisation', rather than stand-alone offices or co-location, to better process enrolments and to provide a more professional service to regions. Mr Peisley stated:

My personal belief is that stand-alone and co-located divisions do not service the community. The office structure of those divisions

14 Mr F. Young, *Submission no. 9*, pp. 1-2.

15 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 5.

16 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 23.

17 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 23.

18 Mr B. Peisley, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 8.

is such that, while they do basic work, the influx of work into those divisions is not meeting the organisation's requirements of processing the enrolment or the work that is going through at the time. We can only do bare basic work.¹⁹

- 3.26 The committee did not receive any additional evidence supporting this view. In contrast, a view was expressed that regionalisation would in fact *reduce* the quality of service to regional electors:

All any regionalisation would do would be to reduce the number of sites that we currently have. I cannot see that that would provide, particularly to country people, anything other than a service inferior to what we have at the moment. Most of the rural or regional divisions around Australia are based in the major towns within the divisional boundaries or in the towns that are more central or easier for the majority of people to visit in person if they need to.²⁰

- 3.27 The committee is of the view that regionalisation would reduce the ability of the AEC to fulfil its obligations. In evidence to the committee, the Electoral Commissioner made it clear that regionalisation was not AEC policy.²¹

Financial and social impacts of co-located offices

- 3.28 The AEC noted in its submission that there were cost savings where AEC offices shares premises. As at 30 June 2006, the annual costs of operating the AEC's 20 shared premises were:

- \$1.9 million for rent; and
- \$509,000 for voice and data communications connection costs.²²

- 3.29 To reverse this arrangement and locate all AEC offices back in their relevant divisions, the estimated revised cost would be:

- \$2.17 million for rent;
- \$1.3 million for voice and data communications connection costs; and

19 Mr B. Peisley, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 2.

20 Mr B. McKivat, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 48.

21 Mr I. Campbell, Australian Electoral Commission, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 26.

22 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 5.

- \$8.4 million, as a one-off cost calculated at 30 June 2006, for the relocation to new premises.²³

3.30 Despite the savings outlined above and the cost-saving imperatives of the past, Mr Campbell told the committee that these are not the current purpose of or philosophy behind co-locations.

What is happening in Chatswood, Ringwood or anywhere else has nothing to do with cost savings.²⁴

3.31 Mr McKivat noted that there could be tangible benefits to co-locations 'as long as it is a co-location in the strict sense of the word.' That is, offices which tend to be inner-metropolitan and therefore geographically close to each other and the electorates they service:

There were comments to me from people who worked in a co-located site, when they were first co-located and were given good accommodation and full staffing resources and were able to operate as stand-alone divisions – in other words, the three staff belonging to division X worked for division X. The comments back were: 'It was good. It was healthy. It was nice to have six people in the office rather than three. We got good accommodation out of all of this. We got moved to a nicer area. We had better opportunities to work closely with our colleagues.' There really were positives.²⁵

3.32 Dianne Switzer, who has worked in the co-located Chatswood office, spoke of a starkly different scenario, where co-location led to unhappy workers, often due to confusion and frustration with shared work tasks:

The staff having previously worked well and happily together, have found they are under stress, quite often at loggerheads with one another, not exactly sure what they should be doing or accomplishing (whether it belongs to their cell or another cell)...²⁶

Opportunities for staff and corporate knowledge

3.33 The AEC asserted that some co-locations have improved the capacity of divisional offices to retain corporate knowledge and provide a wider range of tasks and opportunities for staff:

23 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 5.

24 Mr I. Campbell, Australian Electoral Commission, *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 25.

25 Mr B. McKivat, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 45.

26 Mrs D. Switzer, *Submission no. 8*, p. 1.

[co-location has] undoubtedly contributed to the AEC's ability to improve recruitment and retention, knowledge management and succession planning, training and development, and people management at these sites.²⁷

- 3.34 Tom Rogers, AEC State Manager for NSW, told the committee that co-located offices increase the tasks available to staff, particularly more junior ones, enhancing their skills and development:

An APS2 in a stand-alone office would potentially be involved in a fairly limited range of tasks, but in a larger office they may get the scope to be involved in a larger range of tasks because of the workload sharing.²⁸

- 3.35 However, the committee also heard conflicting evidence that co-location hinders corporate knowledge and opportunities for staff. One employee compared the co-located Chatswood office to a 'repetitious factory floor.'²⁹ Sue Michie told the committee that in her experience in a co-located office, staff were often stuck doing repetition tasks. This led to poor morale, with a 'use it or lose it' effect with respect to skills.

I have been able to observe a number of changes in attitude of staff members and work place procedures. Firstly, nearly all staff have expressed a reluctance at having to do on-going repetitive tasks.

...Staff are concerned that they are losing previously acquired skills that no-longer are relevant to their immediate jobs...They are also concerned that come a federal election, they may be required to step into tasks that they have not experienced for months.³⁰

- 3.36 It was put to the committee that having staff focus on one area or cell, spread across multiple divisions, inhibits the ability of staff to build critical knowledge of their local area, with potential serious flow on effects for the integrity of the electoral roll. Mr Stephen Jones, national secretary of the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), noted:

The employees within [divisional offices] develop, over time, considerable local knowledge and corporate memory of demographics and affairs within their division, and we believe that is lost with the merger, amalgamation, collocation – however it is expressed – of the offices. Quite apart from the interests of our

27 Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 18.

28 Mr T. Rogers (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 28.

29 Mrs D. Switzer, *Submission no. 8*, p. 1.

30 Mrs S. Michie, private capacity, *Submission no. 4*, p. 2.

employees, there is a public interest at stake, so we add our voice to those who have given evidence before the committee opposing that process.³¹

- 3.37 W. Kirkpatrick, member and past president of the H.S. Chapman Society, submitted that co-locations have had a particular impact at the DRO level:

Co locations have contributed to removing the community's awareness of the presence and importance of the local Divisional Returning Officer and his/her role. By increasing the extent of the roll in collocations, the DRO's previous valuable knowledge of the electorate which was and is an aid to better control of the detail in preparation for elections, has been dissipated.³²

Roll integrity

- 3.38 As noted above, the issue of roll integrity – and the maintenance thereof – was raised as a serious issue in co-located offices, where employees previously responsible for one division are now responsible for enrolment in two or more divisions. This disperses their local knowledge, and limits their capacity to double and triple check information and 'master' the area they are responsible for. Mrs Michie stated that:

Local knowledge is sort of frowned upon in the AEC these days, because not every division can have it.³³

- 3.39 Dr Amy McGrath OAM from the H.S. Chapman Society noted:

Divisional Returning Officers said they [amalgamations or co-locations] jeopardise the electoral system. Divisional staff lose contact with the physical nature of their electorate and electors. They have a reduced ability to detect enrolment fraud via roll reviews.³⁴

- 3.40 The Liberal Party of Australia reiterated its view from the 2004 federal election inquiry, in which it expressed concern:

...about any attempt by the AEC to pursue the co-location of AEC Divisional Offices. There is value in these Divisional offices being located within the electorate for which they are responsible.³⁵

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

32 Mr B. Kirkpatrick, *Submission no. 3*, p. 2.

33 Mrs S. Michie, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 18.

34 H.S. Chapman Society, *Submission no. 2*, p. 5; See also Mr J. Snell, private capacity, *Submission no. 7*, p. 2.

35 The Liberal Party of Australia, *Submission no. 10*, p. 1.

Accessibility for clients

- 3.41 The reduced accessibility of co-located divisional offices was highlighted in a submission from Dr Craig Emerson MP, whose seat of Rankin's (Qld) divisional office was relocated to the neighbouring electorate of Forde as the result of a co-location.
- 3.42 Dr Emerson argued that his constituents have been inconvenienced by the decision, noting that 'very few' Rankin residents attend the co-located office (in Beenleigh), as it is not easily accessible:
- Prior to the relocation, the Rankin AEC was centrally located and attracted usage.³⁶
- 3.43 Furthermore, as the population of Rankin is 'highly transient' Dr Emerson believes many electors fail to register.³⁷
- 3.44 Given that the lease of the Beenleigh office is up for renewal in 2007, Dr Emerson suggested that the Rankin AEC office be once again located in the electorate of Rankin.
- 3.45 People With Disability Australia Inc. (PWD) also emphasised the need for divisional offices to be located in easy to reach places. PWD did not support co-locations if they forced the public to travel long distances.³⁸
- 3.46 Sue Michie reported that co-located offices made it more difficult to provide a good and accessible service to electors, particularly elderly ones:

One of the things I was taught when I first arrived in the AEC was be professional but be kind to electors as well. In Berowra division, for instance, in the census statistics in 2001, Hornsby was the oldest community in Australia. We had a lot of elderly people coming into our office. Those people do need special attention I just find that those things that were instilled into me, that kindness to electors, have been sort of thrown back in their faces in many ways, in moving out of the area.³⁹

36 Dr C. Emerson, MP, *Submission no. 1*, p. 1.

37 Dr C. Emerson, MP, *Submission no. 1*, p. 1.

38 People With Disability Australia Inc., *Submission no. 12*, p. 2.

39 Mrs S. Michie, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 24.

Office closures

- 3.47 The increased number of staff in a co-located office, as opposed to a stand-alone divisional office, means that offices are less likely to be shut during working hours due to staff absences.
- 3.48 Table 3.2 indicates the number of days for which divisional offices have had to close their doors to the public due to staff absences.

Table 3.2 Divisional closures – 2005-2006

State (i)	Number Divisions (ii)	Number of days
NSW/ACT	52	150
VIC	37	70
QLD	28	55
WA	15	0
SA	11	12
TAS	5	0
Total	148 (iii)	287

(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.

(ii) At 30 June 2006 there were 50 divisions in NSW and 2 in the ACT.

(iii) Excludes Lingjari and Solomon in the Northern Territory.

Source: Australian Electoral Commission, *Submission no. 16*, p. 18.

- 3.49 The AEC explained that where divisional offices are reduced to one staff member, in many instances the office is closed due to safety reasons, particularly in those offices located in metropolitan areas.⁴⁰ The AEC stated:

This time two years ago in Victoria, we had a problem when the flu seemed to be endemic and we had periods of time when we had to close two or three offices a day ... the reality of life is that three person offices lead to problems about how you keep them open continuously.⁴¹

- 3.50 This is a source of frustration for staff, as Mr Peisley noted:

As a divisional returning officer, one of the biggest frustrations I had in the past was that, where you were the only staff member in the office in a stand-alone site, for safety reasons you would have to lock your door. There would be people knocking on the door

⁴⁰ Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 26.

⁴¹ Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 26.

wanting to come in, and you could not let them in because you were the only person in that office. When you go to bigger sites, if staff are away at least the other divisions are supporting the office opening rules.⁴²

Case study: Chatswood divisional office

- 3.51 Serious concerns about the operations at a co-located northern Sydney Divisional Office in Chatswood (comprising the metropolitan divisional offices of Bennelong, Berowra, Bradfield and North Sydney) were raised in evidence to the inquiry.
- 3.52 The Chatswood site has accommodated four divisional offices since 2003.⁴³
- 3.53 The vast majority of evidence the committee received from AEC employees was from either current or former Chatswood staff members.
- 3.54 One AEC employee held such serious reservations about the successful conduct of the next Federal election at the Chatswood site that she handed in her resignation, citing that she did 'not want to be involved in an election disaster'.⁴⁴ Another staff member described the Chatswood site as 'the unhappiest office I have ever set foot in during my working career'.⁴⁵
- 3.55 Following concerns raised in written submissions, the committee conducted a site visit of the Chatswood premises in July 2007.
- 3.56 Between August 2003 and August 2006, staff at Chatswood implemented various initiatives to utilise their co-location. This included sharing casual staff, responsibility for counter enquiries and mail workloads. At the 2004 federal election, major tasks were allocated to divisions.
- 3.57 Workload sharing was introduced to the office in February 2007, after an external DRO organised the office in line with NSW state office requirements.⁴⁶
- 3.58 The committee understands that following the introduction of workload-sharing the Chatswood office operates on a functional basis.

42 Mr B. Peisley, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 2.

43 As noted above, Bradfield and North Sydney co-located in 1991, Bennelong joined in 1999 and Berowra in 2003.

44 Mrs S. Michie, *Submission no. 4*, p. 3.

45 Mrs D. Switzer, *Submission no. 8*, p. 1.

46 Mrs S. Michie, *Submission no. 4*, p. 1.

Under this structure, a DRO is given responsibility for managing a particular function across all four divisions within the co-located site, with the assistance of support staff – rather than overseeing an entire, discrete division.

3.59 The office has been split into three ‘cells’:

- enrolment;
- administrations; and
- elections and public awareness.

3.60 Therefore, one DRO oversees everything falling within the enrolment function for all four divisions. Another DRO oversees administration – which includes organising events such as habitation reviews, the selection and hiring of casual staff, dealing with customer enquiries and overseeing office equipment and supplies. Two further DROs manage the elections and public awareness function. At election time, the DRO’s temporarily switch back to taking care of the divisions to which they were originally allocated.

3.61 According to Frank Young, a former full-time and now casual employee of the AEC (who has worked in the Chatswood office), co-location has been misappropriated at the Chatswood site:

Procedures and practices being implemented at Chatswood ... have resulted in the 4 divisions concerned losing virtually all independence with functions being combined and grouped into the categories of Administration; Enrolment; and Elections & Public Awareness.... This model does not represent any generally accepted concept of co-location that I am familiar with, but is rather more clearly and indisputably an amalgamation of these divisions and their functions.⁴⁷

3.62 The committee heard evidence that workload sharing practices at the office meant employees had lost control of their work areas, leading to social tensions, hampering career aspirations and compromising Chatswood’s preparedness for the next federal election.

I think the AEC is a wonderful organisation However, I feel that the recent workload-sharing practices are putting those values and AEC standards under threat.⁴⁸

47 Mr F. Young, *Submission no. 9*, pp. 1-2.

48 Mrs S. Michie, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 14

- 3.63 Of particular concern to staff at the Chatswood site was the loss of personal oversight over work-areas. Mr McKivat noted:

There are real concerns from a number of staff who are being told, 'You're no longer the returning officer for division X; you're now the manager of the enrolment cell in this particular site.' That is a massive shift from what we have done in the past, and a lot of people have expressed concerns to me that they are worried that they will no longer be able to manage the roll or manage the election at a divisional level because they are not being asked to do it at a divisional level any more.⁴⁹

- 3.64 While no one single reason was given, it was reported to the committee that DROs from other divisions in NSW consider that Chatswood is 'a disaster waiting to happen.'⁵⁰

- 3.65 Sue Michie, who appeared before the committee in a private capacity, recently resigned from the AEC on account of her concerns about the Chatswood office's election performance and her ability to do a professional job under workload sharing arrangements:

A DRO needs to have full input into and control of their division in matters related to casual and support staffing; electoral roll and address register maintenance; polling booth and pre-polling locations; distribution and return of electoral materials, including ballot papers; and fresh scrutines carried on after election day. As a DRO in the new workload-sharing site, this would not be the case ... I would not want other managers making decisions that, in effect, put the outcome in my own division at risk.⁵¹

- 3.66 The committee heard evidence that Chatswood had experienced a comprehensive turnover of staff in recent times, suggesting that staff who were unhappy with the new working arrangements had either left of their own accord or been moved on:

I have been to the Chatswood a number of times and I have spoken to the staff there as a staff representative. All I can say to you, in all honesty, is that every staff member who was working at Chatswood has been moved out of the site.⁵²

49 Mr B. McKivat, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 47.

50 Mrs S. Michie, *Submission no. 4*, p. 2.

51 Mrs S. Michie, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 14.

52 Mr B. McKivat, private capacity, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 July 2007, p. 46.

- 3.67 It was noted that the AEC can not afford to lose so much of its corporate knowledge:

It does seem as if anyone likely to have a contrary opinion in relation to the model for Chatswood is being driven out. One thing I am absolutely certain of is that the AEC in Sydney does not have access to such a wealth of experienced personnel that they can afford to waste so much expertise.⁵³

The Ringwood 'Quad'

- 3.68 The 'Ringwood Quad', described as 'the Victorian equivalent to Chatswood' was cited as an example by the AEC where co-location has proven successful.⁵⁴
- 3.69 The site, comprising of four outer metropolitan electorates of Chisholm, Casey, Deakin and Menzies, has the same structure as Chatswood – with four APS6, four APS3, four APS2 and casuals. It was initiated by staff in 1997-1998. It operates along functional lines, with DROs performing the full range of functions come election time.
- 3.70 Ringwood has been used as the model for Chatswood and the Campbell Street co-location in Sydney, comprising of the busy metropolitan electorates of Wentworth, Sydney and Grayndler.

Committee conclusions

- 3.71 The AEC cautioned against drawing conclusions from the situation at Chatswood as evidence of an endemic problem across the agency, noting that no submissions were received from the 17 other co-located or amalgamated sites.⁵⁵ The AEC commented that workload sharing was only new to Chatswood and noted, 'we are still going through that change process.'⁵⁶

53 Mr F. Young, *Submission no. 9*, p. 2.

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

55 See Mr I. Campbell (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 25.

56 Mr T. Rogers (Australian Electoral Commission), *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 July 2007, p. 28.

- 3.72 There was also evidence describing examples of co-locations which have been implemented as originally intended and have been widely supported and successful.⁵⁷
- 3.73 However, the committee is mindful of the possibility that other staff are experiencing difficulties in co-located offices but may perhaps have preferred not to speak out publicly regarding their work environment – and that silence could just as likely be a sign of dysfunction as function.
- 3.74 The committee accepts the AEC's position that one office staffing structure cannot fit all divisional offices. Yet, the committee notes that despite differences in geography and demography, each electorate has exactly the same output: to maintain an accurate roll, provide a professional service to electors and candidates and to facilitate a fair election.
- 3.75 Some of the comments concerning the Chatswood site were concerning. Even if it does prove to be an isolated case, it nevertheless comprises four busy metropolitan electorates which are home to over 300,000 voters.⁵⁸ The committee encourages the AEC to immediately assess what additional resources, training or support the Chatswood site may require in the lead up to the election. The committee also strongly advises the AEC to monitor the Chatswood office's preparedness in the lead up to the 2007 federal election.
- 3.76 The committee reiterates its predecessor's concerns with co-locations, particularly with respect to the integrity of the electoral roll and the reduced interaction/ service to the public, MPs and candidates. The committee holds some concerns as to whether divisional offices engaged in workload sharing practices have the level of control and detailed local knowledge required to adequately maintain their respective electoral rolls.
- 3.77 Concerns were raised about the lack of clarity between the terminology from AEC head office with respect to 'co-location', 'amalgamation' and 'workload sharing'. While amalgamation may well be a 'dead word', it appears to the committee that the underlying principles of amalgamation have emerged once more through the introduction of workload sharing.
- 3.78 There are concerns that moving to an office organised into cells, rather than by electoral divisions, will mean data entry on enrolment is less

57 See, for example, Mr F. Young, *Submission no. 9*, p. 1.

58 According to the Australian Electoral Commission website, as at August 2007, Bennelong had 86,220 enrolled voters; Berowra had 87,078; Bradfield had 90,021; and North Sydney had 89,083. Viewed 8 August 2007, <<http://www.aec.gov.au>>.

accurate and less based on local knowledge, which, over time will affect the accuracy of the electoral roll. These are concerns which cannot be ignored.

- 3.79 However, given evidence presented to the inquiry only focused on a small number of specific AEC divisional offices – some of which was contradictory – the committee is mindful about supporting any across-the-board changes without having further information at its disposal.

Recommendation 2

- 3.80 **The committee recommends that, as part of the audit on workforce planning in the Australian Electoral Commission proposed in Recommendation 1, the Auditor-General also examine the efficiency and effectiveness of working arrangements in co-located divisional offices.**

Recommendation 3

- 3.81 **The committee recommends that the Australian Electoral Commission includes an evaluation of the performance of all co-located divisional offices in the upcoming federal election in its submission to the JSCEM inquiry into the conduct of the 2007 federal election.**
- 3.82 While larger offices can provide better security/surety against office closures due to staff absences, the committee is sceptical of the high rate of office closures due to staff absences – given the large pool of casual staff at the AEC's disposal. It is understandable that unexpected absences may be difficult to cover in regional areas, but the impression from the AEC's evidence is that this is more of a problem in metropolitan regions. The committee encourages the AEC to make more effective use of this resource, noting that many other workplaces have successful models in place to combat such occurrences.