

Joint Committee on Public Accounts & Audit

Implementation of COVID-19 measures: Inquiry into Auditor-General Reports Nos. 20,
22, 23, 24 and 39 (2020-21)

PUBLIC HEARING 03 December 2021

ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Social Services Portfolio
Services Australia

Topic: Compliance with IT Security Policy

Question reference number: IQ21-000159

Member: Lucy Wicks

Type of question: Spoken. Hansard Page/s: 8

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 17 December 2021

Question:

"CHAIR: In relation to compliance with mandatory IT security policy, such as the PSPF and the Essential Eight: could you advise us of any assessments of compliance or observations in relation to compliance?"

Ms Skinner: I can probably provide you a little bit more detail on that on notice. Services Australia has many IT systems. The systems, in the broad, are compliant with the top four Essential Eight. There are some legacy systems that are buried deep in the back parts of the organisation—in the architecture, if you like. Some of those sorts of systems are not in the same position of risk, because they're not at the front doors of the organisation. Some of those systems will be remediated as part of upgrades to those systems over time. Services Australia does comply with the Essential Eight—developing cybersecurity on the PSPF. We have the 24/7 cybersecurity operations centre.

The other point about our cybersecurity is that all of the citizen data is encrypted [inaudible] in, essentially, the equivalent of a top-secret facility. Some of this conversation is around access, but, in terms of where citizens' data is stored and how it's protected, it is protected with the utmost security we can provide."

Answer:

To ensure that a consistent level of security is applied across Government and sensitive data and business operations are protected appropriately, all government agencies are required to submit an annual report to the Attorney-General's Department on adherence to the Protective Security Policy Framework (PSPF).

A component of the PSPF report relates specifically to the Australian Cyber Security Centre's Essential Eight, which provides a maturity rating for each strategy and which requires evidence supporting the rationale for each rating.

To determine the Essential Eight security maturity of Services Australia (the Agency) and partner agencies, the Agency performs an evidence based Essential Eight assessment. This occurred in 2020 and an assessment has begun for 2021.

The Agency works hard to ensure it maintains a strong cyber security posture and is able to manage cyber security threats in accordance with the PSPF.

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ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Social Services Portfolio
Services Australia

Topic: Surge Staff

Question reference number: IQ21-000160

Member: Julian Hill

Type of question: Spoken. Hansard Page/s: 9-10

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 17 December 2021

Question:

Mr HILL: I'll be brief. Completely leaving outside this discussion any government policy issues, you've done an incredible amount of innovation in a short space of time, as the audit shows, and it's a really positive audit, which I think is a credit to you. I was stunned by the figure in paragraph 12, that 12,000 staff commenced in the six months between March and September. The logistics of that makes your head explode. I have two sets of questions. Maybe you could take this on notice: I'd be interested to see, given this audit report was completed 12 months ago and a lot has changed since then, perhaps casting back to the start of the pandemic, could you give us something that gives us a sense in maybe a graphical sense or month by month—I'm not trying to torture you with data—of your staffing profile from say February 2020 through to about now? I think that would be helpful for us to understand the resourcing challenges that you've had. If you could break that down into perhaps the three categories, if it's easy for you to report on this: your ongoing APS quotient; how many staff were seconded in, because I know you seconded a lot from other agencies; and how many are ongoing casual or labour hire workers. Is it possible to do that, Ms Skinner?

Ms Skinner: We have done pieces of work like that, and we can provide something like that on notice. Clearly, we scaled up to 12,000, and over 2,000 of those were other public servants that came from elsewhere. We had lots of people who were in service delivery roles that joined us from companies like Qantas and Virgin. Other telephony services were done by Flight Centre and companies like that, where people came from those service delivery places that were closed. One of the really delightful things we were seeing, as we started to open up and we didn't need those additional staff, was that they mostly rolled back to those businesses that they came from. It's quite nice that around Canberra I occasionally bump into people who tell me they worked for us during that time, and they were mostly grateful to get back to their previous employment but also grateful to have worked with us and assisted with their service delivery skills during a time of need. We can give you that sort of breakdown of how staff numbers have gone up and down. We've just concluded an APS surge in which around 500 staff helped us with COVID disaster payments for this year, so that concluded in the last week.

Answer:

The table below displays a breakdown of the Service Australia’s workforce headcount, by employment category, for specific dates from February 2020 to November 2021. This is not a complete breakdown of the Services Australia workforce, but does reflect those categories of staff primarily engaged in surge activities to meet customer demand over this period.

Internal movements to meet the surge in customer demand are not reflected.

Total Headcount by Employment Category					
As at	APS Ongoing and Non-Ongoing (excluding IIEs)	APS Irregular/ Intermittent (IIEs)	APS2000/ Secondees	Non-APS Labour Hire	Total Headcount
29-Feb-20	28,038	2,209	123	1,462	31,832
30-Apr-20	28,257	3,675	2,500	5,025	39,457
30-Jun-20	28,354	3,399	697	3,622	36,072
30-Sep-20	28,146	3,484	297	2,621	34,548
31-Dec-20	27,791	2,965	185	2,177	33,118
31-Mar-21	30,722	2,919	526	1,783	35,950
30-Jun-21	30,829	3,220	91	967	35,107
30-Sep-21	30,892	3,402	647	1,784	36,725
30-Nov-21	30,492	3,234	109	1,421	35,256

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ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Social Services Portfolio
Services Australia

Topic: Waiving Debts for Vulnerable People

Question reference number: IQ21-000161

Member: Julian Hill

Type of question: Spoken. Hansard Page/s: 11

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 17 December 2021

Question:

Mr HILL: No, that's fine. It's not your minister; it's the social services minister if there was a policy question as to whether the minister had asked for or received any advice regarding the possibility of waiving some of the debts—is that correct?

Ms Skinner: If there was to be a change in things like thresholds, that would be a matter of either policy or legislation.

Mr HILL: Right. Has your agency been engaged in any such discussions or contributed advice into such discussions or been asked by your policy department or any ministers regarding that? I represent, of course, the most socioeconomically disadvantaged area in Melbourne, so this is an issue we deal with day to day—people with small debts. I'm pretty upset about big companies milking JobKeeper and them being put under a lot of pressure for \$600.

Ms Skinner: I think we certainly engage quite regularly and deeply with the Department of Social Services, and there are other agencies for which we manage debt—the Department of Education, Skills and Employment, the childcare subsidy.

Mr HILL: True.

Ms Skinner: So there's a range of debt matters that we need to be involved in. Occasionally we're involved through the child support program with debts that arise between family around child support arrangements.

Mr HILL: Yes.

Ms Skinner: I think the point that we are focusing on in the service delivery space is to improve the process and the ability for citizens to conduct their business with us in a simple, helpful, respectful and transparent way that reduces the likelihood of them or us being involved in an overpayment which then gives rise to a debt. That's the sort of work we're doing where the high focus is on ensuring that people's payments are what they should be getting, and we don't have these ups and downs for people.

Mr HILL: I appreciate that. Can you take on notice and let us know, because it's a point of genuine curiosity, whether the government, to your knowledge, turned its mind to the policy questions and whether you've been asked for any input on policy guidance, given the government chose to whack \$20 billion on the national debt for the next generation to repay and kept paying JobKeeper to companies to increase their turnover and profits, in many cases? I'm wondering whether they gave any consideration to waiving tiny debts for the most vulnerable people in

society.

Ms Skinner: Certainly, they put in place the debt pause, but I'll take that broader question on notice.

Mr HILL: I said 'waiving', not 'pausing', just to be clear. I appreciate that.

Answer:

Provisions to waive debts are set out in the following legislation:

- *Social Security Act 1991*
- *Social Security (Administration) Act 1999*
- *A New Tax System (Family Assistance) (Administration) Act 1999*
- *Paid Parental Leave Act 2010*
- *Student Assistance Act 1973*

These provisions allow Services Australia staff with the relevant delegation to waive debts in particular circumstances, including special circumstances faced by our customers.

Questions related to consideration of amendments to these provisions should be directed to the Department of Social Services.