# Services Australia submission – Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

As the government's primary service delivery agency, Services Australia (the Agency) delivers services and payments to almost all Australians at some point during their lives. These include health, social security and welfare, child support, emergency and disaster relief.

Services Australia is one of the largest agencies in the Australian Public Service (APS). It employs approximately 20% of the APS workforce, delivering services and payments on behalf of various departments and agencies which have policy responsibility.

In 2022-23, Services Australia administered over $219.5 billion of payments on behalf of government, handled over 55.2 million calls and completed over 1.1 billion digital transactions. The Agency has a nationwide footprint with 318 face-to-face service centres as well as 364 Agents providing face to face information and assisting customers to use self-service, and 212 Access Points. The Agency is also responsible for managing myGov, the Australian Government's primary digital services platform.

Services Australia supported the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, assisting with the economic and health responses and rapidly mobilising to deliver services as agreed by the government.

## Services Australia's role in the Commonwealth's Response to COVID-19

### 2020: COVID-19 emerges, and nationwide lockdowns lead to a surge in demand for government services

On 16 March 2020, Services Australia stood up its COVID-19 Taskforce, to oversee the implementation of the Agency's initial Pandemic Action Plan. This provided the Agency with a detailed view of Agency wide priorities, and the resources required to maintain critical functions.

Following national lockdown restrictions being implemented by the National Cabinet on 22 March 2020, more than 1 million Australians found themselves out of work and seeking immediate assistance, with demand for government services increasing to unprecedented levels.

In 55 days Services Australia processed 1.3 million JobSeeker claims, a claim volume normally processed in two-and-a-half years. At the peak, more than 53,000 claims were completed in a single day. Within the same 55 day period, the Agency also received and monitored approximately 3.7 million phone calls,1.9 million service centre walk-ins and 250,000 social media interactions.

During this time, Services Australia implemented 50 policy changes to 20 payments on behalf of numerous Departments. These included expanding eligibility to JobSeeker and Youth Allowance, waiving waiting periods and asset tests for certain payments, and applying exemptions from mutual obligations. Almost 300 new services were added to the Medicare Benefits Schedule, often within hours of the Government making a decision.

The Agency commenced paying Crisis Payments (National Health Emergency) and Economic Support Payments from March 2020, and from April 2020, the Coronavirus

Supplement to eligible welfare recipients. The Pandemic Leave Disaster Payment was implemented from August 2020.

From 3 April 2020, a temporary pause on the Agency's debt raising and recovery activities was implemented, which remained in place until debt raising gradually recommenced from 2 November 2020, excluding Victoria, which remained in place until 11 January 2021. From February 2021 debt recovery activity gradually recommenced, but subject to adjustments due to further local pauses.

**To meet the surge in demand Services Australia and the APS mobilised and upskilled new and existing staff**

Services Australia's ability to activate a surge workforce during national emergencies was a core aspect of its COVID-19 response.

The unprecedented demand for services and payments necessitated a mass redeployment of internal staff, onboarding new APS staff, contractors and service delivery partners, and mobilising staff from the broader APS with the support of the Australian Public Service Commission's Workforce Management Taskforce. This effort required a continuous process of training and upskilling as new staff were onboarded, existing staff were retrained, and new policies and payments were introduced.

As part of its recent digital transformation the Agency had transitioned to a single, front-end interface for staff processing of many claims which reduced the need for staff to switch between multiple systems, and simplified processes and workflows. This enabled more rapid upskilling of non-service delivery staff and new starters, simplified training and more efficient processing allowing improved responsiveness.

At the peak of demand, in April 2020, almost 12,000 staff were assisting the Agency to manage its response to COVID-19. This comprised:

- Over 3,400 redeployed Services Australia employees
- Over 1,700 redeployed employees from at least 37 different APS agencies
- Just under 6,800 new employees including over 1,500 non-ongoing and casual employees, 3,100 labour hire employees and 2,100 employees through its service delivery partners.

Telephony services remained a critical part of Services Australia's service offer. By harnessing vendor relationships to rapidly procure ICT equipment, the Agency was able to adapt to the need for staff to work from home. Between March 2020 and April 2023, the Agency deployed over 15,000 'office in a box' kits across Australia where social distancing or other high-risk factors required individuals to work from home. This meant Agency staff were able to continue to take calls, process claims and support customers, regardless of pandemic restrictions. The number of Agency staff working from home peaked on 11 February 2022 at 10,800 due to the spike in COVID-19 cases caused by the Omicron variant. Throughout the pandemic, in most jurisdictions, Agency staff were still able to attend workplaces where necessary due to their status as essential workers.

Between 26 March 2020 and 3 April 2020, the Agency extended its customer servicing hours in 14 service centres, including extended hours on weekdays and opening on a weekend.

Throughout the pandemic, Services Australia worked across government, to ensure a coordinated and effective response across federal and state jurisdictions. During the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic response, the CEO attended meetings of the Secretaries' Board as

an ex-officio member. The Agency also participated in and co-ordinated a number of senior interagency committees to provide a service delivery perspective to the response.

## Safer worker arrangements and customer experience

The Agency also put into place a range of measures to manage customer demand in service centres while meeting social distancing requirements. Service centre waiting rooms were reconfigured to meet social distancing requirements and, on 23 March 2020, service centres implemented a controlled entry approach to limit the number of people in a service centre at any one time.

The Agency aligned its response to the advice provided by Commonwealth, state and territory health agencies. All Agency COVID-19 advice, guides and resources were documented on dedicated intranet pages to provide a single source of truth, accessible to all Agency staff. Services Australia offices were fitted out to support both Agency and broader APS staff throughout COVID-19. A range of health and safety measures were implemented to minimise the risk of staff and customers contracting COVID-19, such as social distancing in all Agency locations, infection control, increased cleaning, the provision of face masks, hand sanitiser and Perspex screens in service centres, and standard operating procedures that addressed confirmed cases and supported staff to work from home.

## Services Australia's digital transformation assisted with its effective response

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Services Australia had been undertaking a significant digital transformation, including long-term projects and programs to accelerate its continued delivery of services to customers. The nature of the pandemic meant that to ensure safety for both staff and customers the Agency focused on delivering government services via digital channels. Digital engagement accelerated as Australians needed to be able to safely access government information and services remotely.

The Agency's digital transformation supported the early response to the pandemic. It enabled the rapid design and implementation of changes to new and existing payments, simplified online claiming, and streamlined processing work for Agency staff. For example, the Agency was able to plan, build, test and deploy the 'intention to claim' feature for the JobSeeker Payment through myGov in 36 hours. This ensured people could start the claim process without calling or visiting a Service Centre. Payments would then be backdated to when the 'intention to claim' was submitted, even if the claim was finalised later.

The New Payments Platform (NPP) is a payment infrastructure developed by the Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) in conjunction with industry, that enables real-time payments to be delivered 24 hours a day, every day of the year. In 2018 the Agency, in collaboration with the RBA developed the capability to use the NPP to deliver immediate emergency and crisis payments in real time. This meant customers facing emergency or crisis situations could receive funds in their bank account immediately. This capability was an important element of the Agency's support of vulnerable people throughout the pandemic.

myGov saw a large uptake at the start of and throughout the pandemic. Customers used the platform to lodge claims online and find information about additional services they may access. While myGov did suffer an initial outage in late March of 2020 due to the unprecedented demand, the Agency incrementally increased its capacity to support concurrent users, and the platform experienced no further issues. By February 2021, myGov had capacity to support up to 500,000 concurrent users, making it the largest authenticated online platform in Australia. Upgrades made to myGov's capacity for concurrent users during the pandemic have been critical to the Agency's management of subsequent disaster

events, such as the 2022 floods where over 290,000 claims were lodged by customers in a single day (7 July 2022). The simplified eligibility requirements for JobSeeker and COVID-19 payments enabled the Agency to process the record volumes of claims and payments, and respond to the legislative and policy changes introduced by government. The Agency was able to use digitally enabled processing technologies for simple and straightforward approvals, which freed up staff time to allow them to focus on more complex claims.

**Collaboration across government jurisdictions**

Prior to the pandemic, the Agency was also developing its new Payment Utility platform, a re-usable capability that could deliver payments on behalf of government, regardless of the agency. This meant that in addition to supporting the Commonwealth response, the Agency was able to deliver COVID-19 support payments on behalf of the ACT and Victorian governments, using Payment Utility. The Agency distributed 4,848 one-off COVID-19 stimulus payments worth $1,212,000 on behalf of the ACT Government in June 2020, and 1,391 relief payments worth $1,037,875, to Victorian public housing tenants on behalf of the Victorian Government in July 2020.

## *2021: Supporting the vaccination roiiout, while responding to new lockdowns*

A number of Australian Government COVID-19 measures providing income support ended in March 2021, including JobKeeper and the Coronavirus Supplement. Additionally, a variety of Australian Government COVID-19 measures and settings were adjusted throughout 2021, including payment eligibility, the cessation of the Coronavirus Supplement, and the gradual reintroduction of mutual obligations for job seekers. This meant Services Australia had to pivot to ensure it was responding to evolving policy requirements.

**Demand for support surged once again**

Victoria went into lockdown on 28 May 2021, and the COVID-19 Disaster Payment was announced on 3 June 2021. It was a lump sum payment for those who had lost work or income as a result of a COVID-19 lockdown. Following the Prime Minister's announcement of the payment, the Agency worked to ensure the payment was available from Tuesday 8 June 2021, for the Victorian lockdown, and all subsequent lockdowns as they were announced.

In less than 4 months, between 1 July and 26 October 2021, Services Australia processed over 5.1 million COVID-related claims alone – more than the full-year total of 3.5 million claims across all social security and welfare payments in the year prior to COVID (2018–19). Policy settings for the COVID-19 Disaster Payment evolved rapidly, and the Agency implemented multiple changes to the payment throughout the year.

Customer demand for digital service delivery further accelerated during this period. Ninety-five per cent of claims for COVID-19 Disaster Payment were lodged online, a process that took most customers 10 minutes. This was a shift from the traditional telephony-based claiming which would take 30–45 minutes and helped deliver payments to customers quickly.

**Re-commencement of pauses to debt raising and recovery**

Services Australia re-commenced pausing social security debt raising and new debt recovery from 4 August 2021 for customers in then-locked down Local Government Areas (LGAs) within NSW and Queensland. Similar pauses were later implemented in lockdown areas in Victoria, the ACT and the Northern Territory. Debt raising for locked down LGAs was lifted on 9 January 2022, with no repayments due until after 1 July 2022.

Although these debt pauses relieved pressure on the Australian population at the time, the work put on hold has led to larger than usual volumes of work on hand. The backlog of potential debts is now older and more complex.

## Services Australia supported the COVID-19 vaccine rollout

At the height of the pandemic, Services Australia developed and implemented a number of deliverables relating to the national COVID-19 vaccination rollout, including ensuring vaccination providers were able to report COVID-19 vaccinations to the Australian Immunisation Register (AIR), and the design and roll-out the COVID-19 Digital Vaccination Certificate. This work enabled the Government's support of citizens during the pandemic, through utilisation of vaccination rate data to inform appropriate health responses, including the reopening of state, territory and international borders, and economic recovery.

Services Australia has experience in designing, building, testing and maintaining technology environments that deliver government services and payments. This capability meant the Agency was able to complete an infrastructure uplift centred around the AIR, originally introduced in 2016, in advance of the national vaccine rollout using cloud-based technology to support increased capacity. The Agency also introduced improvements to the performance and capacity for PRODA (Provider Digital Access), the authentication service used to access AIR. The uplift included increased capacity from 400 to 45,000 concurrent users, and a significant reduction in the processing time taken per request. These improvements facilitated the timely recording of immunisations for individuals by health care providers, and assisted with the large scale vaccination effort. The Agency was also able to deliver the COVID-19 Digital certificate in-house, without needing to engage in a lengthy and expensive procurement or contract variation process with private providers. This improved the agility of the government response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Services Australia worked with a variety of stakeholders including the Department of Health, Australian Digital Health Agency, Digital Transformation Agency, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Department of Home Affairs, and all state and territory governments to enable Australians to obtain and use a free digital form of proof of vaccination.

The Government established Operation COVID Shield, a Taskforce dedicated to ensuring that as many Australians were vaccinated as early as possible. The CEO of Services Australia attended Operation COVID Shield meetings, to ensure that policy changes were able to be rolled out effectively. Services Australia also assisted with COVID Shield activities, providing staff and expertise to help the Department of Health establish their Vaccine Operations Centre.

The Agency stood up an internal Vaccination Certificate Delivery Taskforce, releasing the domestic COVID-19 digital certificate on 5 June 2021, accessible online through myGov, My Health Record and the Express Plus Medicare app. Since its release, over 20 million people downloaded the certificate over 200 million times.[1]

By August 2021, individuals were able to save the certificate to their Google or Apple wallet. As at 10 December 2023, almost 20.8 million people had added the certificate to their digital wallet.

In September 2021, Services Australia enabled functionality for individuals to share their digital certificate with state and territory check-in apps as they went live over the coming months. As at 30 June 2023, over 13.1 million people had linked their certificate to check-in apps.

---

[1] As at 11.59pm, 24 January 2022

In October 2021, the Agency released functionality to allow individuals to access an International COVID-19 Vaccination Certificate. As at 10 December 2023, over 6.3 million people had downloaded their international certificate.

The Agency's support of the digital health response also led to significant demand on the Agency's non-digital channels. In the second half of 2021, the Agency answered 4.8 million calls on health customer telephony lines. This was more than 3 times the number received over the same period in 2020.

**Services Australia provided further support across Government**

In December 2020, Services Australia delivered the COVID-19 Consumer Travel Support Program grants on behalf of the Australian Trade and Investment Commission (Austrade).

Round One of the program provided up to $100,000 to eligible travel agents and tour arrangement service providers to support them in dealing with the economic impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Round Two of the program provided further payments of up to $100,000 to eligible travel agents and tour arrangement services providers who received a payment under Round One.

The Agency granted over 3,800 claims and paid over $105.2 million in Round One and over 2,200 claims and paid over $66.4 million in Round Two.

**COVID-19 Vaccine Claims Scheme**

On 28 June 2021, the Australian Government announced the establishment of indemnity arrangements for COVID-19 vaccinations, to provide assurance and confidence to patients and health professionals during the COVID-19 vaccine rollout.

By August 2021, the Government had confirmed that Services Australia would administer the COVID-19 Vaccine Claims Scheme on behalf of the Department of Health and Aged Care as the responsible policy agency; and on 13 December 2021, the Scheme opened and claiming commenced.

The Scheme provides eligible claimants with an administrative option to seek a similar level of no-fault patient compensation to what would otherwise be available through a personal injury claim through a court process.

The Scheme is able to cover an individual's substantiated losses above $1,000 that have arisen due to moderate to severe adverse reactions to COVID-19 vaccines that have been approved by the Therapeutic Goods Administration and delivered as part of the Australian Government's vaccine program (including AstraZeneca, Pfizer, Moderna and Novavax COVID-19 vaccines).

On 3 April 2023, DHAC updated the Scheme's policy based on advice from the Therapeutic Goods Administration, to include new claimable conditions.

As at 29 November 2023, 3,987 claims had been received. 238 claims have been paid to the value of over $16.9 million.

### *2022: The Omicron strain presents new challenges*

With every state and territory having reached the 80% vaccination milestone by the end of 2021, lockdowns had ended and so had the COVID-19 Disaster payment. However, a new strain of COVID-19 emerged, with significantly increased case numbers.

Prior to the Omicron variant, the Pandemic Leave Disaster Payment (PLDP), which was announced on 3 August 2020, was claimed relatively infrequently compared to other COVID-19 related payments.

By 19 December 2021, Services Australia had received 159,000 claims for PLDP and paid 143,000 individuals a total of $218.6 million. Just over a month later, by 23 January 2022, these numbers had increased to 600,000 claims received, with 443,000 individuals paid a total of $452 million.

This new surge in demand came at the same time as Omicron was impacting the Agency's internal resourcing. Many staff were diagnosed with COVID-19 or required to isolate due to being a close contact.

Services Australia built on lessons learned during previous surges to manage demand. The Agency surged its workforce early. As at 21 January 2022, the Agency had over 3,700 staff mobilised. Services Australia also requested assistance from across the APS through both direct approaches to agencies and through the Australian Public Service Commission. The Agency also made overtime available to staff across the Agency to support the surge efforts.

The Agency also streamlined its Pandemic Leave Disaster Payment (PLDP) claims. From 18 January 2022 these claims were made available online, speeding up processing times. In just under seven months, Services Australia had received approximately 2.6 million PLDP online claims.

The Agency also used Optical Character Recognition technology on 'on hand' claims to enable claim data to be automatically inputted into the Agency's systems. Staff checked that the information had been translated correctly, and then the claim was sent through a Digital Enabled Process for payment.

The Agency implemented the High-Risk Settings Pandemic Payment in October 2022 which was a taxable lump sum payment to help high risk workers during the time they couldn't work and earn an income, because they had tested positive for COVID-19. The High-Risk Settings Pandemic Payment ended on 31 March 2023.

## *2023 and beyond: Services Australia stands ready to support the Government's response to any future national emergencies*

During the COVID-19 pandemic Services Australia increased its capacity to effectively respond to unprecedented levels of demand driven by disaster and emergency events. The Agency had demonstrated its ability to leverage its nationwide footprint, substantial workforce, digital platforms, and relationships with partner agencies to deliver payments and services as determined by the Australian Government.