

Outcome 2

3.1 DFAT describes Outcome 2 as focusing on:

The protection and welfare of Australians abroad and access to secure international travel documentation through timely and responsive travel advice and consular and passport services in Australia and overseas.¹

3.2 This outcome outlines the Department's support to Australians overseas through the provision of readily available services. As such, these include passport and consular services, timely travel advice, practical contingency planning, and rapid crisis response.

3.3 During the Review, issues raised in relation to Outcome 2 and its Programs included:

- the effectiveness of programs like the *Smartraveller* service in delivering responsive travel advice;²
- the criteria determining the administration of travel warnings; and
- the provision of services to Australians living, working and travelling overseas.

Responsive travel advice

3.4 DFAT's provision of clear, current and practical information on safety and security overseas helps assist Australians in making well-informed travel plans. DFAT advised that its travel advice was issued after close

¹ DFAT Annual Report 2009–10, p. 148.

² DFAT Annual Report 2009–10, p. 157.

cooperation with the National Threat Assessment Centre (NTAC) and consular partners. The aim was to ensure that they were supported by the best available information.³

- 3.5 DFAT's travel advice is communicated through published travel bulletins, consular publications, flyers and the *Smartraveller* website. In addition, DFAT has continued its close relationship with the travel industry to promote travel advice and *Smartraveller* messages.
- 3.6 The department has begun to experiment with mainstream social media technologies in delivering responsive travel advice during times of crisis. This has been displayed in
- 2010 World Cup in South Africa;
 - 2010 Commonwealth Games in India;
 - 2010 earthquake in Chile.⁴

***Smartraveller* service**

- 3.7 The *Smartraveller* service is a public information campaign to help Australians prepare for their travel and promote safe travel messages such as the importance of subscribing to their travel advice, registering travel plans online and taking out travel insurance. It also includes a telephone service for those without internet access.
- 3.8 The service reflects DFAT's digital approach in providing responsive travel advice to Australians abroad. The website recorded 27.9 million page-views in 2009-10.⁵ However the percentage of Australian travellers registering for the service was low in relation to the total number travelling.
- 3.9 In 2009-10, the automated *Smartraveller* telephone service received 16 292 calls from Australians without internet access or with visual impairment.⁶
- 3.10 The third phase of the *Smartraveller* campaign will draw upon department research on traveller behaviour, needs and expectations to improve DFAT's provision of responsive travel advice.⁷ This phase will start in 2010-11.

3 DFAT Annual Report 2009-10, p. 156.

4 Mr Fergus Hanson, *Exhibit No. 1*, p. 4.

5 DFAT Annual Report 2009-10, p. 156.

6 DFAT Annual Report 2009-10, p. 157.

7 DFAT Annual Report 2009-10, p. 160.

Travel warnings

- 3.11 DFAT is responsible for administering travel warnings should a level of risk be involved for Australians travelling to particular states.
- 3.12 DFAT has been criticised for the accuracy, responsiveness and timeliness of its travel warnings – even by other governments such as Indonesia.
- 3.13 DFAT told the committee that:

The threat level is determined by the National Threat Assessment Centre, which resides within ASIO. ASIO is the organisation with the legislative authority to make judgements on threats to security. The starting point for our travel advisory is the threat level and the threat advice and information provided by ASIO. We then have different levels of travel warning... There is a strong relationship between the advice provided by ASIO and our travel advisory.⁸

New media

- 3.14 As mentioned in Chapter 2, new media is a term that categorically defines the digital tools of social interaction used by business and individuals as a forum for discussion. New media's responsive and interactive properties are reflected in websites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn.
- 3.15 Public engagement with new media is continuing to evolve. There are currently 500 million active users on Facebook with more than 30 billion pieces of content shared each month.⁹
- 3.16 DFAT has been criticised for its recognition of new media as a potential source of interaction with Australians travelling abroad. Mr Hanson noted that there is still a tendency within DFAT to indentify the utility of social media at the last minute rather than seeing it as integral from the start.¹⁰
- 3.17 Mr Hanson told the committee that DFAT is at the early stages of transitioning to the use of social media. However, the lack of an independent e-diplomacy branch ensuring the provision of travel advice hinders the responsiveness of the department.¹¹

8 Mr Dennis Richardson, *Transcript*, 27 May 2011, p. 17.

9 <<http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics#!/press/info.php?statistics>> Accessed May 2011.

10 Mr Fergus Hanson, *Exhibit No. 1*, p. 4.

11 Mr Fergus Hanson, *Transcript*, 23 May 2011, p. 2.

- 3.18 Mr Mirchandani made particular reference to the department's non responsive twitter account. He said that:

DFAT's tweets have been largely concentrated on repeating media releases, travel advice and announcing jobs available in the department.¹²

- 3.19 In response to criticism regarding the use of new media in delivering responsive travel advice, DFAT told the committee that:

We will continue to approach the use of social media fairly carefully. ...

We are taking tentative steps in the consular area where it is clearly in our own interests and clearly in the interests of the travelling public that we engage more.¹³

Committee comment

- 3.20 The Committee considers that DFAT provides a valuable *Smartraveller* service to Australians travelling overseas. Of concern, however, is the low proportion of Australian travellers registering for the service. Efforts need to be directed towards increasing the proportion of Australians using *Smartraveller*.
- 3.21 Travel advisories have always been contentious. There is the potential for liability issues to arise if travel warnings are issued which imply lower levels of risk to that which is subsequently found to be the case. As such, it is prudent to be cautious in issuing travel advisories.

Services to Australians abroad

- 3.22 Australians' propensity to travel widely is reflected in the diverse range of complex and challenging issues addressed by consular services. In protecting Australians overseas, the department has continued to liaise with other countries on consular assistance and cooperation. In addition to greater demands being placed on consular services, DFAT has been dealing with a record level of demand for passports. Furthermore, DFAT

12 Mr Prakash Mirchandani, *Transcript 23 May 2011*, p. 13.

13 Mr Dennis Richardson, *Transcript 23 May 2011*, p. 21.

expects demand for both consular services and passports to increase further.¹⁴

Consular services

3.23 Given the increasing number of Australians travelling abroad, DFAT has experienced record levels of demand for consular and related services. DFAT told the Committee that:

It has meant our effort has been spread more thinly. Obviously, it has meant we have to sharply prioritise.¹⁵

3.24 Furthermore,

The consulate area, of course, has been under pressure; however, in the event of crisis we simply move resources around the department to ensure that we can cope with the immediacy of the crisis.¹⁶

Travellers emergency loans

3.25 In 2009–10 the department granted emergency loans to 286 Australian travellers to the total value of \$320 456 compared with the loans issued in the previous year to 334 Australian travellers to the value of \$415 767.¹⁷

3.26 In 2009–10 the department recovered \$196 447 from Australians who had been issued loans, compared with \$181 789 in 2008–09.

3.27 DFAT told the committee that the recovery of funds is a long-term process. Loans are only deemed unrecoverable when the individual in question is no longer contactable, deceased or bankrupt.¹⁸

3.28 In seeking to recover funds, DFAT stated:

In broad terms, as a statement of departmental philosophy, we are prepared to be as tough as what the elected representatives determine us to be.¹⁹

14 DFAT Annual Report 2009–10, pp. 8–10.

15 Mr Dennis Richardson, *Transcript 27 May 2011*, p. 3.

16 Mr Dennis Richardson, *Transcript 27 May 2011*, p. 3.

17 DFAT Annual Report 2009–10, p. 170.

18 Ms Ann Thorpe, *Transcript 27 May 2011*, p. 19.

19 Mr Dennis Richardson *Transcript 27 May 2011*, p. 19.

Passports

- 3.29 The Australian passport is one of the most widely held documents in the Australian community and is an essential element of the Government's National Identity Security Strategy. In 2009-10 the number of passports reported lost rose to 36 099. This included 115 passports reported missing in the mail.²⁰
- 3.30 In response DFAT had worked closely with the Commonwealth Ombudsman as part of an inquiry into the operations of Australia Post and the handling of passports by holders and other parties. Two recommendations from the inquiry were implemented in order to secure the handling of passports within the post.²¹
- 3.31 The CLA told the Committee that the inquiry into lost passports in the postal service reflected a mismanagement of resources. It argued that there should instead have been greater attention on the 36 099 passports that were reported lost in 2009-10.²²
- 3.32 DFAT told the committee that the number of lost Australian passports is relatively low in comparison to the number of passports issued. The department acknowledged that the greatest contribution of passport management has been the introduction of the new *Passports Act 2005* that includes penalties for those who lose their passports.²³
- 3.33 Should an individual lose their passport within a five-year period, the additional fees amount to;
- \$100 for the first occurrence;
 - \$226 for the second occurrence;
 - \$454 for the third occurrence and thereafter.²⁴
- 3.34 In addition, an applicant can be refused or be granted a limited validity passport and is automatically referred to DFAT's Fraud and Investigations Unit.²⁵
- 3.35 The department has begun to implement the Passport Redevelopment Program. The program aims to better meet the demand from the public
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20 DFAT Annual Report 2009-10, p. 165.

21 DFAT Annual Report 2009-10, p. 165.

22 Mr Bill Rowlings, *Transcript 23 May 2011*, p. 52.

23 Ms Penny Williams *Transcript 27 May 2011*, p. 15.

24 Ms Penny Williams *Transcript 27 May 2011*, p. 15.

25 Ms Penny Williams *Transcript 27 May 2011*, p. 16.

and give increased functionality, particularly in fraud. It is estimated that the program will be fully completed in 6 years time.²⁶

Committee comment

- 3.36 The Committee is satisfied with DFAT's responses to the issues arising from its passports program. Its consular services have proved valuable in international emergencies but require a far more intensive examination not possible given the scope and time constraints of this report.
- 3.37 The Committee notes the increasing pressure the growing number of Australians travelling overseas places on DFAT's consular services and responsibilities, and that the budgetary challenge presented requires constant vigilance. This issue should be addressed in the further inquiry regarding the adequacy of DFAT's activities overseas.

26 Ms Penny Williams *Transcript 27 May 2011*, p. 16.

