



**Australian Government**

**Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade**



# **APO REGULATOR PERFORMANCE SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT 2020-21 FINANCIAL YEAR**

December 2021

# APO REGULATOR PERFORMANCE

## SELF-ASSESSMENT FOR THE 2020-21 FINANCIAL YEAR

### INTRODUCTION

The Australian Passport Office (APO) is a division of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) that issues Australian travel documents under a framework of legislation, policy and administration. Consistent with the requirements of the Australian Government's *Regulator Performance Framework*<sup>1</sup>, this report sets out the results of the APO's self-assessment of its performance during the 2020-21 financial year (the 'review period').

The Framework includes six Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) against which all regulators must assess their performance. For each of these KPIs, APO has assessed its performance in relation to 1-2 standard annual metrics.

APO is not a regulator of business entities. However, it does require Australian citizens to provide information and documentation, required by legislation, to action passport applications. It also mandates the way in which passport applications can be lodged, and how and when passports may be delivered to, or collected by, its customers. APO continually reviews what it requires from its customers, with a view to streamlining its processes while still meeting legislative requirements and maintaining the integrity of Australia's passports.

<sup>1</sup> Accessible at: [www.cuttingredtape.gov.au](http://www.cuttingredtape.gov.au)

## KPI 1: REGULATORS DO NOT UNNECESSARILY IMPEDE THE EFFICIENT OPERATION OF REGULATED ENTITIES

*Metric: Measures taken to improve and refine the APO's regulatory footprint.*

During the review period, APO continued to analyse and review its business practices to improve customer experience.

APO pursued a number of measures to reduce the regulatory burden, particularly in response to COVID-19. It engaged closely with individual Australian missions overseas to help tailor their passport services to the pandemic's local impacts. For example, APO provided support and advice to the Australian High Commission in London to manage changes to its passport services in April 2021, in line with the United Kingdom's transition out of its extended national lockdown.

Where COVID-19 restrictions prevented Australians from applying for passports in the usual way, APO adjusted its business processes to address the unique challenges posed, including for example through redirecting applications to Australia for processing.

Separate to its COVID-19 responses, APO introduced other measures to improve its customer service. For example, when a person applies for a passport overseas, it now accepts a citizenship confirmation letter, instead of a citizenship certificate. This change means it can now process passport applications sooner.

APO introduced replacement passports for children at a reduced fee and without requiring additional evidence in relation to parental consent. This change is useful for children who travel frequently and fill visa pages more often than normal.

*Metric: APO performance in meeting targets for processing passport applications once all required information has been submitted (10-day turnaround for ordinary applications and 2-day turnaround for priority-processed passport applications) to ensure clients receive their passports in a timely and reliable manner.*

Passport demand was affected significantly by COVID-19 and remained low throughout 2020-21. APO issued 603,464 passports in 2020-21, which was 65 per cent less than last year. For most of the year, application rates averaged around 20 per cent of pre-pandemic expectations. Demand increased in March and April 2021, coinciding with key events including the commencement of Australia's vaccination program, opening of quarantine-free Trans-Tasman travel and the rollout of a passport renewal reminder system. However, from May to June 2021, passport demand again softened.

APO met all of its passport service standards during the review period. It processed 98 per cent of passports within 10 business days and 99 per cent of priority passports within two business days.



## KPI 2: COMMUNICATION WITH REGULATED ENTITIES IS CLEAR, TARGETED AND EFFECTIVE

## KPI 5: REGULATORS ARE OPEN AND TRANSPARENT IN THEIR DEALINGS WITH REGULATED ENTITIES

*Metric: APO public communications material is clear, current and responsive to client needs.*

With the pandemic posing an added challenge for some customers in submitting paper applications both domestically and overseas, a growing number of Australians turned to APO's online service as a quick and convenient alternative. The proportion of clients using online passport applications exceeded APO's target of 60 per cent, increasing from 70 per cent in 2019–20 to 82 per cent in 2020–21. APO also made significant improvements to the service's accessibility online, especially for customers applying on mobile devices.

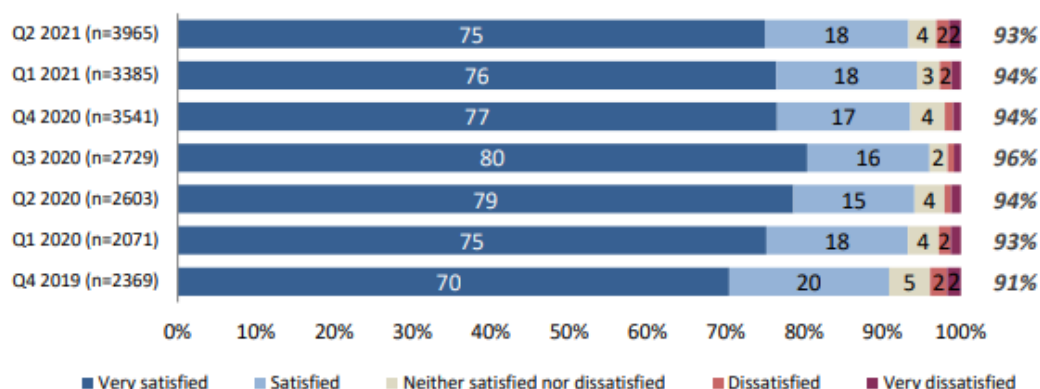
In January 2021, APO launched a new automated SMS/email reminder service for existing customers whose passports have either expired or are close to expiring. This was in response to customer feedback received by APO over a number of years, which consistently recommended it introduce a passport renewal reminder service. Given most passports are valid for ten years, many Australians are not normally aware that their passport is about to expire, or has already expired, without a reminder. While it was not possible for most Australians to travel during the self-assessment period due to COVID-19 restrictions, the reminders were also intended to help customers to be 'travel ready' for when borders reopen.

Survey results compiled by ORIMA Research indicated high levels of satisfaction with APO's website. Around nine in ten respondents had used the site. Between 92 and 93 per cent of these rated the site either 'good' or 'excellent' for its look and feel, the helpfulness of its information, and the ease of navigation for the first quarter of 2021. This is further supported by figures in the second quarter of 2021.

*Metric: Client feedback, as measured by the Australian Passport Office Client Satisfaction Survey, shows a satisfactory experience with communication from the APO and its agents.*

APO places a high priority on customer satisfaction with its passport services. To ensure rigorous performance measurement, APO continued its quarterly independent surveys of customer satisfaction conducted by ORIMA Research. Overall, ORIMA's quarterly survey found that 94 per cent of respondents in the first quarter of 2021 and 93% in the second quarter of 2021 rated APO's passport services, as satisfactory or very satisfactory, exceeding its target of 85 per cent.

**Figure 1: Overall satisfaction**  
(Base: All respondents)

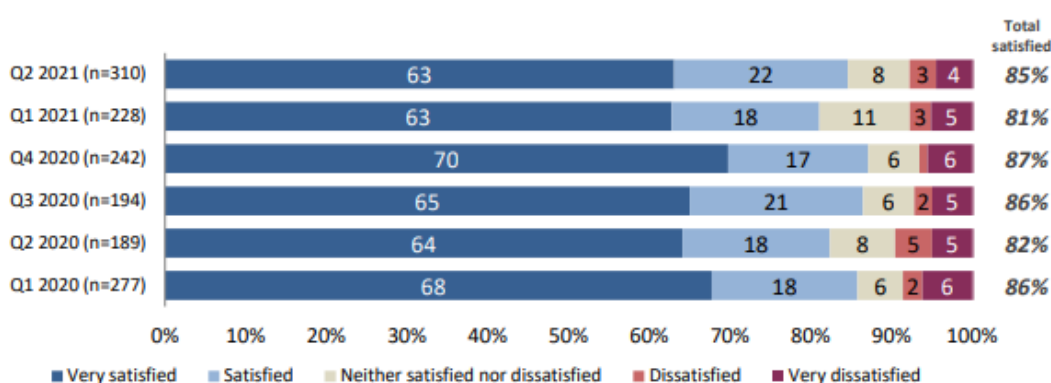


### Customer satisfaction with the Australian Passport Information Service (APIS)

In April 2020, in response to staff redeployments to assist Australia's response to COVID-19, APO absorbed the functions of the Australian Passport Information Service (APIS).

The ORIMA Research's quarterly customer satisfaction survey for APO monitors overall satisfaction with APIS. For the second quarter of 2021, satisfaction among those who telephoned APIS was 85 per cent, up from 82 per cent for the same period in 2020.

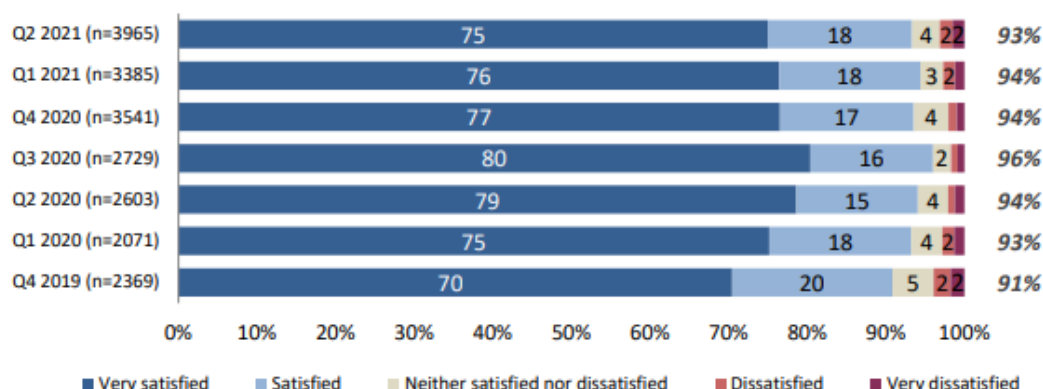
**Figure 9: Satisfaction with APIS service**  
(Base: Respondents that had called APIS)



### APO Customer Satisfaction Survey

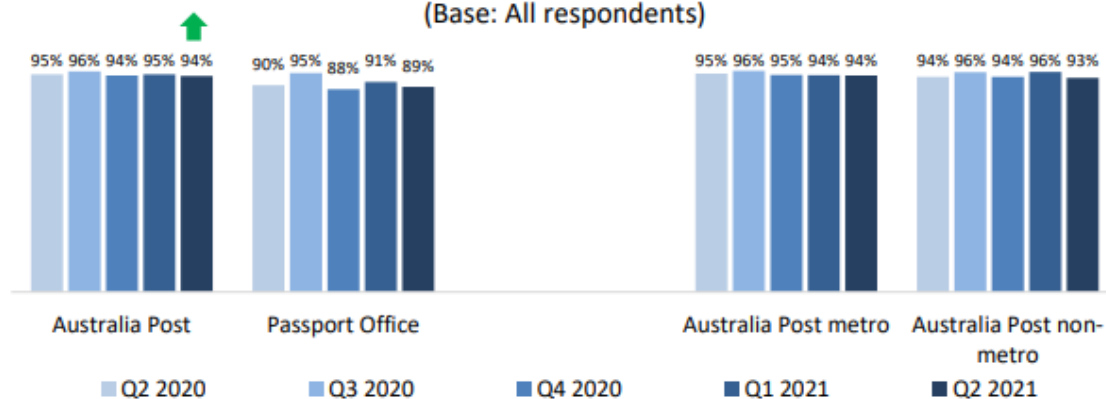
ORIMA Research's surveys measure satisfaction with services provided by the APO, and its agents in Australia Post. Overall satisfaction with the passport application experience in the second quarter of 2021 remained high at 93 per cent, slightly lower than the 2020 second quarter result of 94 per cent.

**Figure 1: Overall satisfaction**  
(Base: All respondents)



ORIMA's quarterly survey results for the second quarter of 2021 indicate overall high satisfaction levels for customers who lodged their application at an Australia Post outlet (94 per cent) and those who lodged at a passport office (89 per cent).

**Figure 2: Overall satisfaction by Place of Lodgement**  
(Base: All respondents)



Q2 2021 bases: Australia Post n=3,659, Passport Office n=306

### KPI 3: ACTIONS UNDERTAKEN BY REGULATORS ARE PROPORTIONATE TO THE REGULATORY RISK BEING MANAGED

### KPI 6: REGULATORS ACTIVELY CONTRIBUTE TO THE CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT OF REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS

*Metric: Measures/assessments the APO has undertaken to identify and reduce unnecessary requirements for Australian travel document applicants while maintaining the security, integrity and efficiency of the Australian passports system.*

APO continued to work on the challenging task of retiring its legacy IT systems. Among other considerations, moving off these systems is critical for introducing new and more dynamic online passport application forms.

A key focus of this work during the review period was on pursuing a major enhancement to APO's existing passport processing system, known as Atlas. This IT enhancement is aimed at delivering significant performance improvements and addressing a number of longstanding issues raised by network users. It will also provide a better customer experience, by enabling the roll-out of updated online forms that will prepopulate the information APO already knows and therefore reduce the number of questions customers have to answer. All new customer and staff interfaces developed under this enhancement will be designed by user-experience experts, in conjunction APO customers and staff.

APO also initiated a number of other activities to better position its business over the next decade. In early 2021, it commenced a service redesign project to develop a new blueprint for customers' access to APO services into the future. At the same time, it commissioned a separate external review into the future of APO's Call Centre, including whether this function should be returned to Services Australia, or retained permanently in-house.

APO does not allow its focus on operational efficiency to compromise passport integrity. All high-risk applications are individually scrutinised by specialist staff. APO referred 16,196 passport applications to its face comparison experts for specialist manual assessment. A separate specialist team managed all applications made by known customers of law enforcement and national security interest.

APO actively sought to identify opportunities to refine its existing policy and processes. Compass, APO's new 'single source of truth' for its internal passport policy and procedural guidance for staff, was launched in July 2020 following an extensive re-write of previous content. It is a dynamic system and a key means of ensuring that passport regulations and regulatory practices remain fit-for-purpose and that staff apply a clear, consistent and up-to-date approach to their implementation. In addition, an APO restructure initiated in June 2021, which brought together all of the policy and review functions in APO under one branch, will help further strengthen collaboration and continuous improvement in this space.


APO is one of the key contributors to the Australian Government's digital identity program. It provides identity verification services in relation to passport data, specifically through the Document Verification Service and Face Verification Service. These services are integral to the issuance of digital identities. APO plans to explore ways to utilise the Government's new Digital Identity capability to further streamline the passport process.

#### **KPI 4: COMPLIANCE AND MONITORING APPROACHES ARE STREAMLINED AND COORDINATED**

*Metric: The extent that APO's compliance and monitoring activities are streamlined and coordinated.*

Compliance and monitoring are part of all aspects of APO's passport application and processing systems. A specialist fraud and compliance team coordinates these activities.

APO continuously improve its understanding of fraud trends and methodologies through internal reviews and close engagement with other agencies, and apply this knowledge to reduce the risk of passport fraud through its ongoing policy review and risk assessment processes. In 2020-21, by



employing a new face comparison algorithm, APO detected three historical cases of passports that had been obtained in false identities. Separately, it refused to process 48 applications on suspicion of fraud or dishonesty. Nearly all of these related to forged parental consent for child passports. APO commenced 137 administrative investigations. Of the 73 administrative investigations that required a delegate's decision, 100 per cent of those decisions were finalised within five business days. APO worked closely with other agencies to maximise prosecution outcomes where related offences could be proven.

APO aspires to reduce the number of failures that lead to passports not meeting customer needs and expectations. During the period, its emphasis on quality checking was more closely aligned to customer outcomes. New internal communications were introduced to heighten staff awareness of failures, additional reporting was initiated to increase staff visibility of errors, and new processes were put in place to inform changes that reduce future failures. Additional quality products, tools and services were introduced across the APO network to increase consistency and compliance with process, procedural and legislative requirements. Quality insights continue to be shared with key areas of APO's business to drive change and improvement, with its customers being at the centre of everything it does.