



Australian Government
Department of Immigration and Citizenship

Address to
DIAC-NGO dialogue on humanitarian issues

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Introduction

Good afternoon

It's a pleasure to have everyone here and I hope you are finding the day useful. This forum is an essential part of the department's work to be an open and accountable organisation and I encourage you to make the most of today's sessions.

We see this is very much as a conversation, a dialogue, and we welcome your views and feedback which will be considered in future planning for these programmes.

There is a lot of ground to cover today:

- in how we select and support the 13 000 refugee and humanitarian entrants who arrive here each year,
- how we exercise our powers in those small number of cases where the law requires we must detain people, and
- how we manage visa compliance.

These may seem very different functions but in the next 10 to 15 minutes, I would like to set out how all the programmes you will hear about today are in fact linked and integrated elements of the department's operations.

DIAC business and cultural transformation

I expect everyone here will be aware of the extensive business and cultural transformation underway in my department since mid-2005.

One focus of this work has been to establish a strong and consistent culture among our 7000 staff, across our 80 offices around Australia and the globe.

Wherever our staff work and whatever they are doing, we expect them to adhere to our three strategic themes of:

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

To support this culture, we have identified the DIAC-specific values we will work to — which build on the Australian Public Service values — and the leadership behaviours we expect to be demonstrated by our managers.

And we rolled out programmes to establish a consistent culture and improve the way we work, most notably the College of Immigration, and other training packages on ethical decision-making and leadership.

I also communicate frequently on these matters to my staff.

On the business side, we have programmes rolling out such as our \$495 million *Systems for People* programme to enable our IT to better support our business and outcomes, the Client Service Improvement Programme, the introduction of case managers for clients with complex circumstances or who are vulnerable, and improved accommodation and health services for detainees.

We have also introduced new approaches and expanded programmes in supporting areas such as in planning our business, governance, stakeholder engagement, quality assurance, risk management and a substantially strengthened internal audit programme chaired by an independent member.

I don't wish to go into further detail on these reforms today, and I think everyone here will have recently received a letter from me enclosing a copy of our DIAC Plan for 2007-2008 and an information kit highlighting progress in some key areas over the past two years.

These documents set out some of our key achievements over the past two years and our plans for what we will do and how we will work over the coming year. If you haven't received these documents, we have a few copies here today, or you can see them on our website.

No aspect of the department's operations or people have been untouched in the transformation process we have driven over the past two years. It has not been about change for change's sake but an integrated approach which reflects our aim to be a high-performing organisation, providing excellent client service and being an employer of choice.

Focussing on our vulnerable clients

This brings me to the programmes you will hear about today — supporting our refugee and humanitarian entrants; and immigration compliance and detention.

On the face of it, these programmes would seem not to be linked, except that they are being administered in the same department. Our programmes to detain people may seem unrelated or even to conflict with our work to resettle refugees. For many people here, you may see the link as being that you have a brief to ensure human rights are upheld in every aspect of the department's operations.

From my perspective, the links are twofold.

Firstly, every programme of the department is part of the business and cultural transformation programme I have outlined already.

Whether someone is in immigration detention or applying for a permanent skilled migration visa they can expect to have fair and reasonable dealings with the department. If they do not receive appropriate assistance, then I and my staff need to know about it, so that we can respond appropriately to the specific circumstance and improve in the future.

We have established systems to achieve this such as the Global Feedback Unit, our Client Service Charter and the Compliments and Complaints policy which will be launched shortly.

The second link for these particular programmes is that these clients are some of the most vulnerable people we interact with.

They deserve for us to be vigilant in being as fair and reasonable as possible in working with them and in ensuring our service providers do the same.

A missed phone message may be annoying for a person whose Working Holiday visa is delayed by a day as a result, but can have far more serious consequences for a humanitarian entrant who has just arrived in Australia and misses a doctor's appointment or for a person in immigration detention.

Our approach now is to identify complex cases and vulnerable people as early as possible and then provide the necessary flexible support to resolve issues quickly and achieve the outcome as quickly as possible.

As an example, case management was introduced in mid 2006 and we now have round 50 case managers across our network. The service is making a difference to peoples' daily lives, helping to reduce time spent in detention and seeing their cases through to an immigration outcome — always working in a way which is fair and reasonable.

Our approach now is also to recognise our clients are individuals — not 'one size fits all'. As individuals, a person in immigration detention or a resettled refugee receiving English language training will have specific needs and we will recognise and respond to that.

For example, we now have a spectrum of detention arrangements including alternative detention in the community. And the case managers in our network can respond to an individual's circumstances and tailor their approach as they work towards resolving the person's case and achieving an immigration outcome as swiftly as possible.

We also recognise that our most vulnerable clients will possibly interact with us across more than one of our programmes over a period of time.

The most obvious example is that a refugee or humanitarian entrant will go through the process of being accepted for resettlement in Australia, be assisted to travel here and then receive support under our settlement programmes.

Alternatively, a person arriving in Australia without authorisation may chart a path through our border security, protection, detention and identity verification programmes, and then either be supported by our settlement programmes to remain in Australia, or be removed under our compliance programme.

It's important that we be aware of these possible pathways and that we offer consistent support or service, which responds to that individual's circumstances.

This reflects that consistency in our culture, our approach to clients and our services is most important for our vulnerable clients.

We recently released a compliance, case management and detention portal under our Systems for People IT transformation. This portal means that a case manager can move seamlessly between these programmes and systems as necessary. They will be fully aware of the client's past history and interactions with the department. They will also be supported by suggested actions which are consistent for each client, but which can be also be varied to meet a client's specific needs.

What does fair and reasonable mean?

As I have highlighted the importance of working in a fair and reasonable way today, I thought I might set out for you how I see this working in practice.

These approaches are informed by feedback from external clients and stakeholders and I have communicated these points to all my staff.

I see being 'fair and reasonable' in our dealings with clients as:

- making timely contact with the client or organisation
- returning phone calls promptly
- being respectful and polite
- providing unambiguous, accurate, plain language information
- giving a clear road map of the process ahead
- keeping clients and stakeholders informed of the progress of an issue
- gaining a sensible outcome as quickly as practicable.

Of course, these are processes — important processes, but processes none the less.

Being fair and reasonable also relates to attitude and judgement. I have asked my staff to apply a simple test and always ask themselves whether their next proposed action is not only within the applicable law, but also the decent thing to do.

Stakeholder engagement

Before concluding, I would like to note that one of the areas in which I can see real benefits for the future is in building our engagement with our stakeholders. Today's dialogue is an example of this, and we have also recently been running forums in the major capital cities for legal and other practitioners who work closely with the department.

These activities are occurring under the umbrella of our stakeholder engagement strategy, and I hope that you have seen an improvement in the way we work with you as a result of this strategy being in place.

We recognise very clearly now that we have a great deal to learn from you about how we can improve our service and our performance.

I am pleased to note that there has been some encouraging feedback on our approach, including more than 80 per cent of clients recently surveyed being satisfied with the service provided by the department.

I would also like to record some of the positive feedback we have been receiving from groups and individuals on these reforms.

The Commonwealth Ombudsman, John McMillan said late last year that there had been 'significant culture change' in the department.

He also commented recently in releasing the final reports on the 247 cases of immigration detention referred to him in 2005 and 2006 that:

'DIAC has been working to address many of the issues identified in these and other reports for the past two years and is making significant headway in its process of reform.

And the Human Rights Commissioner, John Von Doussa has said that:

‘[the department]...has made great strides towards creating a more open and accountable organisation’.

He also said:

‘I recognise and respect the great strides that DIMA has made towards creating a culture which does respect human rights’.

And in the release of a report on detention visits, Human Rights Commissioner, Graeme Innes said:

‘It is clear to us that the [department] has gone to great lengths to improve the approach and attitude of staff towards detainees in immigration detention centres over the last year.’

The Chair of the Detention Health Advisory Group Work Program, Associate Professor Harry Minas, has commented that:

‘Much has been achieved and the DeHAG has made a substantial contribution to the development by the department of new approaches to the provision of health care to immigration detainees, all in a context of very rapid change’.

These comments are encouraging, and we will continue to work closely with our stakeholders, recognising our common interest in resolving cases as quickly as possible within a framework of a lawful, fair and reasonable decision, and learning as much as we can to improve the operation of our programmes.

I also recognise very clearly, and I remind my staff frequently, that there is much more to do in cementing cultural and business change in all our programmes.

Conclusion

I hope it is clear that we have a special focus in the department on supporting our most vulnerable clients, which applies across the programmes you are discussing today.

Please feel free to ask for any assistance you need or if there is something we can do to make sure you get the information you need.

Thank you again for being here and please make the most of this opportunity to engage with us.