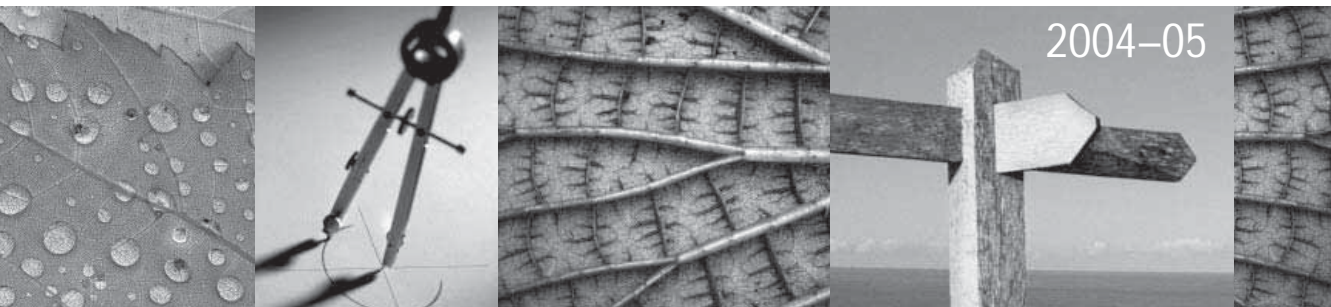




**Australian Government**  
**Australian Public Service Commission**

# State of the Service Report

2004-05



State of the Service Series 2004-05



# The Values and relationships with the public

For most members of the public, the APS is the face of the Australian Government. While the APS has played an important role in implementing policies and programmes since Federation, the nature of its relations with the public has been influenced by dramatic changes as a result of changing policy imperatives, changing expectations of the Australian community and changes in the economic, social and strategic circumstances of the country.

The APS's relations with the public are governed by the Values and the Code. These set out principles which apply to how the APS delivers services and the behaviour required of its employees. The Values, as set out in the Act, provide for an APS where APS employees deliver services to the public fairly, effectively, impartially and courteously, and are sensitive to the diversity of the Australian public. The Values also provide for an APS that has the highest ethical standards and is openly accountable. The Code requires APS employees to treat everyone with respect and courtesy and without harassment when acting in the course of employment. Employees must behave honestly and with integrity and with care and diligence in the course of APS employment and must also comply with all Australian laws.

Increasingly, the focus of service delivery is on a whole of government approach—with an emphasis on a connected public service that seeks to be more responsive to the needs of the Australian public, providing seamless services and increasing efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery. Rising community expectations for easier access to government in terms of prompt, efficient and effective customer service and the integration of service delivery (accessible and provided at a time and in ways that suit the way citizens live their lives) are a key driver for this new approach.

It is not feasible for the State of the Service report to assess the overall quality of services provided to the public: each agency is responsible for reporting on its performance in this regard. This chapter instead focuses on the commitment and capacity of the APS to provide high-quality services, and effective means of ongoing service delivery. In doing so, it includes some material on the quality of key services, and evidence on the quality of administrative decision-making as it affects the public.

This chapter covers the issues of public consultation and the extent to which consultation on government regulation and policy and programme development is used in the APS. It also addresses how agencies are improving service delivery—particularly through feedback mechanisms available to service users, employee training and the implementation of service charters—and how service delivery is being measured. Changes in service delivery as a result of new technology are considered, together with the progress made in implementing the Australian Government’s e-government agenda. The chapter also highlights issues of administrative decision-making and service delivery raised by independent review agencies.

The chapter draws on data from the agency and employee surveys, specific agencies’ own service user surveys, international developments, data from the Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO), from ANAO performance audits, and from published and unpublished material provided by the Ombudsman.

## International developments

A study released by Accenture in April 2005, *Leadership in Customer Service: New Expectations, New Experiences*,<sup>1</sup> has concluded that, despite having invested billions of dollars moving services and information resources online, governments around the world (22 countries are covered in the report) are still struggling to meet citizens’ growing expectations of better customer service. In a departure from its previous reports, Accenture has gone beyond measuring the extent to which governments offer services online to investigating their ‘leadership in delivering real and expanded customer service’, namely, the value they bring to their citizens through four key aspects of ‘leadership in customer service’: a citizen-centred perspective; cohesive multi-channel services; fluid cross-government services; and proactive communications and education.

Key findings were that, although most citizens are eager to embrace a new generation of services, governments are falling short in delivering them. Fifty-five per cent of citizens, for instance, believe government is being effective when it acts as a single, seamless entity that can remember all the details of a citizen’s previous contact with it. The study found that e-government offerings across the board are well-advanced, with an average service maturity *breadth* of 91%. Service maturity *breadth* focused on services online which identified that countries are approaching saturation point in terms of services they could put online and that to make future advances governments will need to focus on a much broader vision. However, the study also found that all countries could do more to realise the broader goal of ‘leadership in customer service’. In fact, the overall average customer service maturity score was just 39%, when the four key aspects of ‘leadership in customer service’ are considered. Only Canada had an overall customer service maturity score of more than 50%. All countries surveyed experienced a drop from the previous year’s overall e-government maturity scores, which measured solely the level to which the government had developed an online service delivery presence.

<sup>1</sup> Accenture, *Leadership in Customer Service: New Expectations, New Experiences*, April 2005, <[www.accenture.com](http://www.accenture.com)>

# Public consultation and communication

The MAC report, *Connecting Government*, put a strong emphasis on the importance of public consultation. It argued that the very nature of Australia's participatory democracy means that meeting the APS's responsibilities for comprehensive policy advising and effective implementation of government policies and programmes is a two-way exercise, which requires the APS to have increasingly sophisticated professional skills and techniques in communication and consultation.<sup>2</sup> The MAC report also emphasised that APS agencies need to recognise that the engagement of people and organisations is an increasing feature of whole of government work.

## International developments

For many years, the Canadians have been leaders in cultivating relationships with stakeholders (mainly, the public) to better determine what services they want and need and how effectively (or otherwise) the government is delivering these. A conference on government-citizen 'Dialogue and Deliberation', held in October 2005, aimed: to establish means of regularly discussing public sector-citizen dialogue, both inside Canada and with other jurisdictions; to devise new frameworks for assessing and evaluating the policy impacts of 'deliberative' engagement; and to formulate a research agenda and plans for taking government-citizen interaction further, including in the area of service delivery.

The Service Canada objectives place particular stress on the need to serve Canadians better in service delivery terms while building 'a citizen-centred government'. The Government of Canada is also committed through the Office of Client Satisfaction to regular assessment of citizen concerns (positive and negative) about the level and quality of service provision <<http://servicecanada.gc.ca>>.

The UK House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee's report, *Choice, Voice and Public Services* (17 March 2005) stressed the need for greater government preparedness to consult the public about the services it wants and how happy or unhappy citizens are with service provision. The Committee recommended that access to services and service information be simplified and that more attention should be devoted to measuring public satisfaction with public services. However, in its 18 July 2005 response to the report, the Government rejected this recommendation on the ground that Directgov, the UK government's flagship website and primary channel for the delivery of electronic or online service provision, is more than sufficient for the task of ensuring a good level of service delivery of this kind, especially since Directgov is designed around people's needs rather than the complex structures of government <<http://www.publications.parliament.uk>>.

In the lead-up to the third European Union e-government summit, an online discussion group, 'Ideal Government: Europe', has been established by Kable's Government Computing Group (<http://www.kablenet.com>) to discuss what Europeans really want from e-enabled public services and to find out to what extent this view is being sought by governments. It also aims to assess how well citizen expectations are being reflected in these services, and to determine if this represents value for money.

international evidence

<sup>2</sup> Management Advisory Committee 2004, *Connecting Government: Whole of Government Responses to Australia's Priority Challenges*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

Community engagement can take many forms, such as surveys and market research; however, more formal consultation through open processes, web-based interactions, advisory bodies, consultative committees, taskforces and consultants permits more sophisticated and interactive participation.

In 2002, the Australian Government launched the *Better Services, Better Government Strategy (2002)*<sup>3</sup> with an objective of enhancing citizen engagement, so that government agencies can use the Internet to improve the transparency of government processes and to provide an opportunity for wider public engagement. The strategy provides for government to connect more closely with its citizens and improve aspects of engagement such as online policy formulation, feedback and consultation. In late 2004, AGIMO organised a number of events that brought together key international and domestic experts in the area of governments engaging with citizens electronically. An E-Democracy Community of Practice, with membership from several jurisdictions in Australia, is developing cross-jurisdictional principles on online engagement. *The International Conference on Engaging Communities*, (coordinated by the United Nations and the Queensland Government) and the *Enabling Government, Engaging Communities: An Online Perspective* event strengthened linkages and opened dialogue on electronic engagement issues between jurisdictions, academia and the community, building on earlier work in the area of governments engaging with citizens electronically.

## Consultation with stakeholders—Government policy, programmes and regulation

The 2005 agency survey enhanced the 2004 question that explored the extent to which APS agencies are conducting formal consultations on the development of government policy and programme delivery to look at agency use of formal consultation during the development of government regulation. Agencies were asked how often they consulted with the following groups: non-government agencies, industry stakeholders, tertiary education and research groups, agencies from state/territory and/or local governments, unions and members of the public about government regulation, government policy and programme delivery. For each option, agencies could respond *usually, sometimes, no, or not applicable*.

Thirty-five per cent of all agencies indicated that formal consultation in relation to the development of government policy with any of the identified groups was *not applicable* to their agency compared to 26% of agencies last year. In relation to programme delivery only 13% of all agencies indicated that consultation was *not applicable* (similar to last year's 14%) and 39% of all agencies indicated that consultation was *not applicable* in regard to government regulation. When agencies that indicated consultation was not applicable to them are excluded from the following analysis, the remaining agencies are identified as 'relevant'. The reasons why agencies responded that consultation was *not applicable* were not explored in the 2005 agency survey but may relate to the nature of policy and programme development in the year and/or government confidentiality requirements.

Consultation in the making of policy and programme decisions is widespread among APS agencies, although overall there has been a decline in the level of consultation reported since last year. The survey results show that 62% of all agencies *usually or*

<sup>3</sup> AGIMO, *Better Services, Better Government (2002)*, <<http://www.agimo.gov.au/publications/2002/11/bsbg>>

*sometimes* consulted with one or more of the specified groups about government policy, and 76% of these agencies consulted five or more groups. The former figure (one or more specified groups) increases to 96% when only relevant agencies are considered.

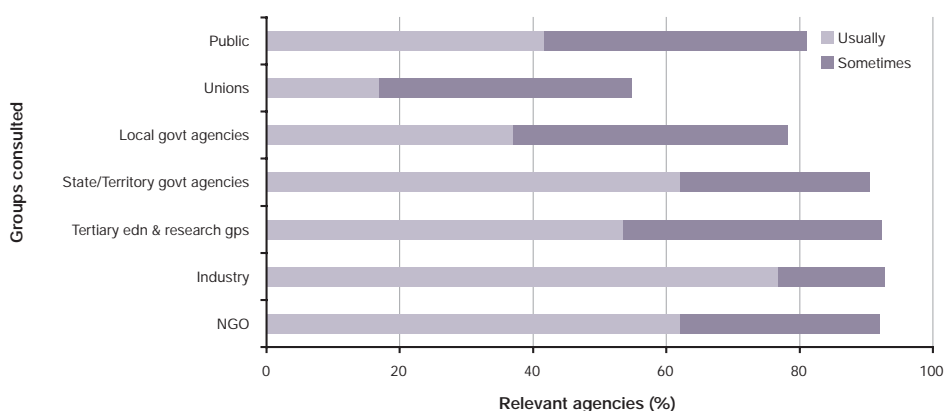
Programme delivery appears to trigger greater consultation than policy development, with 85% of all agencies indicating that they *usually* or *sometimes* consult one or more of the specified groups on this issue, and 73% of these agencies consulted five or more groups. The former figure (one or more specified groups) increases to 99% when only relevant agencies are considered.

Consultation in the making of government regulation is not as widespread as for policy and programme decisions. Fifty-five per cent of all agencies *usually* or *sometimes* consulted with one or more of the specified groups about government regulation, and 56% of these agencies consulted five or more groups. The former figure (one or more specified groups) increases to 90% when only relevant agencies are considered.

'Industry stakeholders' was the key group *usually* consulted by relevant agencies for the development of government policy (77%), the delivery of government programmes (73%) and government regulation (66%) (see Figures 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3). The percentage of relevant agencies consulting with 'industry stakeholders' increases to 92%, 97% and 87%, respectively, for the three activities above when those agencies that *sometimes* use this group are also included. Findings were similar to last year for engaging this group in formal consultation for both the development of government policy and the delivery of government programmes.

The percentage of relevant agencies *usually* consulting the public about the development of government policy is 43%, rising to 81% when those agencies that *sometimes* consult this group are included (see Figure 4.1).

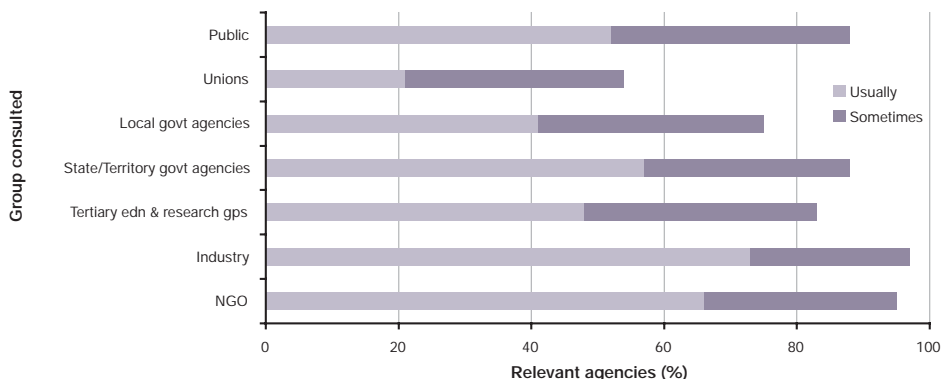
Figure 4.1: Formal consultation with stakeholders on government policy development, 2004–05



Source: Agency survey

'Members of the public' are usually consulted by 52% of relevant agencies in relation to programme delivery; this percentage increases to 88% when those agencies that sometimes consult this group are included (see Figure 4.2).

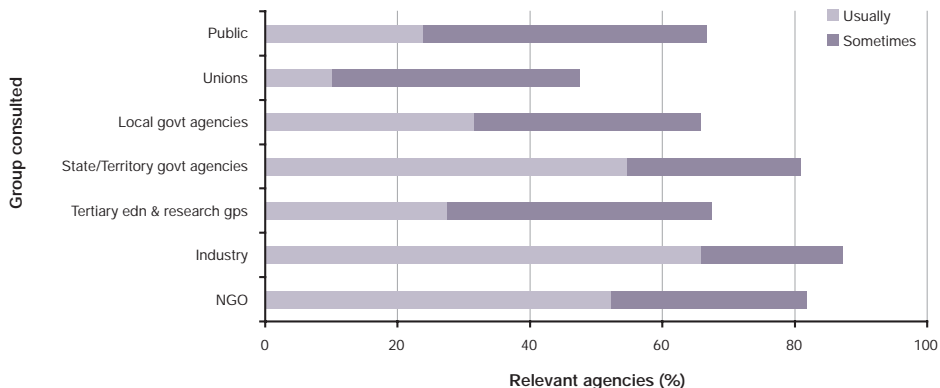
Figure 4.2: Formal consultation with stakeholders on government programme delivery, 2004–05



Source: Agency survey

Consultation with the public is low for government regulation with only 24% of relevant agencies *usually* consulting the public about the development of government regulation. This rises to 67% when those agencies that *sometimes* consult are included and is comparable with other stakeholder groups (see Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3: Formal consultation with stakeholders on government regulation, 2004–05



Source: Agency survey

The government has also put in place a mechanism for informing the community and stakeholders about why and how particular regulatory decisions were taken, including any community consultation that preceded the decision itself.

### Regulation Impact Statement (RIS)

A RIS formalises and documents the steps taken in developing good regulation. It is prepared by a regulatory department and/or agency and seeks to ensure that regulation achieves its objectives in the most effective and efficient way. It identifies the problem, outlines objectives and assesses the economic, social and environmental impacts of a range of feasible options for addressing the problem. The level of analysis of each option should be commensurate with the impacts of

the proposal, and departments and agencies are encouraged to use quantitative cost/benefit analysis when appropriate. The RIS then documents community consultation, proposes a recommended approach and outlines implementation and review mechanisms.

RISs are intended to provide a basis for more informed decision-making and to enhance accountability and transparency by informing the community and stakeholders about why and how particular regulatory decisions were taken. RISs are integrated with—and reinforce—other regulatory quality control systems, such as regulatory plans.

regulation guidance

Overall, the agency survey result suggests that there is more consultation with a wider variety of groups occurring among relevant large agencies than among relevant small and medium agencies. This is consistent with last year's results when relevant agencies are considered. Examples of consultation processes undertaken by relevant agencies include:

The Australian Government, in partnership with the states and territories, has undertaken an extensive programme of investigation, evaluation and trials to find the best model for the health information network. This has been done in consultation with stakeholder groups and members of the community.

Work on a staged national implementation of HealthConnect has begun in coordination with the states and territories and in full consultation with consumer and health care provider groups.

Area Consultative Committees (ACCs) work in partnership with the Department of Transport and Regional Services (DoTARS) to provide advice to government on important issues facing Australia's communities and to identify opportunities, priorities and development strategies for their regions. ACCs are uniquely placed to respond to issues in their regions and provide a vital conduit to government on local, social and economic conditions.

AGIMO is seeking public comment on the Australian Government review of Government Information Technology and Communications contract arrangements.

agency case study

There is scope for some agencies to increase the amount of consultation occurring, particularly with members of the public. One means of obtaining the general public's view on policy and programme delivery issues is through the use of representative surveys in addition to surveys of the agency's direct service users. As *Connecting Government*<sup>4</sup> pointed out, in some circumstances there can be considerable benefits from agencies taking a more effective approach to consultation, by identifying areas where greater consultation and communication would be appropriate and developing targeted processes to ensure that consultation and communication occurs. There may, for example, be areas where agencies could be more proactive in community consultation.

<sup>4</sup> Management Advisory Committee 2004, *Connecting Government: Whole of Government Responses to Australia's Priority Challenges*.

## Level of involvement in service delivery

The employee survey found that 55% of APS employees are either directly involved in the delivery of services to the general public or manage employees who are. This is a similar result to last year (57%), but represented a drop from 2003 (61%). This may be due in part to the decline in the number of ongoing employees for the second successive year in Centrelink.

Employees directly involved in delivering services to the public are predominantly located outside the ACT. Of those employees located in the ACT involved in service delivery there has been a decline from 34% in 2004 to 29% in 2005.

Of the large agencies, Centrelink, CSA, and CRS are three agencies that stand out, with over 80% of their employees directly involved in providing services to the public.

APS 1–6 employees make up 86% of all employees directly involved in, or managing, the delivery of services to the public, compared to EL employees (13%) and SES employees (1%). This finding is similar to last year's result.

More women (61%) are involved in the delivery of services to the public than men (48%). The representation of women in service delivery is higher than the representation of women in the APS overall (54%) but it is similar to the representation of women in lower classification levels, particularly APS 3–4 (65%).

Relevant employees were also asked if the services they provided were coordinated effectively. Thirty-three per cent of relevant respondents thought that the service they deliver was effectively coordinated and 35% of relevant respondents agreed or strongly agreed that over the last 12 months cooperation between their agency and other APS agencies had improved their 'work area's capacity to tailor service delivery to the needs of their clients'. More information on collaboration between agencies to meet the service delivery needs of service users can be found in Chapter 11, 'Whole of Government'.

## The effectiveness of service delivery

Both agency and employee survey results indicate that APS agencies are recognising the importance of obtaining their service users' perspectives on service delivery. This is a good first step in understanding the needs of service users and being able to measure with some rigour the effectiveness of the services agencies are delivering. What it does not provide is a holistic view on how the APS is performing. This is a step towards which some other countries are moving.

In the UK the Cabinet Office is working towards improved measurement of complex data regarding people's experiences of government service provision. The ultimate aim is a comprehensive customer satisfaction index that can identify, and then track, the degree of customer satisfaction with public services. Despite the existence of sophisticated satisfaction-assessment mechanisms devised by particular service providers, there is a call for a standard measurement system across public services which will allow customers to evaluate the effectiveness of government service delivery and measure

how different services compare. Of course the UK jurisdiction varies from the APS in both its composition and the services involved—but the development is of interest in terms of efforts to measure and improve service provision quality.

Last year the Commission examined how a selection of agencies (ATO, AWM, Centrelink, CSA, Customs, DVA, DEWR, DITR) measured both the effectiveness of the services they deliver to the public and service user levels of satisfaction with agencies' services. In consultation with each of these agencies, the Commission selected one key indicator of service user satisfaction from the survey data where trend data was available that best represented overall satisfaction levels of service delivery in that agency.<sup>5</sup> This year those agencies were again asked for satisfaction results for the 2004–05 year. In addition, data has been included on satisfaction with the service provided by the National Museum of Australia (NMA) and DEST—Questacon.

Figure 4.4 plots service user satisfaction with these 10 agencies on a single graph to provide a visual representation of the range of service user satisfaction levels with APS service delivery. Direct comparisons between agencies are not recommended, as agencies conduct surveys in levels of satisfaction within the context of their own business environment and use different methodologies. However, the broad tools of satisfaction and trends in service user perceptions are of interest.

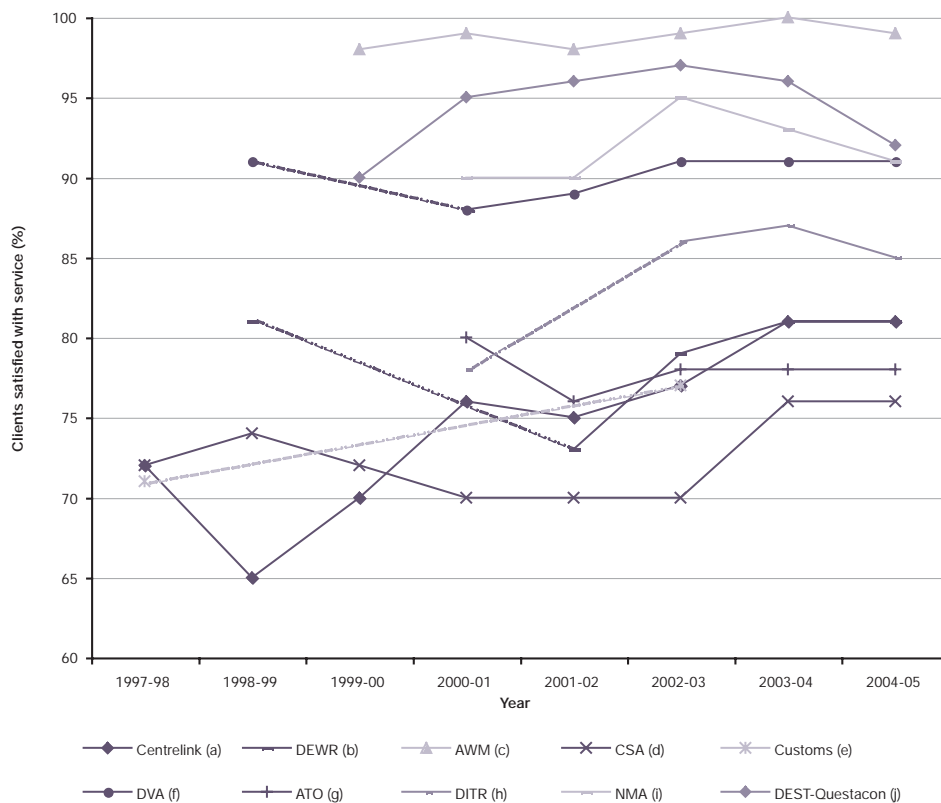
Results of the satisfaction surveys from the 10 agencies paint a positive picture when it comes to service users' overall satisfaction with the relevant APS organisations. Figure 4.4 shows that, generally, satisfaction levels of agencies sampled are tracking at 70% or higher since 2000, with seven agencies trending above 80% in the current year.

Again, AWM has the most satisfied service users closely followed by NMA and DEST—Questacon (both newcomers this year). These results reflect the high level of satisfaction of visitors choosing to visit these establishments—or, in the case of agencies such as DVA, to access benefits. By comparison, service users of CSA, who are generally required to access CSA services and often to provide child support, advise the lowest satisfaction levels, although still well over 70%; these levels saw a notable improvement in 2003–04 and 2004–05.

Fluctuations in the graph can be accounted for by a number of factors, including seasonal changes, implementation of new initiatives and/or contracts, and/or new training of employees. Nevertheless, for most agencies there has been a trend to increased levels of satisfaction in recent years.

<sup>5</sup> Data provided by the sample agencies may not cover all of an agency's programmes, and may represent only one aspect of the agency's business.

Figure 4.4: Overall satisfaction with APS service delivery, 1997–98 to 2004–05



Source: Agency service user survey data

Notes: Dotted lines indicate non-consecutive years of data collection, with the exception of DITR which represents benchmarked data collected over two years. (a) Centrelink’s measure is ‘overall quality of Centrelink’s people, services and information as either good or very good.’ (b) DEWR’s measure is ‘overall jobseeker satisfaction with service provided by Job Network Members as satisfied or very satisfied.’ (c) AWM’s measure is ‘overall would you say your visit met or exceeded your expectations?’ (d) CSA’s measure is its ‘Professionalism Index’, which measures satisfaction with four key elements of CSA employees’ professionalism: personal characteristics, professional characteristics, treatment of service users, and outcome of the interaction. Results are based on an average result on a five-point index scale to record satisfaction. For representation in this graph the CSA index has been converted to a percentage scale. (e) Customs’ measure is the ‘overall satisfaction of clients with the service provided by Customs that scored 7 or more out of a score of 10.’ (f) DVA’s measure is of ‘clients satisfied or very satisfied with the service provided by DVA.’ Results represented are the average results of surveys conducted within each financial year. (g) ATO’s measure is its ‘Satisfaction with Professionalism Average’, which measures ATO employees on their behaviour and ability including levels of empathy, provision of fair and just outcomes, communication skills and levels of accountability. Results are based on an average result on a five-point index scale to record satisfaction. For representation in this graph the ATO index has been converted to a percentage scale. (h) DITR (AusIndustry)’s measure is ‘overall customer satisfaction with service delivery’. DITR results are unweighted to allow comparison with earlier benchmark data, shown as 2000–01 but which covered 1999–00 to 2001–02. Weighted data for 2002–03 (89%), 2003–04 (90%) and 2004–05 (88%) is slightly higher than the unweighted data. (i) NMA’s measure is overall visitor satisfaction, that is, the percentage of visitors interviewed who were ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with their visit. (j) DEST—Questacon’s measure is the percentage of ‘visitors rating their experience as good or very good’.

# Improving service delivery

Improving service delivery is reflected in a number of approaches adopted by APS agencies. These include mechanisms to obtain feedback from the public, and providing information and training to employees on their service delivery responsibilities.

## International Developments

The Government of Canada is committed to improving its delivery of information and services, both online and through other service delivery channels such as over the telephone or at government offices. It is conducting an online research Panel with citizens accessing the government website being randomly selected to participate on this panel. For one year, starting in September 2005, members of the Panel will be invited periodically to give their views or join in discussions about topics ranging from specific features or services on government websites to the development and implementation of federal policies and programmes.

international evidence

## Feedback mechanisms

The 2005 agency survey asked agencies that have contact with the public about the mechanisms they use to obtain feedback from the public. Those agencies that indicated that they had no public contact have been excluded from the following analysis. Overall, the use of feedback mechanisms remained constant. The most common mechanism reported was a complaints/feedback website link, reported by 88% of agencies that have contact with the public (a similar result to last year's). Other widely-used mechanisms include complaints/feedback phone hotlines (75%) and customer surveys (71%); both remain relatively constant compared with last year's results.

There is still some variation among agencies in their use of feedback mechanisms, depending on their size. Large agencies were more likely to use complaints/feedback phone hotlines (90% compared to 64% of relevant small agencies and 74% of relevant medium agencies). Large and medium agencies were more likely to use complaints/feedback website links—95% and 91% respectively—than relevant small agencies (79%). Small agencies show a sizeable decline in the use of both of these mechanisms compared with last year (the 2003–04 results were 76% for phone hotlines and 90% for website links). Examples of online feedback and evaluation include:

Connected Government website—seeks feedback from users on how easy it was to find information on the website, who is using the website, and how the website could be improved.

Finance website—provides the option of sending feedback via email or a form. The form is designed for both Australian and overseas users, and provides optional questions.

The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) website feedback form—prompts users for information about why they visited the website, how they located it and how well different features worked.

CSA website feedback form—the survey collects information about the types of information sought by the user, the characteristics of the user, and aspects of the site that work well and not so well.

DEWR has a purpose built usability facility, used for a range of products, including touch screens, work processes, ergonomics, occupational health and safety (OHS) issues and training videos. The usability facility is a key supporting factor for software development within the department, including user testing of online services.

#### agency case study

Use of customer surveys was more often reported by relevant medium agencies (78%), closely followed by relevant large agencies (76%), than by relevant small agencies (61%). The increased use of customer surveys by relevant medium agencies (from 63% last year) is noteworthy—as is the decline in their use by relevant large agencies (from 90% last year). Visitors' books were least likely to be used by relevant large agencies (5%), although their use did increase marginally in relevant small and medium agencies (a quarter of relevant small and medium agencies). These differences could reflect the nature of the agency concerned—different types of service users and relationships, different ways of doing business or different levels of available resources. Selected agencies' results in relation to service user surveys and satisfaction levels are discussed in the previous section of this chapter on the effectiveness of service delivery.

Both the agency and the employee surveys asked questions on the use of mechanisms to receive feedback from the public regarding service delivery.<sup>6</sup> As previously mentioned, the three most popular feedback mechanisms used by agencies are 'complaints/feedback website link' (88% of relevant agencies), 'complaints/feedback phone hotline' (75%) and 'customer surveys' (71%). These findings are consistent with last year's results. In the 2005 employee survey, 67% of employees involved in service delivery stated that their work unit received regular feedback from the public, either directly or indirectly, on the quality of services it provided. This is a considerable decline from the 2003–04 result of 73%.

Relevant SES employees (88%) were much more likely to indicate that their work unit obtained feedback from the public than relevant EL (69%) and APS 1–6 (67%) employees. This was also a significant increase on last year's result (79%) for the SES group. By comparison, this year's response from APS 1–6 employees about obtaining feedback from the public marked a significant decline from last year (from 73% to 67%).

<sup>6</sup> The agency survey asked about the use of a range feedback mechanisms at the agency level while the employee survey asked questions concerning regular public feedback and formal mechanisms at the work unit level.

Although EL employees recorded a decline from last year (72% to 69%) this result was not statistically significant.

Comments by employees in the 2005 employee survey on receiving regular feedback from the public included:

*Rarely get to hear results of client feedback (e.g. survey forms).  
We only ever get told when we do something wrong.  
We don't hear about it, once again, no feedback given to staff.  
Stakeholders [provided] with the opportunity to provide continuous feedback which enables us to tailor the service to meet the need where appropriate.  
Feedback from clients on service standards is for negative feedback only.*

employee survey

Eighty per cent or more of employees involved in service delivery from three large agencies (CRS, CSA and BoM) indicated that their work unit received regular feedback from the public.

In 2003–04, Centrelink delivered services to approximately 6.5 million customers (about one-third of the Australian population). Centrelink recognises the importance of regularly seeking feedback from its large customer base on the quality of the services provided by its customer service network, and it has a number of processes through which it obtains customer feedback. An important element of Centrelink's customer feedback system is its complaints handling system. Management of customer complaints is seen as important for both Centrelink's performance and its reputation as a service provider. Given the number of customers and decisions made each year, Centrelink has relatively few complaints.

agency case study

The employee survey also asked employees involved in service delivery if there were formal mechanisms in place to respond to feedback from the public. Seventy-nine per cent of employees confirmed that there were formal mechanisms in place in their work unit to respond to feedback from the public, a slight increase on the 2003–04 result (76%).

*This department has a policy of responding to all comments submitted to the department's website...*

employee survey

Relevant SES employees (84%) were as likely to indicate that there were formal mechanisms in place in their work unit to respond to feedback from the public than were APS 1–6 and EL employees (both 79%). This was a significant increase from last

year for the SES group, up from 72%. Last year EL employees (86%) were much more positive than both SES (72%) and APS 1–6 (74%) employees in reporting that formal mechanisms were in place to respond to feedback from the public.

Customs prepares national quarterly reports on complaints and compliments received from its clients. The feedback that clients provide is used to monitor and improve services, to address problem areas, and to give credit to areas of the organisation that receive compliments. These reports are available on the Customs website. In the last quarterly report (April–June 2005) Customs received 665 complaints, with the top three complaints being ‘didn’t expect duty/tax’, ‘officer was rude’ and ‘process took too long’. The prime reason identified for the increase in complaints was some travellers being unaware of an amendment to passenger-duty free concessions that was introduced in February 2005. Customs also received 212 compliments, with the top three compliments being, ‘officer was helpful’, ‘appreciated assistance’ and ‘officer was professional’.

agency case study

Approximately 90% of relevant employees from three large agencies, Customs, Centrelink and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), indicated that there were formal mechanisms in place to respond to feedback from the public. This is a very high response rate when compared to the APS-wide result of 79%, though perhaps not unexpected, considering that these agencies have a focus on service delivery. Overall, relevant employees from large agencies (80%) are more likely to agree that formal mechanisms were in place to respond to feedback than are relevant employees from small (62%) agencies.

Employees from outside the ACT (81%) were much more likely to indicate that formal mechanisms were in place to respond to feedback from the public than were those in the ACT (72%). This is not surprising, given that most services are delivered from the regions. Results do show an increase from last year for employees outside the ACT, suggesting that a stronger focus may have been given to this area of business in some agencies.

The employee survey found that the effectiveness of these formal mechanisms for responding to the public was rated as high or very high by 56% of employees involved in service delivery in 2005. This is a drop on last year’s result (61%). Seventy per cent or more of employees from BoM, DEST, DFAT and DITR (agencies with 1000 or more ongoing employees) rated the effectiveness of these formal mechanisms as high or very high.

This year employees were also asked to provide their views about strategies that would improve the provision of services in their work area. Thirty-one per cent of relevant employees responded that ‘more feedback/consultation with clients’ would enable them to improve services.

Overall, there is some disparity between the agency and employee data on the use of mechanisms to obtain feedback from the public. Some of this disparity may be explained by the different components of feedback mechanisms examined in the employee and agency surveys.

The agency survey focused on the external component, which is the relationship between the public and the agency. In contrast, the employee survey focused on the internal component, which concerns internal communication from the broader agency level to the work unit level. Overall analysis suggests that while the external components of agency feedback mechanisms appear to be working well, the internal components could be further improved. This proposition is also supported by the discussion on consultative mechanisms in Chapter 5 'The Values and Workplace Relationships'.

## Employee training and/or information in service delivery responsibilities

The increased focus on service delivery is also reflected in an increasing attention to 'client-focused' training and reinforcement of behaviours that promote the Values and the Code that relate to the provision of services to the public. Of those APS employees that responded to the employee survey, 77% of employees involved in service delivery agreed that they 'received appropriate training or had access to information that enabled them to undertake their client service responsibilities'. This was comparable to last year's result. Less than a quarter of employees were undecided or disagreed that they received appropriate training.

In 2005, employees involved in service delivery were also asked about strategies to improve the provision of services in their work area. Forty-four per cent of employees indicated that more training and development activities would enable them to improve services. This is consistent with comments made by employees about training to meet client service responsibilities.

*At present, new employees do not [receive appropriate training]. When I started I received far more than I expected.*

*Some clients who ring up are very distraught and expect me to provide marriage counselling service to them. I have not been trained in this.*

*It is difficult to conduct ... more training and development when resources are continually being cut.*

*We are a major 'service to the public' organisation but to date [we have] received very limited support/training focus.*

*Training in client relations in [agency] was woefully inadequate when I started... we need to understand more about our clients industry environment.*

employee survey

Of agencies with over 1000 ongoing employees, over 80% of employees involved in service delivery from CSA, CRS, DFAT, the Department of Health and Ageing (Health) and DVA, agreed that they received 'appropriate training and/or had access to information that enabled them to meet their client service responsibilities'.

This year relevant employees from medium agencies (83%) were more likely to agree that they received 'appropriate training and had access to information to meet their client responsibilities' than relevant employees from small (74%) and large (77%) agencies.

Relevant APS 1–6 employees (77%) were less likely to think that they get ‘appropriate training and information to meet their client responsibilities’ than relevant EL (82%) and SES (81%) employees. The more time employees spent on off-the-job training the more likely they were to agree that they receive ‘appropriate training to meet their client service responsibilities’.

## Service charters

A key mechanism used by the Australian Government to improve service delivery is agency service charters. A service charter is a public document that describes the service experience the public can expect from an agency. This includes information about the agency’s service delivery approach and the relationship the client will have with the agency. All government agencies delivering services directly to the public are required to prepare and implement such a charter. Agencies with policy development functions are also encouraged to develop charters.

International developments point to a whole of government approach to the design of service charters, especially in the arena of e-services, with a focus on building confidence and trust with citizens who use services and information. There is also recognition of the importance of assessing the success of client service for all public service providers—public and private—recognising the stronger links being built to provide a seamless service to the public.

The UK Cabinet Office is reviewing their ‘Charter Mark’ scheme, which provides certification for excellence in public service. Recent emphasis has been on focusing public service providers on the needs of customers; the next step is to encourage and recognise outstanding customer service across public services. It is proposed that the new customer satisfaction standard will apply to all public service providers—in the public, private and voluntary sectors. It is anticipated that, as the barriers between state, business and voluntary providers are increasingly broken down in new, user-focused public services, it is only fair that the efforts of each provider in delivering customer satisfaction are given equal merit.<sup>7</sup>

The Government of Canada portal—Service Canada—provides a whole of government approach to services to its citizens. It also has a highly developed ‘Service Charter’ which is a whole of government service charter that describes the government’s service commitment to Canadians. A ‘Minister for Service Canada’ oversees this.

The Australian Government’s approach to service charters is a network of service charters that are based on a set of common principles contained in the *Client Service Charter Principles 2000*, and contain mandatory elements around service standards, feedback options and reporting on performance. The effectiveness of service charters depends on a number of factors, including the ability of agencies to successfully monitor and report on service user satisfaction using quantifiable performance indicators.

The ANAO has undertaken audits of both the ATO’s Taxpayers’ Charter and Centrelink’s Customer Charter. It concluded that, although progress has been made, more work still needs to be done before these charters can effectively drive service improvement.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> J. Hutton, Minister for the Cabinet Office (speech on public service reform and social justice, 24 August 2005), <<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk>>

<sup>8</sup> ANAO, *Taxpayers’ Charter*, Performance Audit Report No. 19, December 2004; *Centrelink’s Customer Charter and Community Consultation Program*, Performance Audit Report No. 32, March 2005, <<http://www.anao.gov.au>>

### Coverage and review

The 2005 agency survey found that 62 agencies (76%) had an agency-wide service charter in place. This was similar to the proportion of agencies that reported having a service charter in both 2003–04 and 2002–03, and includes the vast majority of agencies with a major service delivery focus. A further three agencies indicated that they were developing agency-wide service charters. Seventeen agencies did not have a service charter; of these, seven indicated that they did not have any public contact. Service charters continue to be more common in large agencies (86%) than in medium agencies (77%) and small agencies (69%).

### Performance indicators and service standards

The *Client Service Charter Principles 2000* place a strong emphasis on the monitoring and reporting of satisfaction. They provide that service charters must include service standards and have avenues for service users to provide feedback and make complaints. In some cases, the feedback mechanisms mentioned earlier contribute to the measures used in assessing the performance of the service to the public as outlined in the service charter. There must also be mechanisms to report on that data.

The *Client Service Charter Principles 2000* also state that, when deciding which service standards to publish, agencies should take account of their ability to measure performance against each standard. This year 81% of agencies with public contact stated that they had identified service standards, an increase on last year's result (78%). The number of agencies reporting that they have identified performance indicators has, however, remained the same for the last three years. A further seven per cent of agencies said indicators were being developed, the same as last year. Ten agencies indicated that they did not have performance indicators because they did not have contact with the public. A further nine agencies indicated that they did not have performance indicators, though five of these agencies had a service charter. Quantifiable indicators or standards are still more common in relevant medium (87%) and large (86%) agencies than in relevant small (71%) agencies with public contact, although there has been a slight increase in the number of small agencies with charters compared to last year (69%).

Although agencies with a service charter are required to publish performance against their charter commitments in their annual report, there has been a decline in the proportion of agencies reporting that they do so (81% down from 90% last year). Reporting through internal agency management structures remained high at 82%, similar to last year's result. The annual report and reporting through internal agency management structures were the most common mechanisms used to report the quality of service provided to the public. Reporting through internal service delivery units/teams remained constant at 69%. The proportion of agencies using these measures as part of a balanced scorecard concept also remained stable at 34%.

### E-government (government online)

ICT is pervasive in all Australian Government functions, from the delivery of health care and education, to the collection of taxes and the protection of borders.

The ongoing changes in technology present the APS with both challenges and significant opportunities in the area of service delivery. Technology has been a major driver and enabler for change. The availability of ICT to both public and private sector organisations and individuals has increased dramatically in recent years. The Internet has been particularly important in driving commercial, government, and social and personal change.<sup>9</sup> Changes in technology have the potential to dramatically improve the effectiveness of service delivery.

Australia's e-government objective is to simplify the complexity of government for citizens and business, and improve the efficiency of government administration at the same time. The Australian Government is committed to the continuing reform of government operations, which underpins better electronic service delivery to citizens and business.

Australian Government agencies are identifying priority areas for service improvement, where better linkages can bring a tangible benefit to a citizen's experience of electronic government services. At the same time, they are improving the ways information is made available to relevant parties and delivering more effective electronic services.

Australian Government agencies are enhancing electronic service delivery by making it cheaper, faster and easier for citizens and business through:

- better infrastructure
- multi-channel service delivery
- more strategic ICT investment
- services designed in response to the needs of citizens and business
- whole of government approaches.

### **APS e-government effectiveness**

Australia continues to rank among the top-performing countries in various international e-government reports. These reports reflect international and domestic recognition of the Australian Government as an exemplary user of ICT, particularly in implementing and delivering e-government and developing customer-centric models of service delivery.

While comparisons with previous data are difficult, there is little doubt that the use of e-government services in Australia is continuing to grow. The 2005 Accenture report, *e-Government Leadership*, ranked Australia equal third behind Canada and the USA, in overall customer service maturity. The report noted that Australia has been at the forefront of e-government policy and implementation, and has consistently ranked among the top countries in terms of e-government maturity; it has also begun to lay the groundwork for true leadership in customer service, that is, citizen-centred, multi-channel and interconnected government.<sup>10</sup> In the *United Nations Global E Government Readiness Report (2004)* Australia ranked sixth out of 191 member states in e-government readiness (based on website assessment, telecommunications infrastructure and human resource endowment) behind the USA, Denmark, the UK, Sweden, and Korea. Australia was ranked 10th in e-participation (the quality, relevance, usefulness and willingness of government websites for providing online information and participatory tools and services to the people) behind the UK, the USA, Canada,

<sup>9</sup> AGIMO & IPAA, *Future Challenges for E-Government Volumes 1 & 2*, 2004, < [http://www.agimo.gov.au/publications/2004/05/egovt\\_challenges](http://www.agimo.gov.au/publications/2004/05/egovt_challenges)>

<sup>10</sup> Accenture, *e-Government Leadership*, April 2005 <<http://www.accenture.com>>

Singapore, the Netherlands, Mexico, New Zealand, Korea, and Denmark. The United Nations noted that Australia had one of the most impressive online provisions of information and services.<sup>11</sup>

Customs is modernising the way businesses report the movement of goods across Australia's borders. These changes, a result of the Customs Cargo Management Re-engineering (CMR) project, have involved a major review of Customs practices. The CMR project includes the introduction of a new integrated IT system, the Integrated Cargo System (ICS) that will replace the existing reporting and processing procedures. The ICS enhances Customs' risk management assessment at the border and assists industry track cargo movements more efficiently through the ability to verify the status of transactions, and through enhanced functionality for lodging import and/or export declarations. A major feature of ICS is its improved security. Users and transactions will be protected by public key infrastructure. This involves the use of digital certificates, which are a proven way of providing confidentiality, authentication, non-repudiation and message integrity over open networks such as the Internet.

The export component of ICS was implemented in October 2004. Since this time it has been mandatory for all export cargo to be reported to Customs via ICS. Over 4.3 million transactions have been processed to date.

In February 2005, a comprehensive CMR education campaign commenced. Workshops emphasised the major changes to be introduced with ICS for each specific industry sector. To complement formal CMR workshops, additional onsite training was also provided. Customs maintains a website dedicated to CMR. This website, which provides considerable information on CMR and ICS, can be found at <<http://www.customs.gov.au>>.

agency case study

The Internet is now a mainstream means of government-citizen interaction. For the first time, a survey has been conducted to assess citizens' satisfaction with e-government services. *Australians' Use of and Satisfaction with E-Government Services*, which was released on 21 June 2005, successfully engaged governments across all jurisdictions. This report highlights the increasing use of e-government services in Australia and provides data that governments can use to enable services to continue to meet the needs of citizens and business. It is anticipated that the survey will be repeated annually, in order to gather trend data.<sup>12</sup>

The survey found that people accessing government services via the Internet are no longer a small minority. Thirty-nine per cent or nearly four in 10 adults—and more than half of all adults who use the Internet—contacted an Australian government agency via the Internet in 2004. This represents a substantial increase on the most recent figures published by ABS in 2002, which showed that 21% had accessed government services via the Internet. There has also been an increase in the percentage of businesses accessing government services online, from 44% at June 2000 to 71% at June 2003.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *United Nations Global E Government Readiness report (2004)*, <<http://www.unpan.org/egovernment4.asp>>

<sup>12</sup> *Australians' Use of and Satisfaction with E-Government Services*, <[http://www.aglmo.gov.au/publications/2005/june/e-government\\_services](http://www.aglmo.gov.au/publications/2005/june/e-government_services)>

<sup>13</sup> DCITA, *The Current State of Play 2004*, p. 23, <[www.dcita.gov.au](http://www.dcita.gov.au)>

The types of services most frequently accessed via the Internet include income or personal tax (16%), land rates or land tax (10%) and car, boat and vehicle registration and licenses (8%). Reasons cited for using the Internet to contact government were that it could be done at a time that suited users, required less time and was easy and uncomplicated. By contrast, the most significant reason for not using the Internet was that people thought that the service they wanted could not be done online. Almost a quarter of people cited this reason.

Overall, the satisfaction levels of Australians using the Internet to access government services were high. Nine out of 10 Internet users accessing government services online achieved what they wanted, were satisfied with the ease of using the service and with the ease of finding specific information and/or service respondents. Dissatisfaction with the Internet primarily reflected difficulties in navigating websites or incomplete information on websites.

The National Pests and Disease Outbreaks Website <<http://www.outbreak.gov.au/>>—the result of collaboration between the Australian Government and state and territory government agricultural agencies—aims to help manage agricultural emergencies by keeping stakeholders abreast of current and reliable information. Agricultural industries are economically vital to Australia. Pests and disease do not respect state boundaries, and agricultural emergencies are situations common to many countries. This website has been developed to better manage these situations. It demonstrates how government agencies can operate outside traditional organisational silos and away from the previous ‘lead agency’ model.

agency case study

### E-government progress within APS agencies

Australian Government agencies are continuing to develop innovative and practical ways of applying new technologies in order to benefit the community, business and government itself. Examples of agency initiatives designed to increase productivity, build internal capability and improve service user focus are:

- DEWR’s JobSearch website <<http://www.jobsearch.gov.au>> enables people and organisations—whether job seekers, employers or recruitment agencies—to use electronic channels to find jobs, build resumés, advertise jobs or seek seasonal work. This service is delivered, according to the user’s preference, via a personalised web page, email, telephone or a text message to a mobile telephone. JobSearch provides access to over 300,000 jobs each day and securely holds over 100,000 resumés.
- Centrelink’s Electronic Welfare Services Framework is about improving linkages between electronic government services. These services use natural voice recognition, text messaging and other technologies to implement the principle of ‘no wrong door’ so that citizens, wherever they are—at home, at a service centre, at a charity refuge, over the telephone—can quickly access government services in response to their life events.
- Health*Connect* is a collaborative effort between the Australian Government and state and territory governments. Health*Connect* involves redefining roles and

relationships between citizens and private and public health care providers. HealthConnect is a change management strategy that aims to improve the flow of information across the Australian health sector within strict privacy safeguards. Better flows of information will give doctors, and other health professionals, access to important and potentially lifesaving medical information and improve the quality and safety of health care for all Australians.

- The DITR business website <<http://www.business.gov.au>> offers simple and convenient access to all government information, transactions and services. It is a whole of government service providing essential information on planning, starting and running a business. This website is estimated to provide time and cost savings of approximately \$50 million a year to both business and government.
- The ABS is developing the National Data Network as part of its strategy to strengthen the National Statistical System. The network will support the sharing and integration of information sources relevant to policy development and research. The National Data Network will also provide access to a range of services such as data analysis and geocoding (a process of allocating latitude and longitude to each statistical unit (e.g. a business unit or dwelling)), thereby describing its position on the surface of the earth.
- The ATO has introduced the Tax Agents Portal <<http://www.ato.gov.au/taxprofessionals/>> which aims to improve agents' tax experience by ensuring they can access the information they need in a convenient, efficient and more personalised way.
- The Australian Business Register (ABR) <[https://abr.gov.au/abr\\_bc/homepage\\_bc.htm](https://abr.gov.au/abr_bc/homepage_bc.htm)> is an extensive database of identity information provided by businesses when they register for an Australian business number (ABN). The ABR makes it easier for businesses and all levels of government to interact using a unique identifier—the ABN. By providing a single point where a business can maintain its registration details and government can view business registration details, the ABR generates administrative efficiencies through re-using data. The ABR is an excellent example of re-using of information.
- The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) has developed an effective online search facility—the Panoptic search engine. This product provides high-level search efficiencies for agencies by combining a wide range of indicators to produce relevant search results, thereby facilitating clients' searching for information on agency websites. The incorporation of Panoptic into the website <<http://www.australia.gov.au>> provides access to over five million unique resources from over 1100 government sites.

ICT continues to grow in both capability and complexity, as does individual agencies' dependence on information and technology capabilities for the delivery of services. The time, cost and quality risks involved in implementing new ICT projects are high. The Edge project, a joint project between Centrelink and the Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) to develop an expert system for the Family Assistance Office is an example of the risks involved. This project was terminated before completion as it was over time and over budget and the direct financial savings from the project were not realised, nor was the project successful when assessed against its aims.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> ANAO, *The Edge Project*, Performance Audit Report No. 40, April 2005 <<http://www.anao.gov.au>>

## ANAO audits of online service delivery

Government policy requires that agencies use the Internet to deliver all appropriate programmes and services.<sup>15</sup> Implementation of this policy has led to considerable agency investment in online service delivery. Government policy also requires investment in Internet-based service delivery which should deliver tangible returns through cost reductions, increased efficiency and productivity, or improved services to businesses and the broader community.

The 2005 ANAO audit programme included a number of audits on growing interconnectivity and changing service delivery through information technology and telecommunications. ANAO examined the Defence project management of the Standard Defence Supply System (SDSS) Upgrade Project, specifically project management procedures and practices in the information management system domain. ANAO found that the Project had not delivered value for money.<sup>16</sup> Also examined was ATO's Administration of Taxation Rulings. This was a follow-up on an earlier audit that examined ATO's information technology (IT) systems supporting the provision of advice capability. ATO replaced systems previously used with one case management system which also supported enhanced monitoring and reporting of performance.<sup>17</sup> Another follow-up audit of the ATO was of the integrity of Tax File Numbers. ANAO found that interrelationships between the Tax File Number (TFN) system and other systems within ATO still require some improvement.<sup>18</sup>

ANAO conducted an audit that measured the efficiency and effectiveness of e-Government. This audit examined the methods used by selected agencies to measure the efficiency and effectiveness of their delivery of services through the Internet; to evaluate the adequacy of these methods; and to identify lessons learned and opportunities for improvement. The audit covered a specific Internet-delivered service and website of each of the six participating agencies. The agencies selected were of varying size with different types of programmes and services, providing for a mixture of groups.

ANAO found that all of the participating agencies had developed a strategy that set out responsibility for the management of their website and online services. Agencies' monitoring of the effectiveness of their websites was found to be adequate; however, agencies were unable to report any efficiency savings through the use of the Internet, as they had not evaluated their services. ANAO concluded that most agencies had not developed adequate measures to determine whether their website offered an efficient form of service delivery. ANAO found that agencies generally did better in measuring the efficiency and effectiveness of selected online services, but that few agencies had collected information that facilitated comparison with other service delivery channels. It was noted that agencies could demonstrate their achievements against the Government's aim for e-government through the provision of services to their service users, business and the broader community, but in general were unable to conclude that their investment in e-government was delivering tangible returns. Overall, ANAO determined that agencies' methods were inadequate in assessing whether the online

<sup>15</sup> National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE), *Government Online—The Commonwealth Government's Strategy*, April 2000 <<http://www.agimo.gov.au/publications/2000/04/govonline>>

<sup>16</sup> ANAO, *Management of the Standard Defence Supply System Upgrade*, Performance Audit Report No. 5, August 2004, <<http://www.anao.gov.au>>

<sup>17</sup> ANAO, *Administration of Taxation Rulings Follow-up Audit*, Performance Audit Report No. 7, August 2004, <<http://www.anao.gov.au>>

<sup>18</sup> ANAO, *Australian Taxation Office Tax File Number Integrity*, Performance Audit Report No. 47, May 2005, <<http://www.anao.gov.au>>

delivery of government services and programmes was efficient and effective, although there was evidence that agencies had made considerable progress in this arena during the last year.<sup>19</sup>

### Management of strategic e-government issues

Key strategic e-government issues are being addressed by high-level cross-government committees.

The Online and Communications Council focuses on a broad information economy agenda of strategic national significance. The strategic priorities for the Council include broadband policy, regional and Indigenous communications services, ICT capability, e-security and online environment, e-government and digital divide. The Council is a collaborative government approach with members from all state and territory governments and the Australian Government.

The Information Management Strategy Committee (IMSC), a subcommittee of MAC, is chaired by Dr Ian Watt, Secretary of Finance. Membership consists of the Secretaries and CEOs of 12 departments and agencies.

IMSC provides shared leadership on multi-agency and whole of government information management strategies. It also provides whole of government governance on ICT matters that contribute to Australian Government administration, operations and service delivery. IMSC has progressed a number of significant issues. These include the Technical Interoperability Framework, an Australian Government Authentication Framework, an agreed Gatekeeper Public Key Infrastructure (PKI) Framework, a guide to ICT Sourcing and the roll-out of the FedLink encryption system (see Chapter 11).

In his 28 September 2005 speech, 'E-government, the way forward', the Special Minister of State Senator the Hon Eric Abetz, discussed the Australian Government's strategic directions for e-government—electronic service delivery to Australians. He stressed that e-government has reached a major turning point. The major drivers for the new direction being proposed for e-government included a commitment to achieving greater levels of use and higher levels of satisfaction with Government electronic services, the need to reduce red tape and administration, to make services simpler and more intuitive, and a desire to cut the Government's service delivery costs.<sup>20</sup>

The challenge for the future is embedding ICT into the business of government, while ensuring value for money and ICT project success. At the same time the pursuit of service excellence and protecting privacy and security are essential.

## Reviews of specific programmes and administrative decision-making

A suite of Commonwealth administrative law mechanisms supports public scrutiny of government decision-making. These mechanisms include the Ombudsman (who is also the Defence Force Ombudsman and the Taxation Ombudsman), external review by specialist tribunals and the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT), review under the

<sup>19</sup> ANAO, *Measuring the Efficiency and Effectiveness of E-Government*, Performance Audit Report No. 26, February 2005, <<http://www.anao.gov.au>>

<sup>20</sup> <[http://www.agimo.gov.au/media/speeches/2005/e-government\\_the\\_way\\_forward](http://www.agimo.gov.au/media/speeches/2005/e-government_the_way_forward)>

*Administrative Decisions (Judicial Review) Act 1977 (Cwlth)*, and access to documents under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982*.<sup>21</sup> With the exception of the Ombudsman, these processes generally concentrate on administrative decision-making, rather than on the process of service delivery. Many ANAO performance audits of specific government programmes also deal with issues related to service delivery and accuracy of decision-making. Information from ANAO audits on service delivery issues and the activities of the Ombudsman are discussed below.

## ANAO performance audits

ANAO's performance audits examine and report to Parliament on the economy, effectiveness and efficiency of the administration of many Australian government agencies. As noted above, broad themes for the 2004–05 audit work programme included growing interconnectivity and changing service delivery through ICT and evolving governance structures, including higher community expectations for strong management and appropriate governance.<sup>22</sup> In 2004–05, ANAO tabled several performance audit reports which addressed the theme of service delivery in the context of the delivery of specific programmes or components of programmes.<sup>23</sup> Recommendations stemming from these reports related specifically to the programmes audited, but key themes included the need to have:

- basic systems and controls to promote the quality and transparency of service delivery and improved integrity and transparency of processes
- adequate guidance and training available to agency employees required to deliver services
- measurement and control frameworks related to administration of services delivered
- up-to-date guidelines and documentation for both employees and service users and effective strategies to promote services to users
- improved performance management and reporting, including by enhancing the range of performance indicators and the means of measuring performance and monitoring of service user satisfaction with services
- appropriate protocols and procedures to advise service users of their rights and obligations as part of their interaction with agencies
- effective management of service user and outsourced services, including clear expectations of the level and/or quality of services to be delivered and mechanisms to protect the Australian Government's interests.

In each case, the agency concerned agreed to the recommendations of ANAO.

## Role of the Commonwealth Ombudsman

During 2004–05, the Ombudsman investigated complaints made about 105 Australian Government departments and agencies. The complaints ranged across the spectrum of government activity. Building on the experience and insights gained from handling

<sup>21</sup> The availability of review mechanisms varies depending on a range of factors, including the specific legislative context. For a comprehensive description of Commonwealth administrative law refer to the federal Attorney-General's Department website <<http://www.ag.gov.au>>

<sup>22</sup> ANAO, *Audit Activity Report: July to December 2004*, Audit Activity Report No. 23, January 2005, <<http://www.anao.gov.au>>

<sup>23</sup> ANAO, Performance Audit Report Nos. 14, 19, 24, 32, 37, 43, 50, 51, 58, published in 2004–05, <<http://www.anao.gov.au>>

complaints, the Ombudsman is in a good position to develop a broad perspective on the systemic issues affecting the overall effectiveness of service delivery in the APS, and some of the practical challenges facing agencies.

Information in this section has been provided directly by the Ombudsman, and includes statistics also included in the Ombudsman's 2004–05 annual report and additional analysis of systemic issues facing the APS.

### Own motion investigations

The Ombudsman undertakes a number of own motion investigations each year. In 2004–05, the Ombudsman published reports on six own motion and major investigations relating to APS agencies. One of the investigations (which related to ATO) was completed and provided to the agency in 2003–04, and was reported in last year's report. Of the remaining five reports finalised and released publicly in 2004–05, two related to the Australian Defence Force (ADF), two to DIMIA, and one to the Australian Crime Commission (ACC).<sup>24</sup>

Reports on two other own motion investigations concluded during 2004–05. One investigation looked at administrative matters relating to Defence's dealings with young people. The other examined the quality of Freedom of Information processing by Australian Government agencies.

The Ombudsman also commenced own motion investigations into the policy underpinning the administration of marriage-like relationships under the social security law, and an own motion investigation into DIMIA's administration of visa cancellations under section 501 of the *Migration Act 1958* in relation to long-term Australian residents.

In addition, the review commenced by the Ombudsman in 2003–04 on the complaint-handling mechanisms employed by DoTARS continued during 2004–05. This was due to DoTARS developing new complaint procedures within its Vehicle Standards Safety Branch and also initiating a review of internal complaint-handling procedures in other areas during the year.

### Complaints to the Ombudsman

Many larger agencies have established effective mechanisms for reviewing decisions, handling complaints and obtaining customer feedback to enable improvements to services. This means that for many of the approaches made by members of the public, the Ombudsman does not initially investigate the matter but advises the person about using agency mechanisms for complaint handling and review. Complainants may subsequently request the Ombudsman's assistance if the agency does not resolve the issues.

The total number of complaints received by the Ombudsman in 2004–05 was 17,310, a decrease of 1% over the previous year.<sup>25</sup> Of these, 14,143 complaints were related to APS agencies, a decrease of 1.6% over the 14,380 received in the previous year.

This year's decrease was spread across most agencies; however, it was offset by an increase in complaints received about DEWR (up 19% from a small base) and the CSA (up 7%).

<sup>24</sup> To the extent possible, the Ombudsman's reports on own motion investigations are published in full or in an abridged version on the Ombudsman's website at <[www.ombudsman.gov.au](http://www.ombudsman.gov.au)>.

<sup>25</sup> Complaints received in all jurisdictions, including ADF, Australian Federal Police (AFP) and ACT.

In 2004–05, the Ombudsman did not initially investigate 67% of complaints received—an investigation rate similar to that for the previous three years. The complaints that are investigated by the Ombudsman about the activities of APS agencies tend to involve more complex and difficult issues.

Centrelink remains the APS agency about which the most complaints are received, due to its primary role in the delivery of a large number of Australian Government programmes to the Australian public. Complaints about Centrelink finalised during the year fell by 4% to 7719, accounting for 54% of complaints finalised about APS agencies. The Ombudsman chose not to investigate over two-thirds of complaints received about Centrelink, instead referring 70% of these complaints to Centrelink's internal complaint or review processes. Of the 2696 Centrelink issues investigated, the Ombudsman identified an arguable administrative deficiency or error in 415 issues (15%). Remedies were achieved for 2024 of issues investigated.

The Ombudsman received 2094 complaints about CSA, representing almost 15% of complaints received about APS agencies and an increase of 7% on CSA complaints received last year.

The number of complaints received about ATO continued to decline (1633, down by 5% on last year), perhaps reflecting the bedding down of the major changes to the taxation system over the past four years. Complaints about ATO represent 12% of complaints received about APS agencies. This suggests a return to greater stability in ATO complaint numbers comparable with the period prior to the introduction of the new tax system and the difficulties over the tax treatment of mass-marketed investment schemes.

DIMIA was another substantial source of complaints received by the Ombudsman during the year, with 873 complaints received, compared to 865 complaints received last year.

The Ombudsman investigated 43% of complaint issues arising from complaints about DIMIA, against the general average of 33% across all Australian Government agencies.<sup>26</sup> The higher investigation rate perhaps reflects the more limited availability of internal review for DIMIA's complainants. Of the 427 DIMIA issues investigated, the Ombudsman identified arguable administrative deficiency or error in only 41 issues (10%). This compares favourably with the average for APS agencies of 13%.

## Systemic issues

There continues to be a large number of complaints about APS agencies that consistently raise common themes. Many complainants are concerned about agency decisions that directly affect them, and complain that they have not been given sufficient reasons for the decision or that the decisions are flawed. Investigation of such complaints is often complicated due to poor record keeping by agencies or a failure to record oral advice.

This latter issue is of particular importance, given the widespread use of customer contact centres to respond to queries in large service delivery agencies. Complaints about call centres arise particularly in relation to Centrelink, CSA and ATO.

The other major area that continues to result in many complaints to the Ombudsman is delay by agencies in taking actions or making decisions. Other matters include

<sup>26</sup> Commonwealth and ADF complaints (excludes AFP and ACT complaints).

harsh or unreasonable use of statutory powers to gather information or enter premises; unreasonable debt recovery policies and practices; failure to coordinate decisions and actions between agencies; loss of correspondence; and inadequate, misleading or ambiguous information in publications or on websites.

### **Private contractors**

Some aspects of the role of the Ombudsman have changed over the years because of developments in the way agencies go about their business. As more agencies 'contract out' some of their operations, the Ombudsman tries to ensure that proper accountability is retained, either by treating the contractor's actions as those of the agency (if that can lawfully be done) or by examining the way in which the agency dealt with a complaint about the contractor.

The limits of government responsibility and responsiveness are tested by complaints that stem from the failure of private entities to meet their obligations to government, with consequent injury to others. An example is complaints about the Superannuation Guarantee. Where an employer fails to pay superannuation contributions in respect of employees, ATO can pursue the employer for the unpaid superannuation. However, ATO is limited to using the recovery mechanisms established by law. If an employer goes into insolvency, there is often little scope for ATO to recover the monies owed to the employees. In such cases, it is difficult for the Ombudsman to go beyond investigating with a view to reassuring complainants all has been reasonably done under the law to assist in the recovery of their lost entitlements.

Tax complaints received by the Ombudsman reveal similar issues. Tax agents play an increasingly important role in our taxation system, with almost 75% of individual tax returns prepared by agents. Although there is some scope for administrative discretion, the ultimate responsibility for the return rests with the taxpayer. Where an agent makes a mistake in a return, or fails to lodge a return, the taxpayer will generally carry the burden for those errors. One line of investigation that can be pursued is to consider whether ATO has taken account of all the facts and been prepared to exercise any available discretion to assist the taxpayer. Beyond that, taxpayers are advised of their right to take the matter up with either the relevant Tax Agents' Board or the appropriate professional body.

Action taken by government contractors that affects members of the public is another area where the Ombudsman has cause to examine the limits of government responsibility. This has been a particular theme this year in relation to complaints about actions occurring in immigration detention facilities managed by a private service provider under a contracted arrangement with DIMIA; the department retains an overall duty of care for detainees, and the Immigration Detention Standards provide the framework for how detainees are to be managed and treated. DIMIA may nevertheless decline responsibility for actions taken by independent contractors, such as medical practitioners.

The Ombudsman also deals with the complex and difficult area of complaints about the way agencies conduct tenders and administer contracts to provide services. Most agencies have developed effective internal complaint and review systems. While sound internal complaint management can reduce the number of complaints that the Ombudsman needs to consider, the effect is commonly that the Ombudsman deals with a higher proportion of more complex or intractable matters.

## Key chapter findings

Increasingly, the focus of service delivery is shifting towards a whole of government approach. The push to move services and information resources online has continued and would appear to be the way of the future. Despite significant investment in the move to online service provision, governments around the world, including Australia, are still recognising the need for further improvement to meet the growing expectations of citizens for better customer service.

The agency survey shows that consultation in the making of policy and programme decisions is widespread among APS agencies, but less in the area of government regulation. Consultation continues to be a significant mechanism for engaging stakeholders in public debate about government services. The increased government presence on the Internet and citizen access to government services and resources via this medium provides a ready-made mechanism for engaging with service user groups, and is already being used, by agencies.

Improving service delivery continues to be a major theme for the APS. With 55% of APS employees directly involved in the delivery of services to the general public, or managing employees who do so, the importance of those Values that set out how the APS interacts with the public is paramount. As expected, employees delivering services are predominantly located outside the ACT.

Results from selected agency service user satisfaction surveys paint a positive picture in relation to the overall satisfaction with selected APS organisations, with the majority of service user satisfaction levels with agencies above 80% in 2005.

The majority of agencies appear to have developed effective mechanisms for receiving and responding to feedback from the general public. Seventy-nine per cent of relevant employees confirmed that formal feedback mechanisms were in place, although employees reported a drop in the effectiveness of these mechanisms. Over three-quarters of APS employees involved in service delivery agree that they received 'appropriate training or have access to information that enabled them to undertake their client service responsibilities'.

The use of service charters is widespread, and most agencies have taken on board the need to monitor and review their effectiveness. Although progress has been made, as suggested by ANAO, more work is required before service charters can effectively drive service improvement.

Australian Government agencies are continuing to develop innovative and practical ways of applying new technologies to benefit the community, business and government itself. The Australian Government's e-government objective is to simplify the complexity of government and improve efficiency of government administration at the same time. Agencies are identifying priority areas for service improvement, where better linkages can bring tangible benefits to a citizen's experience of electronic government services.

Information provided by the Ombudsman indicates that, although complaint numbers decreased this year, there continues to be a large number of complaints regarding the lack of information provided about decisions made by agencies or that decisions are flawed, and that this is often compounded by poor agency record keeping. Evidence from ANAO reports suggests also that agencies need to have systems in place to promote the quality and transparency of service delivery along with mechanisms that measure the effectiveness of the service they provide.