

Outcome 2

Australians informed about and provided access to consular and passport services in Australia and overseas

OUTPUT 2.1

EFFECTIVENESS

Consular services

Passport services

QUALITY AND QUANTITY

ADMINISTERED ITEMS FOR OUTCOME 2

QUALITY AND QUANTITY



PERFORMANCE INFORMATION FOR OUTCOME 2

Effectiveness indicators—overall achievement of the outcome

Indicators to assist in assessing the success of the department's contribution to the achievement of this outcome are:

- Delivery of comprehensive, responsive, high-quality consular and passport services
- Effectiveness of activities to improve awareness among Australian travellers of potential trouble spots and an understanding of the extent of assistance that the Australian Government can provide
- Responsiveness to international crises or natural disasters to help Australians affected by them.

TABLE 10. FINANCIAL AND STAFFING RESOURCES SUMMARY FOR OUTCOME 2

Australians informed about and provided access to consular and passport services in Australia and overseas

	2004-05 Budget and Supplementary Additional Estimates (\$'000)	Actual 2004-05 (\$'000)	Variation (actual less budget) (\$'000)	Budget 2005-06 (\$'000)
Administered expenses				
Suppliers*	14 742	13 157	(1 585)	0
Emergency advances to Australian travellers**	500	208	(292)	500
Passport and consular refunds under s.28 Special Appropriation	500	412	(88)	500
Total administered expenses	15 742	13 777	(1 965)	1 000
Price of departmental outputs				
Output 2.1—Consular and passport services	149 366	150 224	858	150 231
Total price of departmental outputs	149 366	150 224	858	150 231
Appropriation from government for departmental outputs				
	149 366	150 224	858	149 810
Revenue from other sources	0	0	0	421
Total resourcing for outcome 2 (Price of departmental outputs plus administered expenses)	165 108	164 001	(1 107)	151 231

* Tsunami related expenses.

** The total amount of loans provided under this item by the department in 2004-05 was \$0.229m. These loans are reported as receivables and not expenses as it is expected they will be fully repaid in the future.

	2004-05 Budget and Supplementary Additional Estimates	2004-05 Actual	2005-06 Estimate
Average staffing level (number)*	666	672	670

* Includes overseas locally engaged staff.

OUTPUT 2.1:

Consular and passport services

2.1.1 CONSULAR SERVICES

2.1.2 PASSPORT SERVICES

Overview

The department delivered a range of high-quality consular and passport services to Australians travelling and living overseas and to their families in Australia. We effectively managed the consular and passport implications of, and led whole of government responses to, a significant number of international crises:

- The Indian Ocean tsunami that hit on 26 December 2004 involved us in our most extensive and complex crisis response to date. Although the Bali bombing of 2003 led to greater numbers of Australian casualties, the tsunami required us to confirm the whereabouts and welfare of over 15 000 Australians across six countries, including in locations where there was no Australian consular office.
- Hostage-taking presented a significant new challenge to the department and other agencies. We responded to the kidnapping of an Australian in Iraq in May 2005 by deploying an inter-agency Emergency Response Team (ERT) for six weeks, supported by sustained inter-agency efforts in Canberra and at a large number of overseas posts.
- The bombing of our embassy in Jakarta in September 2004 was another compelling reminder of the difficult international security environment faced by Australians living and working overseas—an environment that continues to pose challenges for the consular service.

These incidents tested the department's crisis management arrangements. Refinements to our systems following these events included the creation of a new crisis management information technology system that can share information between Canberra and remote locations overseas where consular officers are sent to assist Australians. Centrelink call centres were also linked into the new system to ensure a greatly increased capacity to manage inquiries from Australians concerned about mass casualty incidents overseas.

In its second year, the Government's \$9.7 million *smartraveller* travel advice and consular services information campaign continued to promote safe overseas travel. We issued 447 travel advisory updates for 152 countries, providing Australians with up-to-date advice on security and related conditions in major overseas destinations.

We established the Smartraveller Consultative Group, a high-level body chaired at parliamentary secretary level, to enhance cooperation between government agencies and key travel industry representatives on safe travel issues.

In 2004–05, of the 4.7 million Australians who travelled overseas 25 731 required significant consular assistance. A large number of cases attracted strong media interest. The department's efforts to provide information to the media rose by 70 per cent compared to 2003–04.

The department continued to face an increased demand for passports. The number of travel documents issued rose by 16 per cent from 2003–04 to 2004–05. Despite this, the average issue time for a passport decreased from 9.4 days to 5.8 days, a significant improvement and well within the department's advertised ten working day service level. In response to growth in demand, average passport staff numbers across the passports network in Australia increased by 19.2 per cent from 239 to 285.

Arrangements to regionalise passport production, introduced in December 2003, led to greater security and efficiency in issuing passports overseas. During the year, posts issued 6481 emergency passports. The three production centres in London, Washington and Canberra produced 41 756 full validity passports for their respective overseas regions. Of these, 91.6 per cent were returned to the initiating posts within ten working days.

The department drafted the new *Australian Passports Act 2005*, passed by Parliament on 8 February 2005, to replace the *Passports Act 1938*. We developed and implemented supporting policies and procedures to bring the Act into force on 1 July 2005.

The department introduced new arrangements for reporting lost and stolen passports to Interpol and some other countries to curtail possible illegal use of Australian passports overseas. We continued research and development on the use of biometric identifiers in passports with very strong preliminary results.

Passport training was a major focus, with increased attention to regional post training and to staff proceeding on long-term postings. The use of online passport services continued to be well received by the Australian public, with 56 per cent of applicants visiting the website to access information and services. This growth in online services contributed to reductions in costs in other facilities, such as the Australian Passport Information Service call centre. The department made further enhancements to the online service to support the new Passports Act.

Consular services

Australians can now access consular services in 172 locations overseas. The department opened a new embassy in Kuwait and the Minister for Foreign Affairs agreed to the establishment of a new consulate headed by an honorary consul in Phuket, Thailand, which remains an important tourist destination in Asia with increasing business opportunities. Canada agreed to provide consular services to Australians in Algeria under the Consular Sharing Agreement. There are now 23 locations where Canada provides consular services for Australians. Australia, in return, provides similar services for Canadian citizens in 21 locations.

The department looked for additional opportunities to meet the needs of the increasing number of Australians travelling overseas. We concluded a Service Level Agreement with Austrade establishing a comprehensive set of service level standards for the delivery of consular and passport services at Austrade-managed posts. To help deliver consular services, Austrade funded a web-enabled version of the department's consular management information system (CMIS), a tool that will improve Austrade's ability to deliver consular services overseas.

The department completed a review of the Honorary Consul Program to examine the coverage and effectiveness of our honorary consul network. The findings and recommendations are yet to be considered by ministers.

Travel advice: protecting Australians overseas

Against a backdrop of continued strong media and community interest in the department's consular information services, we continued to refine the format and presentation of travel advisories. Travel advisories provide up-to-date, practical information about most destinations to which Australians travel, helping them to make informed decisions about travelling safely. We issued 447 travel advice updates during the year, and the number of destinations covered by travel advisories grew from 144 to 152.

The department continued to give urgent priority to alerting Australians to possible terrorist and other security-related threats that could affect their safety overseas. We liaised closely with the National Threat Assessment Centre (NTAC) to ensure strong linkage between travel advice and NTAC country threat assessments. We worked to ensure that our advice remained credible in the public mind and was not blunted by a perception that risk is overstated. Timeliness and a move from prescriptive to more descriptive language, with detailed explanations of the risks in each country, helped travellers reach a more informed decision on travel to particular destinations. We actively engaged partners in the travel industry to promote our travel advisory service and general safe travel messages.

Now in its second year, the Government's \$9.7million three-year travel advice public information campaign, *smartraveller*, continued to promote safe overseas travel through targeted national television and print advertising, and the *smartraveller* website. Market research confirmed that the Internet continued to be the most popular method of accessing travel advice. The *smartraveller* website recorded 217 000 page-views per week (a 32 per cent increase over the average for the previous year). More than 65 000 clients have email subscriptions to travel advice updates (up from 42 000 last year). The automated *smartraveller* telephone service (1300 139 281), which ensures travel advisories are accessible to Australians without Internet access, registered an average of 2528 calls per month.

The department's 14 different consular information publications continued to generate strong public interest, with 1.5 million printed brochures distributed throughout the year. We continued to promote online access to the brochures, including through the *smartraveller* website. To provide security and events-related information to the record 14 000 Australians who travelled to the Anzac Day commemoration services in Gallipoli in April 2005, the department distributed 15 000 copies of a new *Travelling to Turkey for Anzac Day?* brochure to travellers, travel agencies and tour operators.

The department continued efforts to combat the abuse of children overseas. Reflecting particular concern about the safety and welfare of children placed in child care facilities at hotels in Bali, the department engaged Child Wise (an internationally recognised child protection advocacy NGO) to conduct two training workshops for hotels in Bali on risk minimisation strategies to help prevent child abuse.

The department initiated outreach to representatives of the Australian–Lebanese community and travel agents to raise awareness of potential consular difficulties affecting Australian minors travelling to Lebanon, including forced marriage and child custody issues, as well as military service obligations affecting holders of Australian–Lebanese nationality.

Who reads travel advice?

An increasing number of Australian travellers are reading the department's travel advice:

- Average *smartraveller* website page-views per week increased to 217 000, a 32 per cent increase over 2003–04.
- Subscriptions to the automatic travel advice email update service increased by 55 per cent, with 65 000 travellers now receiving regular updates.

Spikes in the use of the *smartraveller* phone service following specific travel-related events demonstrated increased reliance on this information:

- Immediately following the Indian Ocean tsunami, the service received 3981 calls over six days—six times more than the average.
- The Australian embassy bombing in Jakarta prompted a 583 per cent increase in calls.

The travel industry also showed its support for the *smartraveller* campaign:

- Membership of the Charter for Safe Travel doubled over the course of the year, bringing the total to 2200, or nearly 50 per cent of all Australian travel agents registered with the Travel Compensation Fund.
- Charter members commit to encouraging their customers to access the latest travel advice.
- According to independent research, 95 per cent of travel agents claim to advise their customers to read the department's travel advice.

Responsiveness to consular crises

The Indian Ocean tsunami presented a significant new challenge in both scale and complexity for the department's crisis response systems (see box below). More than 15 000 Australians were reported as missing to the department's consular crisis hotline. Working closely with other agencies, we and several of our overseas missions coordinated relief flights and medical assistance and provided consular assistance to hundreds of Australians stranded by the tsunami. Within a fortnight following the tsunami, we were able to account for 10 500 Australians. Tragically, 26 Australians lost their lives. An unprecedented number of staff was recalled to duty across the department's network to serve either overseas or in Canberra to provide consular services to Australians affected by the crisis (see box below).

The department received over 85 000 calls to its hotline in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami. To improve our hotline capacity, we collaborated effectively with Centrelink call centres. We deployed consular information systems to Centrelink and provided systems training for Centrelink staff. This will ensure increased capacity and a more efficient hotline service in the event of a future significant incident overseas that generates a large volume of consular enquiries in Australia.

The department developed technologies to enable access to key consular management information systems for consular staff deployed in the event of a significant incident in a remote overseas location. We consolidated a close working relationship with the Australian Federal Police and, through it, with state and territory police forces. This helped us locate Australians reported as unaccounted for as a result of crises overseas.



The Secretary, Michael L'Estrange, with representatives of the Tsunami Disaster Response Team receiving a joint citation for their work. Photo: Michael Jensen

The tsunami, the Australian embassy bombing in Jakarta and hostage taking in Iraq provided thorough tests of the department's consular crisis mechanisms. After each event, the department, together with other agencies represented on the Inter-Departmental Emergency Task Force (IDETF), conducted a series of debriefing exercises to identify areas for improvement, including enhancements to communications technologies and systems. These have been implemented.

Emergency Response Teams (ERTs) were despatched twice to Iraq to respond to hostage incidents (the first proving to be a hoax) and to Thailand following the tsunami. In the Iraq hostage cases, in addition to departmental officers, the ERTs included representatives of the Department of Defence and the Australian Federal Police. The Indian Ocean tsunami response team used Australian Federal Police expertise in forensics and disaster victim identification. A medical team and counsellors from Centrelink were also included in that ERT.

In planning for the large numbers of Australians travelling to Athens for the Olympic Games in September 2004, we invested considerable effort to develop contingency plans for that event. That experience, and lessons learned from the tsunami crisis, underpinned contingency planning for the 90th anniversary of Anzac Day in Gallipoli. We deployed our new remote access technology to the Gallipoli peninsula and to Centrelink in time for the commemorations. This provided a useful test for the system.



In advance of Prime Minister Howard's visit to Banda Aceh on 2 February 2005, Elizabeth O'Neill (Counsellor, Public Affairs, Australian embassy Jakarta) (centre) and Andrew Chandler (First Secretary, Defence, Australian embassy Jakarta) (right), and Major Matt Grant (Defence Headquarters Task Force, Banda Aceh) (left), inspect the damage caused by the Indian Ocean tsunami.

Indian Ocean tsunami: the consular response

The Indian Ocean tsunami presented an unprecedented challenge to the department's consular service.

From the early afternoon of 26 December 2004, the department moved quickly to activate our crisis centre and our emergency call unit. Both were fully operational by 6.00 pm Canberra time. The first Inter-Departmental Emergency Task Force (IDETF) meeting, chaired by the department, was held at 9.00 pm that night and brought together senior representatives of all relevant agencies to coordinate whole of government policy and operational responses. The IDETF met a total of 22 times between 26 December 2004 and 14 January 2005.

The consular complexities posed by the tsunami were unique in scale and geographic scope. The department activated a consular response in six countries, including in remote locations. Our hotline took over 85 000 calls, with over 15 000 Australians reported as unaccounted for.

In the immediate aftermath, our diplomatic posts in Thailand, India, Malaysia, Indonesia and Sri Lanka worked with local authorities, hospitals and hotels to account for, and provide assistance to, affected Australians. Temporary offices were established in Phuket and Krabi in Thailand, and in the Maldives. Consular officers and local staff worked tirelessly in the field locating and assisting Australians. We helped Australians with medical treatment and emergency shelter, replaced travel documents and facilitated departures from affected areas. We worked closely with Virgin Blue and Qantas to ensure relief flights were available to as many Australians as possible who wanted to leave. Staff worked closely with the Australian Federal Police to put victim identification and support arrangements in place and assisted the repatriation of the remains of Australians killed. Forty additional staff were deployed to the region to supplement consular staff on the ground.

The department had teams in Canberra working around the clock coordinating with teams on the ground to confirm the safety of Australians and identify those unaccounted for, and to support and inform next of kin of developments. Over 300 staff, 150 of whom voluntarily returned from leave, worked on the tsunami response in Canberra.

Since the tsunami, the department has strengthened its crisis management systems to deal more efficiently with such large-scale events. The hotline has been expanded through an agreement with Centrelink call centres. We have developed a remote access consular emergency database that can be deployed in remote locations overseas and, through other systems, to Centrelink.

Assisting Australians overseas

The department assisted 25 731 Australians in difficulty in over 152 countries. This was significantly more than the previous year due to the high number of welfare and whereabouts enquiries for Australians possibly affected by the Indian Ocean tsunami. We managed greater numbers of serious category consular cases, including medical evacuations, deaths, welfare, whereabouts and repatriations. The department also dealt with additional cases of arrests of Australians overseas, continuing the trend of recent years.

Consular officers dealt with many highly complex cases in isolated areas or countries with unique cultural, health and legal systems, often unfamiliar to Australians. The abandonment of a 12-year old child, a fisherman lost at sea in a small dinghy and a tourist attacked by a hippopotamus in an isolated game park were examples of the diversity of cases the department managed.

A number of high-profile cases and issues—including Australians detained for drug trafficking offences (some facing the death penalty), search and rescue operations, and kidnappings—contributed to misconceptions about what the consular service can deliver. Through targeted public campaigns in the media and on the Internet, the department promoted realistic expectations about the level of assistance that can be provided to Australian overseas travellers, and to highlight the risks they face and their responsibility to minimise and avoid exposure to risks.

The department continued its constructive cooperation with consular partner governments (Canada, New Zealand, the United States and the United Kingdom) to identify common problems and share solutions, with a strong focus this year on the tsunami response. The Consular Sharing Agreement with Canada again proved its usefulness, with Canadian consular officials assisting a number of Australians overseas where we are not represented, for example in the Caribbean region during the devastating Hurricane Ivan. We provided similar assistance for Canadians in other locations.

To improve service delivery to consular clients, the department introduced a new complaints handling mechanism that enabled consular clients to provide feedback on our services. Since its introduction on 1 December 2004, only 47 of the 372 items of correspondence recorded gave negative feedback. We investigated all complaints and, where warranted, took corrective action.

The demand for notarial services grew again this year, representing a 54 per cent increase over the past four years. Given the increase, we undertook a review of notarial services. Recommendations on how to deal with the resource implications are being considered by the department's Senior Executive.

The department delivered a wide range of services on behalf of other government agencies to Australians either resident or visiting overseas. For example, our missions overseas provided voting services for the 2004 federal election. Overseas voting centres issued a total of 69 000 ballot papers. The largest voting centre for the federal election again was Australia House in London, which issued over 20 000 ballot papers. Working with the Australian Electoral Commission, the department streamlined the electronic despatch of ballot material and ensured Australians overseas were well informed about the election through our website and the issue of a special consular bulletin.

Iraq hostage: response to the kidnapping of Douglas Wood

On 15 June 2005, 63-year old Australian engineer Douglas Wood was rescued by Iraqi forces after being held captive in Iraq for 47 days. Mr Wood's safe release followed exhaustive efforts by the Government—in Australia, Iraq and other countries—by Mr Wood's family, and by Muslim community leaders.

Within two hours of learning of Mr Wood's kidnapping, the department activated its Crisis Centre and convened the first of 54 Inter-Departmental Emergency Task Force meetings. An Emergency Response Team (ERT), headed by Nick Warner, a departmental Deputy Secretary, was despatched to Baghdad within 12 hours. The team included personnel from the department, the Australian Federal Police and the Department of Defence.

The department's response to the kidnapping followed our established crisis management response procedures. It also drew on a specific hostage crisis strategy developed last year. This framework proved to be robust, allowing the Government to respond quickly to the specific circumstances of Mr Wood's kidnapping.

During Mr Wood's captivity, consular officials, together with the department's senior staff counsellor and AFP personnel, were in daily contact with his family, providing support, assistance and the latest information from Iraq on the case. The department worked closely with the family on a public information strategy emphasising Mr Wood's family relationships and responsibilities, and his poor health. This message was disseminated widely in Iraq through the print and visual media and the Internet.

Following the rescue, the ERT implemented a staged repatriation strategy that ensured Mr Wood received medical and psychological assistance and facilitated a quick reunion with his family. Mr Wood and his family have since expressed their strong appreciation for the efforts of the department and other government agencies.

TABLE 11. CONSULAR SERVICES PROVIDED TO AUSTRALIAN TRAVELLERS

	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05
Australian travellers	3 716 790	3 508 200	3 429 960	4 080 300	4 745 540 ¹
Hospitalised Australians given general welfare and guidance	766	722	864	666	638
Australians evacuated to another location for medical purposes	138	116	203	81	167
Next of kin guided or assisted with disposal of remains in relation to overseas deaths	547	639	681	547	642
Australians having difficulty arranging their own return to Australia given guidance and assistance	71	81	109	66	1599
Inquiries made about Australians overseas who could not be contacted by their next of kin	1 712	1 838	5 767	711	16 545 ²
Australians arrested overseas	568	649	649	728	736
Australians in prison overseas (as at 30 June)	208	180	184	215	166
Australians in financial difficulty who were lent public funds to cover immediate needs (travellers' emergency loans)	738	739	610	454	395
Australians given general welfare and guidance ³	16 975 ⁴	19 914 ⁴	10 129	9 478	6 283
Total number of cases involving Australians in difficulty	21 723	24 158	19 196	12 946	25 731
Notarial acts ⁵	67 319	74 932	73 514	87 545	100 851
Total number of Australians provided with consular assistance	89 042	99 090	92 710	100 491	126 582

1 This figure draws on ABS data and includes permanent departures, long-term departures and short-term departures of Australian residents.

2 Whereabouts figure includes tsunami-related inquiries (15 178).

3 Includes the following sub-categories: assaults (135), theft (4619), welfare of children (256) and other serious welfare matters (1273).

4 Includes minor non-case inquiries which in subsequent years have been recorded separately under quantity information.

5 These statistics include notarial acts performed by overseas posts, Canberra and state and territory offices in Australia.

Passport services

Demand for Australian travel documents grew significantly during the year with 1 260 831 documents issued compared to 1 086 366 during the previous year, reflecting the strong, ongoing interest of Australians in overseas travel. The continued strong performance of the Australian dollar and competition within the travel industry on airfares appear to have contributed to this trend.

The number of passports reported as lost or stolen by Australians increased to 37 616, up from 33 954. The department has sought to address this trend through tighter controls on the replacement of lost and stolen documents under the new Passports Act. As a result of the department's concerted efforts, in conjunction with Australia Post, the number of passports reported as missing in the mail was significantly reduced to 129, down from 498 last year.

The department re-appointed Australia Post as its agent to conduct passport interviews for a further five years, ensuring Australians continue to have ready access to passport services. Interviews conducted by Australia Post agencies over the year increased slightly to 85.4 per cent of all applications lodged in Australia.

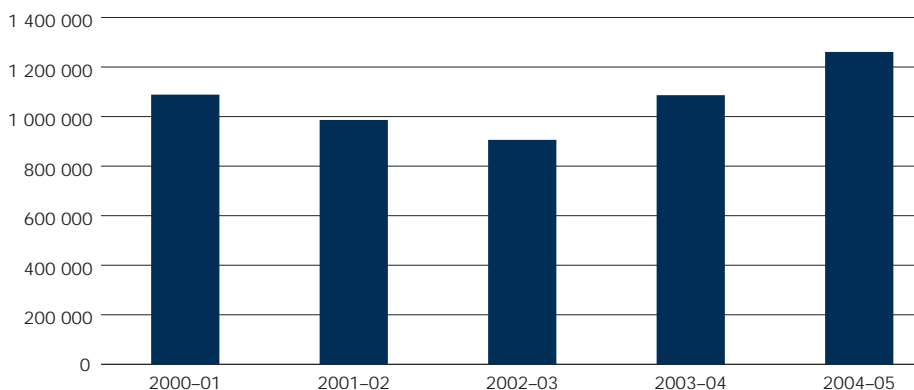
The use of the department's online passport services increased significantly: 179 403 applications were completed online (82 504 in 2003–04); 57 877 applicants viewed online the status of their application in the production process; 372 327 applicants were advised by email that their passport was ready (186 032 in 2003–04). The department selected a service provider to implement a content



The Secretary, Michael L'Estrange, with representatives of the M-series Passport team recognised for producing a world class, highly secure travel document. Photo: Michael Jensen

management system to improve online passport services. This initiative is scheduled for completion by September 2005. The department let a tender for the provision of an appointment system to manage attendance at interviews in passport offices. The new arrangements, to be implemented in early 2006, will allow passport applicants to book ahead for interview, reducing waiting times for applicants and improving staff time management.

FIGURE 14. TRAVEL DOCUMENTS ISSUED



The Australian Passport Information Service (APIS) call centre, operated by Centrelink on the department's behalf, provided advice and assistance on all passport matters to the public on a seven-days-a-week basis. APIS handled 1 303 822 calls (a decrease of 12.9 per cent due to growth in use of the online services). The APIS network expanded in August 2004 to receive passport calls from Australians resident in New Zealand and registered 6980 calls.

Passport technology

The department developed a biometric identifier for Australian passports, working closely with other Australian Government agencies, international organisations and foreign governments. A trial of the electronic passport (ePassport), incorporating a contact-less chip that stores an electronic copy of the information on the data page of the passport, began in May 2005 (see box below). Over 2400 ePassports were issued for this trial. Provided the outcome of the trial is successful, the Australian ePassport is scheduled to enter into full production in October 2005.

Passport security

The department established a new Passport Fraud Section in June 2004 as part of our strategy to enhance the security of the passport issuing system. We worked closely with other agencies as a member of the Commonwealth Reference Group on Identity Security to develop a national approach to identity protection and verification. Memorandums of understanding were signed with New Zealand, the United States and Interpol to enable the exchange of lost and stolen passport information to increase our capacity to detect and prevent the misuse of those documents. A total of 301 passport fraud cases were detected.

Passports client service charter

The department revised the Passports Client Service Charter to incorporate changes to reflect the *Australian Passports Act 2005* and to state more clearly our service level commitments.

Client survey gives thumbs up to passport service delivery

An external client satisfaction survey conducted in early 2005 indicated that clients considered the department's delivery of passport services to be of a high standard, with some areas showing substantial improvements since the previous survey conducted in 2003.

- 87 per cent rated passport services as good to very good
- 11 per cent believed the services were satisfactory
- 97 per cent thought a ten working days turnaround was a reasonable standard
- 31 per cent went to the website for information on how to apply for a passport (compared to 7 per cent in 2003)
- 30 per cent of new passport applicants downloaded the application form from the website
- 60 per cent of those renewing their passport used the website
- 89 per cent rated the interview process as good to very good
- 93 per cent were happy with the method used to deliver passports
- 87 per cent rated the quality of the passport as good to very good (compared to 81 per cent in 2003)
- 89 per cent indicated they approved of the use of biometric technology.

New Passport Act

The department coordinated the drafting and approval of the *Australian Passports Act 2005*, which came into force on 1 July 2005. The new Act, which replaced the *Passports Act 1938*, strengthens the capacity and integrity of Australia's passport system. It includes increased penalties for breaches of the Act and stricter procedures for dealing with lost or stolen passports, including additional fees to replace such travel documents.

Under the new Act, law enforcement, border control and counter-terrorism authorities are supported by clearer powers for the minister to refuse or cancel a passport in connection with serious offences. The new Act regulates the use of emerging technologies, such as biometrics, which will better protect passports against misuse.

ePassport—preventing identity theft

The department's ePassport project aims to protect Australia and the identities of Australian passport holders by making sure the person who uses the passport is the person it was issued to.

The ePassport project involves the adoption of biometric passport technology to improve identity verification processes and to reduce identity-related fraud through the use of facial recognition technology.

A three-year biometric passport research and development project has proven that facial recognition technology works and that inter-operability with border control systems can be achieved at national and international levels.

Australia has already mass produced ePassports using equipment designed specially for this purpose. Personalisation facilities have been established and data has been written to, and read from, the microchips embedded in the centre of these documents.

The Australian ePassport has been extensively tested and is currently being used by about 2400 Qantas staff. A live trial involving Qantas, United Airlines and Air New Zealand air crew is under way at Los Angeles and Sydney airports.

If this testing is successful, Australia's ePassport will be rolled out to all new and replacement Australian passport applicants from October 2005. The ePassport will ensure that Australian citizens have a world class passport that provides an unprecedented level of security for the bearer's identity and protection against fraudulent use.

Output 2.1 Quality and quantity information

2.1.1 Consular services

Quality indicators

- Satisfaction of the public and travel industry with consular services
- Extent to which highly developed crisis management procedures are in place and tested
- Client satisfaction with the suitability and effectiveness of contingency plans at overseas posts
- Response time to consular issues

Quantity indicators

- Number of Australians assisted overseas, including the number of public inquiries handled, notarial acts performed and travel advisories issued
- Number of unexpected events or crises handled by the department, number of associated Departmental Emergency Task Force and Inter-Departmental Emergency Task Force meetings held, and the duration of Crisis Centre operations

Satisfaction of the public and the travel industry

The department monitored public feedback on our travel advice, including through independent research conducted as part of the *smartraveller* initiative. This research confirmed that the *smartraveller* campaign and the cooperative relationships we developed with the travel industry are motivating increasing numbers of Australians to access our travel advice before they depart Australia. The research conducted in 2004–05 indicated that:

- 95 per cent of travel agents are encouraging their customers to access the department's travel advice
- more than 70 per cent of the general community intend to access the department's travel advice before they next travel overseas
- the percentage of departing travellers who had personally accessed the *smartraveller* website increased from 25 to 32 per cent over the course of the year
- the majority of departing travellers who had used the travel advice were happy with the amount of the information it contained, with the safety and security information section considered to be the most useful.

In the five months from July to November 2004, we received 131 letters and emails from the public on consular issues. Eighty-four were general inquiries, 30 commented positively on services provided for particular consular cases and on our information service, and 17 expressed dissatisfaction about elements of the department's service.

To improve our level of service, in December 2004 we introduced a formal complaints mechanism to capture feedback on consular services. Since then, the department received 138 items of correspondence commenting positively on the consular service and a further 187 containing general inquiries. Forty-seven letters and emails provided negative feedback.

The bulk of complaints concerned the timeliness of updates to the website, while some users expressed difficulty with cancelling subscriptions to the department's email alert service. A small number of users reported difficulty accessing the *smartraveller* online registration service. The remaining items of negative correspondence expressed concern about response times for passport processing, staff attitudes and service received, the accuracy of information contained in brochures and the reliability of automated telephone services.

Of the annual total, 64 items of correspondence expressed dissatisfaction, with over 50 per cent of these relating to the department's travel advice. This compares with 168 items of positive correspondence, most of which concerned service delivery. In all instances, we responded to complaints after investigating the concerns and, where warranted, took corrective action.

The department consolidated relations with the travel industry through initiatives such as the Smartraveller Consultative Group (SCG) and the *Charter for Safe Travel*, aimed at promoting awareness and use of travel advisories.

The SCG held its inaugural meeting in November 2004. Following SCG consultations, two key airline reservation system providers agreed to include hyperlinks to the *smartraveller* website in reservation software used by travel agents. We secured agreement from travel insurance providers and travel agents to highlight key travel advice and consular service messages in their publicity material.

The department encouraged travel industry representatives to join the *Charter for Safe Travel*, with membership of the Charter doubling to 2200 in the past year. As a result, nearly 50 per cent of the travel industry organisations registered with the Travel Compensation Fund (the national licensing and regulatory body for travel agents) have committed to working with the department to promote safe travel. We will work to increase this number.

Recognising the importance of the travel industry in communicating our messages to the travelling public, the department participated in 32 travel industry expos, conferences and seminars across Australia (compared to 11 similar events in 2003–04) to promote travel advice and consular services. We received overwhelmingly positive feedback from event organisers and the public.

Crisis management procedures in place and tested

The department's crisis centre was activated for the following incidents during 2004–05:

- Defence training in July 2004 for five days
- Jakarta bombing in September 2004 for five days with two Inter-Departmental Emergency Taskforce (IDETF) meetings
- purported Iraq hostage incident in September 2004 for 12 days with 11 IDETF meetings
- tsunami crisis in December 2004 for 20 days with 22 IDETF meetings
- Iraq hostage incident in May 2005 for 47 days with 54 IDETF meetings
- Cambodia hostage in June 2005 for one day with one IDETF meeting.

The department responded to a number of major consular events including:

- a suicide bombing in Sri Lanka—July 2004
- a plane crash in Papua New Guinea—July 2004
- a train crash in Turkey—July 2004
- a yacht sinking in Noumea—July 2004
- a plane crash in Russia—August 2004
- a bus crash south of Salzburg, Austria—August 2004
- a bus crash in Los Angeles, USA—September 2004
- the unauthorised landing of a private plane in Bougainville—September 2004
- hurricane Ivan in Cayman Islands—September 2004
- a hostage situation in Iraq—September 2004
- explosions in Egypt—October 2004
- a bus crash in Cairo, Egypt—October 2004
- a hotel fire in Cairo, Egypt—October 2004
- civil unrest and riots in the Ivory Coast—November 2004
- a plane crash in Java, Indonesia—November 2004
- an earthquake in East Timor—November 2004
- seizure of a bus in Athens, Greece—December 2004
- petrol station explosions in Madrid, Spain—December 2004
- the Indian Ocean tsunami—December 2004
- a train crash in Bangkok, Thailand—January 2005
- civil unrest in Nepal—February 2005
- a car bomb in Beirut, Lebanon—February 2005
- a car crash in Mexico City, Mexico—February 2005
- a ferry sinking in Thailand—February 2005
- an earthquake in Nias, Indonesia—March 2005
- a train crash in Tokyo, Japan—April 2005

- a sinking vessel off the coast of Nias, Indonesia—April 2005
- a hostage situation in Iraq—May 2005
- a hostage situation in Cambodia—June 2005
- civil unrest in Bolivia—June 2005.

Suitability and effectiveness of contingency plans at overseas posts

The department evaluated 82 contingency plans held by our overseas missions and secured Austrade's agreement to participate in our contingency plan program for its posts.

The department developed event-specific contingency plans for three events where Australians were expected to gather in numbers: the Athens Olympics; the Aichi Expo in Japan; and Anzac Day commemorations in Turkey.

Building on work by the Department of Health and Ageing, we developed a generic contingency plan, to be rolled out soon, for posts in South-East Asia to respond to any outbreak of avian flu.

Client satisfaction with plans was consistently high:

- Contingency plans developed for both the Aichi Expo and Anzac Day were well received by other agencies involved in the planning.
- We received positive feedback from the Australian Olympic Committee for our joint work on consular contingency planning for the Athens Olympics.

Response time to consular issues

The department operates a 24-hour Consular Emergency Centre to respond to the consular needs of Australians overseas and as a point of advice on consular issues for Australian diplomatic and consular missions. To supplement this standing after-hours arrangement, we introduced an after-hours Watch Office with responsibility for monitoring international developments, including those likely to affect Australians, and for providing timely advice on passport issues to clients.

The department's significant consular workload, including in response to the attack on the Australian embassy in Jakarta, hostage taking in Iraq and the Indian Ocean tsunami, was demonstrated by the number of days of operation of our crisis centre and the number of IDETF meetings we convened and serviced (see table below).

Quantity information for output 2.1: consular services

Indicator	2004-05	2003-04
Number of Australians assisted overseas:		
Consular cases ¹	25 731	12 946
Public inquiries ²	355 490	363 952
Number of inquiries in response to the Indian Ocean tsunami (approx.) ³	85 000	
Notarial acts performed ⁴	100 851	87 545
Travel advice notices issued	447	527
Number of unexpected events or crises handled by the department	33	26
Number of associated Departmental Emergency Task Force and Inter-departmental Emergency Task Force meetings held	90	6
Duration of Crisis Centre operations	90 days	5 days

1 These statistics refer to inquiries about actual cases at posts and do not include general inquiries on non-case-related consular matters (eg travel advice). These are reported under public inquiries. The figure for 2004-05 includes 15 153 cases related to our response to the Indian Ocean tsunami.

2 Public inquiries include inquiries on non-case related matters made at overseas posts and through the 1300 and 1800 call numbers in Australia. The 2004-05 figure does not include calls received in response to the Indian Ocean tsunami reported below.

3 In the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami the department received over 85 000 inquiries related to locating and assisting Australians.

4 These figures include notarial acts performed at overseas posts, in Canberra and in state and territory offices.

2.1.2 Passport services

Quality indicators

- Satisfaction of the public and travel industry with passport services
- Turnaround time for passport issue, including urgent issues

Quantity indicators

- Number of passport inquiries handled by the Australian Passport Information Service
- Number of travel documents issued, including urgent issues

Satisfaction of the public and the travel industry

An external customer satisfaction survey commissioned in early 2005 found that 98 per cent of passport applicants were satisfied with the level of service they received. The survey also indicated that 97 per cent of applicants considered that ten working days was a reasonable period to wait for a passport. Almost two-thirds of those interviewed reported accessing passport information or services online.

The department conducted an extensive public information campaign both in Australia and overseas advising the travelling public of changes resulting from the new Passports Act effective from 1 July 2005. The campaign included written advice to the Australian Federation of Travel Agents and other travel industry representatives in Australia, print media advertisements, and television advertisements on ABC Asia Pacific. New passports information was incorporated in consular travel advices.

The priority processing service continued to be popular, with 177 860 applicants paying a fee to ensure their passports were issued within 48 hours. This compares to 165 549 applicants last year.

Turnaround time for passport issue

Passport demand rose by 16 per cent over the previous year, placing considerable pressure on passport offices to meet service commitments. Nevertheless, 92.4 per cent of normal applications were processed within the ten working days service commitment, achieving an average turnaround time of 5.8 days. Of those who paid the priority processing fee, 97.9 per cent received their travel document within 48 hours. Fees were refunded to only 107 applicants because the 48-hour turnaround time was not met. A further 682 applicants had their fees refunded on compassionate grounds.

Quantity information for output 2.1: passport services

Indicator	2004-05	2003-04
Number of passport inquiries handled by the Australian Passport Information Service ¹	1 303 822	1 496 907
Number of travel documents issued, including urgent issues ²	1 260 831	1 086 366

1 The decrease in the number of inquiries handled by the Australian Passport Information Service reflects increased use by applicants of the Passports website.

2 Travel documents include passports, documents of identity, certificates of identity and convention travel documents.

Administered items for Outcome 2

Travellers' emergency loans

Quality indicator

- Travellers emergency loans granted to Australian travellers in accordance with the guidelines laid down in the Consular Instructions

Quantity indicator

- Number of Australian travellers assisted by emergency loans
- Success of debt recovery activities

During 2004–05, the department granted 387 travellers emergency loans in accordance with the guidelines in our consular handbook, including loans made through the Prisoner Loans Scheme to 22 Australians imprisoned overseas. This compared to 454 loans granted in 2003–04 and 610 loans granted in 2002–03. The total value of the loans we issued was \$228 882.

We issued fewer loans than in previous years due, in part, to Australians being better prepared—for example, by having insurance—and by continued rigorous analysis of client needs.

Decisions to issue emergency loans are made on a case-by-case basis, and only when it has been established that concern for a person's welfare warrants such assistance and that the person has no alternative means to access funds, including through family members in Australia.

In 2004–05, Australians issued with travellers emergency loans repaid a total of \$59 082, compared to \$76 333 in 2003–04. We issue emergency loans according to a traveller's need and not on their ability to repay. This affects the success of debt recovery efforts. The higher proportion of loans for repatriation, which are by nature more expensive than straightforward travellers emergency loans, also impacted on the sum of money we were able to recover. We used many means to encourage the repayment of loans, including by making a person's eligibility for a new passport subject to repayment of the loan.

Quantity information

Indicator	2004–05	2003–04
Number of Australian travellers assisted by emergency loans	387	454
Success of debt recovery activities	\$59 082	\$76 333

Tsunami financial assistance

Quality indicator

- Effective and immediate assistance for disaster victim identification and repatriation of Australian remains and personal effects

Quantity indicator

- Number of Australian victims identified

In the wake of the Boxing Day 2004 tsunami, an amount of \$14.742 million was provided to the department in Administered Appropriations under Outcome 2 in the *Portfolio Supplementary Additional Estimates Statements (PSAES) 2004–05* for tsunami financial assistance. An amount of \$173 000 was provided for financial assistance to affected Australians and \$14.569 million was provided for the disaster victim identification process and the repatriation of the remains of Australian citizens and their personal effects. Financial assistance provided to Australians in tsunami-affected areas is treated as ex gratia.

The department engaged the services of Kenyon International, a disaster management company, to support the efforts of the Australian Federal Police (AFP) disaster victim identification (DVI) team on the ground in Phuket, Thailand and to arrange the repatriation of the remains of Australian victims.

Given the scale of disaster, including the fact that 15 000 Australians were initially reported as being present in tsunami-affected areas, the department needed to urgently establish a process to identify possible Australian victims. Because the remains of most Australian victims could not be distinguished from the remains of over 3800 victims, the department underwrote the overall logistical support provided by Kenyon International for the DVI process until 30 June 2005.

Of the over 3800 remains of victims unaccounted for following the tsunami, the formal identification process for 26 Australians has been completed and their remains, according to the wishes of their families, returned to Australia.

As at 30 June 2005 a total of 2000 victims' remains had been identified through the DVI process, leaving around 1800 victims' remains still awaiting identification. The DVI process is unlikely to be completed before the end of 2005. While Australia's funding for Kenyon's services ceased on 30 June 2005, the Australian Government remains engaged in the process through the provision of support by the AFP.

Given the high proportion of foreign nationals who were victims of the tsunami, a number of foreign governments have already contributed to the costs of Kenyon International's services and a number of others have agreed to contribute. The department has continued to liaise with foreign governments to seek contributions to recover the costs of the disaster victim identification process relating to the remains of victims of other foreign countries.

Accounts for Kenyon International's services from 26 December 2004 until 25 March 2005 amounted to \$9 778 739.94. Accounts for services provided in the period since 25 March 2005 are yet to be finalised.

Following the tsunami we issued \$164 107 in emergency financial assistance to 92 Australians.

Quantity information

Indicator	2004-05
Number of Australian victims of the tsunami identified	26



Consul-General John Olsen addressing guests at a trade and investment seminar during Australia Week in Los Angeles, held from 15 to 23 January 2005.

Australian High Commissioner to Ghana Jon Richardson cuts the first sod for work to begin on the construction of a kitchen for the Baptist School Complex and Orphanage at Trotor, watched by Rev. Victor Ofori, head of the school. The school received support under the department's Direct Aid Program. Photo: Andy Somers

