



Australian Government
Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs

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Mr Andrew Metcalfe
Secretary of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs
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Introduction

I would like to complement the remarks of the Parliamentary Secretary here a few days ago by providing the programme delivery perspective on where the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs is at — and where we are going.

The Transformations theme for this conference is very relevant to the department I lead.

The reports by Mr Mick Palmer in July 2005 and Mr Neil Comrie marked a turning point for the department's operations.

These reports noted a 'culture that was overly self-protective and defensive, a culture largely unwilling to challenge organisational norms or to engage in genuine self-criticism or analysis'.

We were also rightly criticised for being "process rich, outcomes poor".

While it is on the public record that my department had faced some enormous challenges in recent years and clearly had got some things very, very wrong, there is no way to defend or excuse the removal from Australia of an Australian citizen, or the detention of a permanent resident.

I've said it before, and I'll repeat it to you today — we were wrong and made mistakes.

We are now comprehensively addressing those failings in what's admittedly a very complex area of administration.

And we are strongly focussed on building a positive and outward-looking organisation that treats clients appropriately.

More broadly, the Palmer and Comrie reports focused 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

PO Box 25 BELCONNEN ACT 2616 • Telephone (02) 6264 1111 • Facsimile (02) 6264 4466 • Website:
www.immi.gov.au

In response, we have done a great deal of work since my appointment in mid-2005.

We have had 16 months of comprehensive reform and improvement, covering almost every aspect of the department's activity, but especially cultural change and systems change — both to support excellence in client service.

We have now grown to be an organisation of around 7000 staff at the end of June this year.

These staff are working in offices in every capital city in Australia and nearly 1000 people are in our overseas service delivery network in 68 locations.

The reform and improvement programme has been implemented while maintaining high levels of activity in serving clients.

On a typical working day, the department:

- receives more than 12,000 visa applications
- grants around 11,500 temporary visas and 500 permanent migrant visas, including about 35 humanitarian visas. On my calculation that's about thirty 747s of people every day
- grants citizenship to around 375 people
- processes more than 60,000 people across the border at air and sea ports — that's around one person per second, and
- provides nearly 2000 telephone interpreting services, with around ten new clients joining the service each day.

I know many of you will be aware of the work underway to reform and improve the department so I will summarise the changes.

We have developed a framework within which all our work is conducted, comprising the three strategic themes, of:

- ❖ being an open and accountable organisation
- ❖ having fair and reasonable dealings with clients, and
- ❖ having well-trained and supported staff.

These themes are not just something we wheel out at conferences like this.

They permeate all our work, all around the world every day.

For instance, the College of Immigration — the Advisory Board for which is now chaired by Mick Palmer — encompasses all three themes in training and supporting staff to have fair and reasonable dealings with clients, and knowing exactly why and to whom staff are accountable.

And earlier this year, the newly appointed Regional Director South Asia, Paul Windsor, sent an update on his first ten weeks at the post which illustrates this. He wrote:

‘One aspect of working in this region is the reality of heightened security requirements. When assessing applications, political, security and economic issues can all contribute to a high risk profile. Our commitment to ensuring fair and reasonable dealings with clients is tested in this environment and with this in mind, one key focus for us is on developing innovative ways to ensure all clients receive excellent client service.’

We have also done much work to establish our values.

This is not a cosmetic exercise either. As a large and dispersed organisation, it’s essential that we establish and promote a clear set of values for all staff, so that whether someone is working in our Islamabad office or in London, Perth or Canberra they have a consistent set of values to apply in their work.

So we have defined our own DIMA values — in addition to those we work by as public servants — as teamwork, service excellence, respect for each other and the people we serve, openness, and commitment to delivering government policy in a fair and reasonable way.

On this theme of values, I congratulate FECCA in having your values upfront on your website home page.

It certainly helps us as a department to recognise the values we share with you so that we can work with you more effectively.

I’m thinking especially of your willingness ‘to work in strategic partnerships with other organisations to build an inclusive, diverse, accepting and prosperous 21st century Australian society’.

This resonates strongly with the department’s work and I know we can build on this common platform together.

The department has also made significant steps forward in improving our planning, accountability, leadership capability, communication and training.

And there has been strong support from the government for our new direction, both in terms of funding and in a number of positive comments Minister Vanstone has made on the public record in recent times.

The reform and improvement programme is now well-established and will be ongoing, and I draw everyone’s attention to the feature article which sets this out in our recently published Annual Report for 2005-06.

Today, I want to cover three topics in a little detail:

- ❖ our client service improvement initiatives
- ❖ our new initiative to engage more effectively with our stakeholders, and
- ❖ a top-level view of how we can build on our current relationships with stakeholders.

Client Service Improvement Initiatives

One of the lessons we have learned and that I have strongly reinforced in the department over the past year and a half is that our reform and improvement agenda cannot be too narrowly focussed on the specific problems that were identified in the Palmer and Comrie reports.

The Palmer report itself identified that the deficiencies in the department's approach went beyond specific items that could be fixed, and our experience has been that in many cases we have had to develop a fresh way of thinking and operating — beyond the specific problem highlighted.

Our new approach recognises that many aspects of the department's operations were sound, but establishes a much stronger framework in which we can be confident that we are working effectively and meeting the expectations of our clients and stakeholders.

The development of the three strategic themes is an example where we have built on existing better practices, and established a flexible and broad framework which supports our future activities.

Similarly, our client service improvement initiatives provide a fresh framework for the work we do, while keeping the successes such as the Electronic Travel Authority and our business centres and so on.

At the same time, pretty much everything we do contributes to our client service in one way or another. I have communicated very strongly to my staff that if they are not directly serving a client, then they are serving someone who will be serving a client.

This means that our client service improvement initiatives have to be comprehensive and ongoing.

Our DIMA National initiative identified 28 projects that were designed to drive a client-focussed change in culture across the department. These are largely complete and are now ongoing or managed as mainstream projects.

These improvements include the development of the Model Office, with the Sydney and Melbourne client service offices first off the rank in being refurbished to improve the way our offices support our clients.

We are listening to our clients and some have already participated in feedback workshops to help us better understand their issues which will lead to an improved service approach. We established a client survey framework that will be used to guide decisions about intended client surveys over the coming years, and through a tender process have identified a panel of service providers to conduct ongoing survey work.

Recognising the importance of client feedback and complaints management, we have centralised the processing and analysis of all feedback and complaints through the Global Feedback Unit based in Melbourne, so that we have a clear picture of themes, trends and systemic issues as they emerge across the service delivery network.

Our clients have a single point of contact to raise any concerns, with these issues quickly followed through to finalisation.

And we are now up to strength with our new case managers who will facilitate the resolution of exceptional cases, where clients have complex circumstances or are especially vulnerable.

We did a lot of work on our Client Service Charter, consulting with more than 700 stakeholders to make sure the Charter provides an overview of our service commitment to our clients, so they know what to expect when dealing with us, and how they can provide us with feedback or complain. I have insisted that my senior executives regularly spend some time at the front counter of the client service areas of our state and territory offices.

This assists them to develop a more intimate understanding of client service issues and provides insights that are flowing into our business improvements.

Detention was obviously a key area of concern in the Palmer and Comrie reports, and we have reviewed our longer-term detention requirements and begun to implement a new Onshore Detention Strategy to provide a more appropriate environment for people held in immigration detention. This includes major upgrades to the Baxter Detention Centre and putting Detention Review Managers in place to ensure decisions to detain people are made lawfully and reasonably.

The College of Immigration has been a key part of our effort to equip staff with the skills and knowledge to better carry out the department's business by enabling better decision making and improved client service standards.

The first course has been completed with 20 compliance officers receiving training on migration law, mental health issues, people trafficking and exploitation.

It's very important that as well as working at the nuts and bolts level to improve our client service capability, we also motivate staff by publicising better practices and successes through the Award for Client Service Excellence I initiated last year.

This recognises and rewards staff who strive for distinction in their day to day activities and raise the bar for service standards.

For instance, in August, the Award went jointly to Le Augustes and Brendon Thomas in our Perth office for conducting a series of seminars on retirement visa processing. They combined this outreach activity with a thorough review of processing arrangements which generated an exceptional level of positive feedback from clients, turning around some negative perceptions.

In July, two of our locally-engaged officers in Dubai — Bronwyn Jolly and Qamar Afaq — received the Award for the recognition from their clients of their consistently high level of client service and compassion, despite a very large caseload under difficult conditions.

And in June the award went to Jason Boyd, the General Client Services Manager in Brisbane for who was cited by the University of Queensland both for exemplary service during a particular incident requiring urgent action and for his ongoing support.

The overall goal of our Client Service Improvement Programme is to improve the ways we serve DIMA's clients in the future, as well as positioning ourselves as an open and accountable organisation committed to delivering high-quality outcomes.

Better engagement with stakeholders / partners

Our engagement with stakeholders — such as the people here today — is another area where there was much we could build on from the past, but where we also recognised the need for a fresh and comprehensive approach to a critical area of our work.

I want everyone in the department to recognise that our stakeholders are an asset, rather than a liability or an obligation, and to work constructively with you.

Just as our global feedback unit allows us to spot trends in client service as they emerge, so our engagement with stakeholders offers an opportunity to understand how our activities impact on the wider community, and then make sure we understand and respond to community expectations. It also enables us to draw upon the experience and expertise of those of you working with our clients in different settings.

Our initiative to build community and stakeholder confidence is one of just five strategic priorities identified in our high-level planning for 2006-07, but will — of course — be ongoing.

I have devoted senior level resources to this initiative with Des Storer as Principal Adviser and Fran Parker in charge of the Stakeholder Taskforce. Some of you will have already met with Fran or Des about these issues.

Our aim over the longer term is to engage with the right people and organisations as effectively as possible to ensure our work is informed by a good understanding of stakeholder perspectives. This is especially true of how we go about the daily business of implementing government policy.

We also intend that as stakeholders, you will feel that your views are seen as legitimate and you will have confidence that we have recognised your concerns even if at times policy or other considerations prevent us from addressing them in exactly the way you desire.

To implement this initiative, we are developing a Stakeholder Engagement Model, and we have established Client Reference Groups in all States.

Part of this work is to map our stakeholders and I have brought copies of this evolving map today, to give you an insight into our approach.

We also have consultations underway with a range of stakeholders to identify issues of concern, and this is proving very useful in directing our activities and thinking.

This will be an ongoing process, not something that will be fixed overnight or addressed in a one-off fashion. We will be continuing to map and re-map our key stakeholders, identify and address the major issues and continue to monitor the effectiveness of our engagement.

Working in partnership with DIMA

I would like to put this issue of stakeholder engagement in a slightly broader context today and speak about how I see the department and stakeholders working together in the future.

We have a strong and valued relationship with FECCA in particular, which has been built up over many years, and I am sure we will continue to build on that relationship.

Our remit as a government agency is to implement government policies and services fairly and to enable all Australians to reach their full potential and contribute to the development of Australia.

This provides the broad landscape in which we operate, but to achieve anything concrete, we have to work with organisations, people and services on specific issues which provide a tangible benefit or positive outcome.

So with an organisation such as FECCA or the other stakeholders here today, there is an opportunity for us each to add value to the other's efforts.

For instance, we expect you to provide feedback to us — both good and bad — on the experiences of clients who use our services.

This provides us with ways to make distinct improvements to our services which mean that both FECCA and the department are achieving positive outcomes.

We also seek key stakeholders to be tapping into your own networks so that you can present a common view of issues resonating at the grass roots community level.

And we also encourage our stakeholders to promote the important messages of mutual respect, which contribute to our shared goal of a socially cohesive society in which everyone feels comfortable to express their own heritage.

This all means that to maintain their relevance, peak body stakeholders such as FECCA need to build and maintain links with a wide cross-section of our diverse Australian community.

For our part, we recognise our responsibility to be open and accountable, and I am keen that as a department we promote mutual understanding by being clear about our role in the policy cycle and our management of the implementation of that policy.

I welcome your feedback on the positions I have outlined today, so we can work together to improve mutual outcomes for our clients and the people we serve.

Thank you.