



**Australian Government**

**Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs**

**Public Sector Leadership Series  
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**Key strategies for improving client service in the department of  
immigration and multicultural affairs**

**Andrew Metcalfe  
Secretary, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs**

Thank you for the opportunity to talk to you today. We have heard over the course of the conference about the challenges which face large service delivery agencies. How we must balance client needs with the delivery of strong government policy. We have also heard about how we must develop policy with a keen eye to implementation and outcomes and we have heard about the challenges of change.

At the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) we have been taking a close look at our client service delivery strategies as part of a much broader reform and improvement programme. Our story over the past ten months or so has been one of rapid change driven by a number of highly critical reports on our activities. Our experience is not unique, but it has played out very publicly and I believe has lessons for all of us involved in leading large and complex organisations.

I would like to take the opportunity today to share with you some of those lessons. All of the themes underpinning this conference – leadership, defining priorities and outcomes, enhancing delivery and outcomes and ensuring successful reform and innovation – are key parts of DIMA’s programme of change.

**Drivers for change**

In July it will be 12 months since Mr Mick Palmer reported on his inquiry into the Cornelia Rau case and I was appointed as Secretary of the Department. Mr Palmer’s report, and the later Comrie Report on the Vivian Alvarez case, shone a spotlight on areas where DIMA had clearly made mistakes. Both reports had concerns that certain areas of the Department had an assumption-based, unquestioning culture; one that was overly self-protective and defensive; a culture largely unwilling to challenge organisational norms or to engage in genuine self-criticism or analysis. Mr Palmer said we were “process rich and outcomes poor”.

Mr Comrie said that our management of Ms Alvarez’s case was “catastrophic”.

Those criticisms went beyond the specific cases investigated. They focussed more broadly on leadership, governance, training, systems support, the relationship between policy development and implementation, client service delivery and records management.

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6 Chan Street Belconnen ACT 2617

The Government accepted the findings and recommendations in both reports and has given DIMA the resources and support to implement a substantial reform and improvement programme. Almost \$790 million has been committed in new and redirected funding.

How we came to this point is important. Electronic visa processing and much of the overseas visa application processing to our offices in Australia changed the way we work. Large numbers of unauthorised boat arrivals from the late 1990s and the subsequent policy changes meant we had to be flexible and responsive. And we were. But it was perhaps in meeting the challenges that crises present that we took our eye, in some key areas, off the ball - off managing DIMA's "business as usual".

### **What sort of organisation is DIMA?**

DIMA is both a policy and programme agency and a service delivery agency. Many services are delivered by us directly; much is outsourced. In terms of procurement, we are the second largest Commonwealth agency by number of contracts and fourth by dollar value.

There are around 6000 staff – a number which has grown substantially in the past couple of years.

Our services are delivered through offices in every State and Territory and through our overseas network of more than 60 countries.

About half of my staff work in the State and Territory network and over 160 Australian based staff work with about 700 locally engaged staff overseas.

We are rightly proud of the work we do in delivering the Government's strong migration, citizenship, settlement and multicultural programmes. In many of these programmes we are widely recognised by independent commentators as being world leaders.

We are an incredibly busy department. On a typical working day, DIMA will:

- receive more than 12,000 visa applications – that's over 4.5 million per year;
- grant around 11,500 temporary visas and 500 permanent migrant visas, the latter including about 35 humanitarian visas;
- grant citizenship to around 375 people;
- handled nearly 7,000 calls to our general and citizenship inquiry lines;
- meet around 560 clients face to face at scheduled interviews;
- process more than 60,000 people across the border at air and sea ports – that's around one person per second; and
- provide accommodation, meals, activities, health care and other services to around 750 immigration detainees in detention facilities and alternative detention arrangements (mainly illegal foreign fishermen).

About now, flights QF 192 from Beijing, Cathay Pacific 101 from Hong Kong and Freedom Air 91 from Nadi are touching down at Sydney International Airport. We Customs & AQIS will clear some 1,500 passengers through that airport alone in the 30 minutes or so that I am speaking this morning.

Around now in Bangkok, a DIMA airline liaison officer is assisting Thai Airways with the uplift of passengers ready to board TG993, checking passenger details with our 24/7 Entry Operations Centre here in Canberra to confirm that a passenger has a valid visa for travel.

This morning, and most mornings, our 26 Movement Monitoring Officers on the islands of the Torres Strait will be assisting the arrival and departure of traditional visitors from PNG who are travelling under the auspices of the Torres Strait Treaty. They'll also be looking out for anyone seeking to enter the country without permission.

Over the next 30 minutes staff in our Hobart Office will issue electronically and worldwide around 330 Working Holiday Maker visas. And about 3800 clients will be serviced at reception counters in 13 offices around Australia.

In Canberra, one of our 15 Industry Outreach Officers will be working with senior management at the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry on the ACCI policy development process or presenting sessions for employer members of ACCI on how best to meet their overseas skill needs. This could involve assisting them with the visa application process.

And in Suva, DIMA officers might be interviewing an Australian and his Fijian wife in the Visa Section at the Australian High Commission to assess her application for migration to Australia.

These are just a few snapshots of the crucial role our staff perform all around the world, every day, for the benefit of the Australian community and our many direct clients.

DIMA works very closely with other agencies to deliver whole of government policy. Visas are an entitlement for non-citizens to travel to and stay in Australia. Decisions to grant them, or not, are determined by, or impact on, a range of different policy settings. Policy ranging from border security to economic and labour market issues, from education and training to tourism, from community health issues to child welfare and issues surrounding the resettlement of refugees.

This is the backdrop to the events of 2005. My challenge was to achieve sweeping change while continuing to run the business.

### **The framework for change**

The three key themes that underpin our planning and implementation are simple. In order to meet the expectations placed on us, we need to:

- develop and maintain an open and accountable culture;
- promote fair and reasonable dealings with clients; and
- ensure well trained and supported staff.

All of the work we have done since I was appointed as Secretary to DIMA can be mapped to these themes and to our tagline – people our business. We represent this through “The Triangle”, which we use as a key way to articulate our change agenda. It’s a framework that is focussed on our three main stakeholder groups – the Government and the wider community, our direct clients and our staff. It also mirrors the Australian Public Service Commission framework for the wider APS which places emphasis on developing productive relationships with Government, with the public and with each other.

### **Acting as a monopoly is dangerous**

We hold a monopoly over the permission for foreign nationals to enter and stay in Australia. We had fallen into the trap of acting like one.

I’ll return to some history here. Over the past ten years the number of visas issued by DIMA in the migration programme has doubled from around 67,000 in 1997-98 to a planned 140,000 in 2005-06. Working Holiday Makers have increased from around 50,000 to 104,000 and offshore student visas have risen from around 60,000 to nearly 117,000.

We had to find innovative ways to deal efficiently with those numbers of transactions. Like many organisations we looked to IT solutions and we have been very successful. We have got away from the long queues stretching away from the doors of our Embassies and High Commissions overseas. We have embraced the internet as a way to deliver many of our services. It means that every internet access point around the world is a potential link with DIMA and our services.

It also meant that we discouraged people from calling us and coming in to our offices – to the extent of actively saying “don’t call us”. By the middle of last year it was impossible for a client in the United Kingdom, one of our biggest markets for visitors and migrants, to speak to an immigration officer unless they came to the High Commission in London.

We thought that because most of our clients were happy to deal with us via the internet, we were delivering good client service.

But we weren’t.

Good client service means offering choice; it means there is no wrong way to approach us and no “wrong door” to come through.

In many respects, we had lost sight of clients as individuals, with individual needs, and we were rightly criticised for it.

### **Improving the client service focus in DIMA**

A very large part of our reform agenda is around improving the client service focus in DIMA. At the governance end we are building this into our new business plan – the DIMA Plan - which is focussing on developing a service philosophy that integrates policy, programmes and delivery. Values and leadership behaviours are key planks of the Plan - we are working together as a department to develop the kind of culture that delivers excellent client service as a matter of course.

This takes me back to “people our business”. The phrase sums up what DIMA does every day. People are at the heart of every transaction we undertake. Decisions we make directly affect their lives. In these circumstances we have no choice but to provide excellent client service.

### **Being fair and reasonable**

We have summed up our responsibilities to our clients as the need to be fair and reasonable in our dealings with them. We have a strong legislative framework, so we need to make decisions which are also lawful. Being fair and reasonable in DIMA means providing clients with:

- accurate, consistent and relevant information about our products and processes;
- a clear view of next steps, remaining requirements and likely timeframes for finalising the matter at hand;
- options as to how they might contact us;
- timely resolution of their issues;
- helpful responses to their follow-up; and
- lawful, sensible decisions based on all of a client’s circumstances, including special needs or exceptional circumstances.

It’s all about treating people professionally and with respect.

I have told my staff that a practical way to come to terms with this is to ensure that we treat clients as we would wish to be treated ourselves or we would wish a close friend or family member to be treated if the circumstances were similar.

It certainly doesn’t mean the client will always achieve their desired outcome – usually a visa to come to or stay in Australia – but they should feel they were treated fairly and reasonably, as should a reasonable member of the public if the circumstances were explained to them.

Part of this approach is to ensure that when there are exceptional circumstances we work that out quickly because the standard approach to processing – which works in the vast majority of cases – may not lead to the most appropriate outcome.

### **Case management**

This is where good case managers come into play. One of Mr Palmer’s most strident criticisms was that DIMA lacked a holistic case management framework to effectively deal with an individual’s circumstances throughout their interactions with the Department.

We have developed and put in place a new case management framework that is characterised by early identification of clients with exceptional circumstances and managing their cases individually and proactively – an early intervention model of service delivery. It will be familiar to many of you in service delivery agencies. Most clients are dealt with quickly and efficiently through normal processes. Some need special consideration and the earlier that occurs the more likely it is that we can resolve the case quickly and without controversy.

Case management is not about saying yes to all of our clients, but it does mean that clients are managed in a fair, lawful, reasonable and timely way; that we interact with people on an individual basis; take the time to understand their circumstances; and ensure that Government policies are implemented humanely. It requires a careful balance and the staff who are making these decisions need to be well trained, well supported and well led.

Case managers do not work in isolation. They are not DIMA decision makers, nor are they welfare agents - they are “solution brokers”. They have the important task of coordinating all activities around a case, to achieve timely and appropriate outcomes.

### **Systems supporting client service**

Mr Palmer also criticised our systems, which did not allow us to see a client’s entire history quickly. We took this criticism very seriously. The Government last week announced an ambitious \$494.6 million information technology strategy – Systems for People – that will deliver a client-centric perspective through our systems. Better data quality, a single view of a client’s dealings with us, less fragmentation of information, data and systems, more flexible systems and better support for staff through tailored portals all mean better decision-making and better client service.

### **Client feedback is important – listening to clients**

When I was first appointed as Secretary to DIMA, I said that future planning would be informed by comprehensive client surveys. Many of the projects we initiated as an immediate response to the Palmer and Comrie Reports were directed at obtaining and analysing client feedback so that systemic issues could be identified and dealt with.

One of the first things I did, and continue to do, was to engage with a broad range of external stakeholders. I deliberately seek their feedback on our activities and I continue to keep them updated on our progress to give them one way to judge whether DIMA is changing.

Since July last year, we have also made it easier for our direct clients to provide us with feedback through the Global Feedback Unit. The Unit receives, records and tracks feedback received via email, the telephone and regular mail. We have also made it easier for clients to contact us overseas with a new Client Contact Centre in London and an expanded Contact Centre in Ottawa. And we have plans to open a Contact Centre in the Pacific Region.

We have commenced a programme of Value Creation Workshops with client groups. Some of you may be familiar with the methodology. Facilitators ask our clients questions about our performance and client service delivery. Managers attend to listen, but can’t speak while clients are there. It means clients can give very direct feedback and tell us exactly what they think about our services and the way we deliver them. The workshops are a very powerful forum for drawing out commentary on key issues.

I attended one such workshop in Sydney a couple of weeks ago with a number of student visa holders. Some had been here for a very short time, others for longer. They came from many different countries. The facilitators got them to speak frankly about their experience in dealing with DIMA – their initial contacts with our overseas posts, their experience at the counter here in Australia, over the telephone and over the internet.

It was clear from that workshop that we have a long way to go and this is consistent with the findings from other client workshops. But I was pleased to hear them reporting very positive experiences in recent times.

I have encouraged all of my staff to listen closely to what our clients have to say. All of my senior executives in National Office are spending time at the counter in our service delivery network because we cannot afford to lose touch with the issues confronting clients and front line staff.

More client surveys will follow later this year.

### **Client Service Improvement Programme**

The Minister, Senator Vanstone, will be launching a Client Service Improvement Programme in a couple of weeks. This will pull together all of the strands of work underway. The key themes are “our commitment, our presentation, helping you and hearing you.”

There are several components. A new Client Service Charter will set out very clearly what clients can expect of us and what we expect of them in return. The Charter has been developed following an extensive period of public consultation which provided a lot of very valuable feedback that we have taken on board in finalising the Charter.

There is also a Model Office Project which has two dimensions. The first is about the physical look and feel of our offices and how we can present a more welcoming and comfortable environment for our clients. The second includes analysing and understanding how we interact with clients through different communications channels and better understanding their needs and preferences. All the while, we need to keep in mind efficient and modern practices. We need to continue to reap the efficiencies of global working, but tailor the way we interact to the needs of particular client groups.

Much of this work will go towards improving our image, and will have a direct impact on the way we are perceived externally and the way our staff perceive themselves. A lot of the public perception of our image comes from the media, but a lot comes from the daily interactions we have with our clients. If we improve those perceptions – by being fair and reasonable and by being professional - then we will go a long way towards improving our image.

### **Making it happen – governance and implementation**

From the very start of developing the reform and improvement agenda for DIMA I have been focussed on making sure we have the right governance frameworks and a strong implementation plan in place.

I established an Executive Management Committee which meets weekly and comprises myself, my Deputy Secretaries and four key division heads – in strategic policy, national communications, finance and the Chief Lawyer. The EMC has a strong governance role around whole of department strategic planning and integration.

It is supported by a number of governance committees that have a key role in the change process. An expanded Audit and Evaluation Committee, with an independent chairman and a second external member, is rigorously overseeing an enhanced internal audit programme.

The audit programme is focussing on making sure that we are making decisions in line with our legislation and instructions.

I have also established a Values and Standards Committee, which includes four external members – the Deputy Commonwealth Ombudsman, the Deputy Australian Public Service Commissioner and two community members. This committee is well placed to ensure that DIMA is meeting the expectations of the wider community.

I have placed a high priority on implementation planning to make sure that we achieve our key objectives. Project management principles and a strong governance framework are key tools we are using to maximise the success of the initiatives we have put in place. Fortnightly reports are provided to me and the senior executive and the Minister. Quarterly reports are provided to the Government and I will deliver a progress report in September, through the Minister, to the Commonwealth Parliament.

### **Supporting our staff**

I just wanted to finish today with some comments about the support we need to provide to staff when we are implementing change, when we have high expectations about their capacity to deliver quality client service in a consistent way.

As Mr Palmer pointed out, DIMA officers have extraordinary powers under the Migration Act – including powers to deprive people of their liberty. Those officers must be well trained, well supported and well led if those powers are to be exercised properly. It is also the only guarantee that we won't repeat the mistakes of the past and that we will achieve the objectives we have set ourselves.

DIMA had clearly dropped the ball in relation to the support and training it was providing. I mentioned earlier that there were problems with our systems which made it difficult for staff to carry out their jobs properly. They had also been let down in terms of the training they were provided. In fact, it speaks to the dedication and perseverance of our staff that we continued to meet the Government's agenda in areas such as settlement, citizenship and visa outcomes with the tools we had. Along with the nearly half a billion dollars that has been committed to systems improvements, the Government has made a substantial commitment to establish the College of Immigration.

The College isn't made of bricks and mortar, but it is an initiative that will deliver a mix of classroom, e-learning and on the job training. It will open its virtual doors at the beginning of July and deliver training tailored to the individual roles of our staff, particularly those in operational roles. New staff and existing staff moving to new jobs will be provided with comprehensive training that will give them the skills they need to undertake their jobs. Regular refresher training for existing staff will also be delivered by the College and we have a deliberate policy of backfilling jobs while people are being trained.

### **Leadership and teamwork**

I am also asking a lot of all my staff who are in leadership roles and those who are part of teams. They are the people who are going to make the changes happen. Leadership training is being rolled out across the Department at different levels. It is focussing on the values and behaviours we need to embed if we are to succeed.

I am also asking all of my staff to use teamwork as a driver for cultural change and to achieve other reforms. It is one of the key strengths we have as a large and diverse organisation and one of the key values I am asking my staff to embrace.

### **In conclusion**

DIMA is not out of the woods yet, not by a long way.

We face more criticism over coming months as the Commonwealth Ombudsman reports on a further 200 or so cases of detention where persons have later been found to be “not unlawful”. He also reports regularly on cases where people have been held in immigration detention for more than two years.

These ongoing reports about our mistakes can be a serious dampener on staff morale and our wider image. Thus, one of our key objectives is to be in a position to respond positively to these reports and their recommendations. Improvements to date mean that we are well positioned to respond positively and in many cases, we can now say “we already have an answer for the problems you have identified”.

We have a very big job of work to do to implement all of the reforms I have spoken about today. I have a highly committed team working with me and the strong support of the Minister and Government. I have no doubt that DIMA has the capacity to make the changes and to deliver for the Government strong migration, citizenship, settlement and multicultural programmes - underpinned by excellent client service.

Thank you.