



Australian Government
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade



APO REGULATOR PERFORMANCE SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT 2019-20 FINANCIAL YEAR

October 2020

APO REGULATOR PERFORMANCE

SELF-ASSESSMENT FOR THE 2019-20 FINANCIAL YEAR

INTRODUCTION

The Australian Passport Office (APO) is a division of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 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*¹, this report sets out the results of the APO's self-assessment of its performance during the 2019-20 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, the APO has assessed its performance in relation to 1-2 standard annual metrics.

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

¹ Accessible at: 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, we continued to analyse and review our business practices to improve customer experience. We did a number of things to reduce the regulatory burden, in particular in response to bushfire emergencies and the COVID-19 pandemic.

We issued over 200 free passports to Australians to replace travel documents lost or destroyed in bushfires. The process was highly streamlined. No application form was required, only basic information to confirm each passport holder's identity and that they were in a bushfire-affected area. Applications were handled by our state and territory passport offices – rather than centrally – to expedite processing and collection. Most applications were processed within a week. The APO's passport face-matching service separately helped Services Australia to expedite financial relief to bushfire victims.

We put in place temporary measures to streamline the passport application process for individual customers who, because of their particular circumstances and COVID-19 restrictions, were not in a position to interact with us physically. The measures included: conducting application interviews virtually; accepting mailed or scanned applications; and accepting scanned supporting documents in lieu of originals.

Separate to the bushfires and COVID-19, we reformed the application process for non-citizen travel documents by:

- streamlining the lodgement process
- trialling lodgement at selected Australia Post outlets, potentially limiting the need for customers to travel long distances to apply at capital city passport offices
- translating information documents into key foreign languages
- for Certificates of Identity, increasing the defaulting validity period from one to two years and removing a requirement to provide evidence of intended travel.

We aligned our policy on dual place of birth attributes with the functionality of our online and paper forms. For instance, if a form permitted an applicant to enter 'Canterbury, Sydney' as their place of birth, we no longer contacted them to elicit a choice between 'Canterbury' and 'Sydney'.

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 told two very different stories during the year. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, between July 2019 and February 2020, we received a record number of passport applications – 1.4 million. This was 7.2 per cent more than in the same period in 2018-19. COVID-19 ushered in three months of historically low demand. As a result, in the whole of 2019-20, we only issued 1,745,340 passports. This was 18 per cent fewer than in 2018-19. Of these, 134,787 were priority passports – 27 per cent fewer than in 2018-19.

In spite of these challenges, we met our turnaround performance metrics. We processed 96 per cent of routine passports within 10 business days, and 98 per cent of priority passports within two business days.

We achieved this by enhancing our surge planning to respond better during periods of peak demand, and improving the efficiency of our end-to-end production workflow. We streamlined our internal quality control processes to remove redundant checks. This exercise reduced the number of checks from approximately 70 to 20, without compromising the integrity either of our processes or of Australia's passports.

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.

In May 2020, we completely refreshed the material on our website (www.passports.gov.au) explaining how to apply for a passport. The new content is now clearer, more comprehensive and easier to navigate.

Australians continue to embrace the user-friendliness of our website's online application service in preference to paper forms. The proportion of clients starting their applications online rose from 68 per cent in 2018-19 to 70 per cent in 2019-20, surpassing our performance target of 60 per cent. We made significant improvements to the service's accessibility, especially for customers applying on mobile devices.

Survey results compiled by ORIMA Research indicated high levels of satisfaction with the website. Around nine in ten respondents had used the site. Between 90 and 92 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.

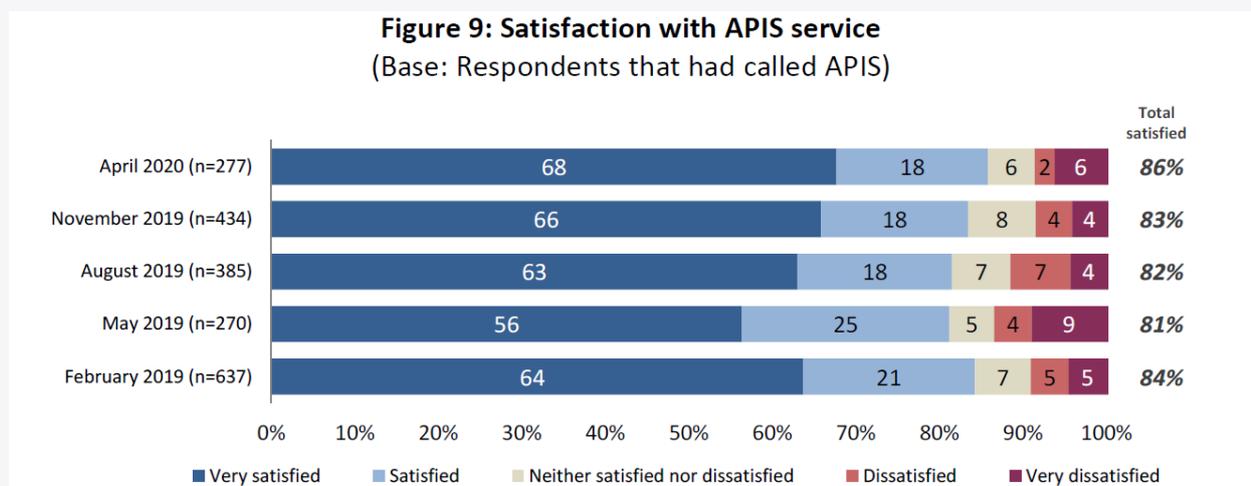
Metric: Client feedback, as measured by the APIS Call Centre Feedback Management Survey and the Australian Passport Office Client Satisfaction Survey, shows a satisfactory experience with communication from the APO and its agents.

We continued our practice of conducting Australian Passport Information Service (APIS) Call Centre Satisfaction Surveys and APO Client Satisfaction Surveys. We engaged ORIMA Research to conduct these surveys on a quarterly basis.

Overall, 93 per cent of respondents rated the department’s passport services as either ‘satisfactory’ or ‘very satisfactory’, exceeding our target of 85 per cent. Moreover, there were signs that satisfaction levels were continuing to increase, despite the client service challenges posed by COVID-19. ORIMA’s quarterly survey ending April 2020 reported that the ‘very satisfactory’ rating (75 per cent) was at its highest on record.

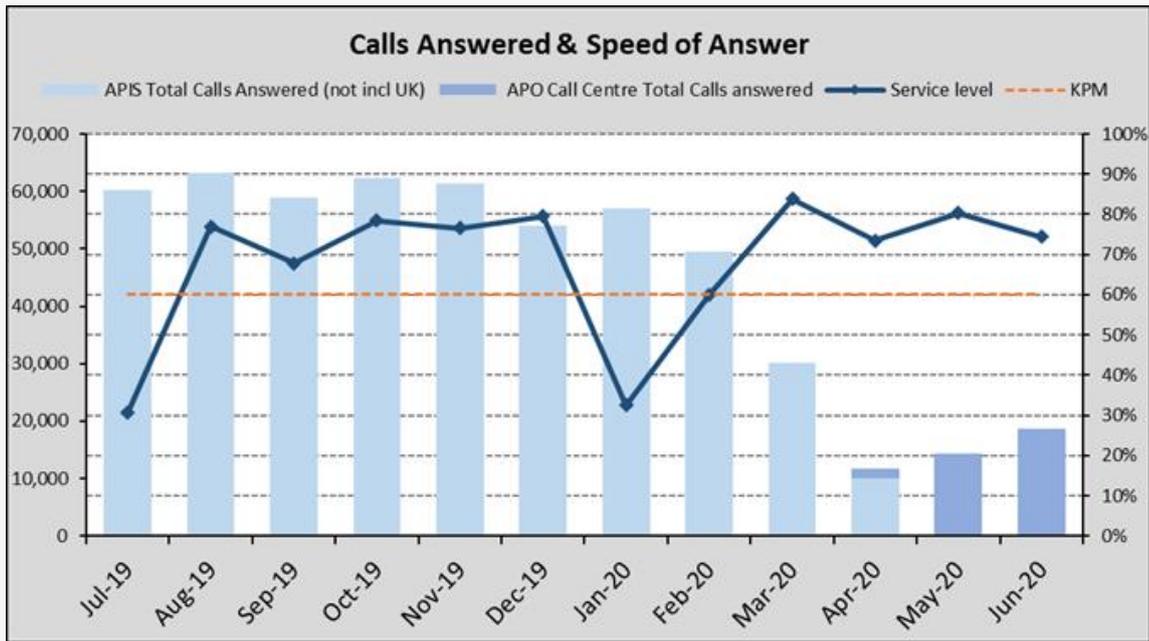
APIS Call Centre Survey

ORIMA completed three Interactive Voice Response (IVR) APIS surveys in 2019-20 (August 2019, November 2019 and April 2020). Satisfaction among those who called APIS showed an increase from 82 per cent in August 2019 to 86 per cent in April 2020.



We worked closely with Services Australia (SA) – our outsourced partner managing APIS – to improve client satisfaction and call answering times. As a result, between July 2019 and March 2020 the percentage of calls answered within 120 seconds increased from about 33 percent to over 80 percent.

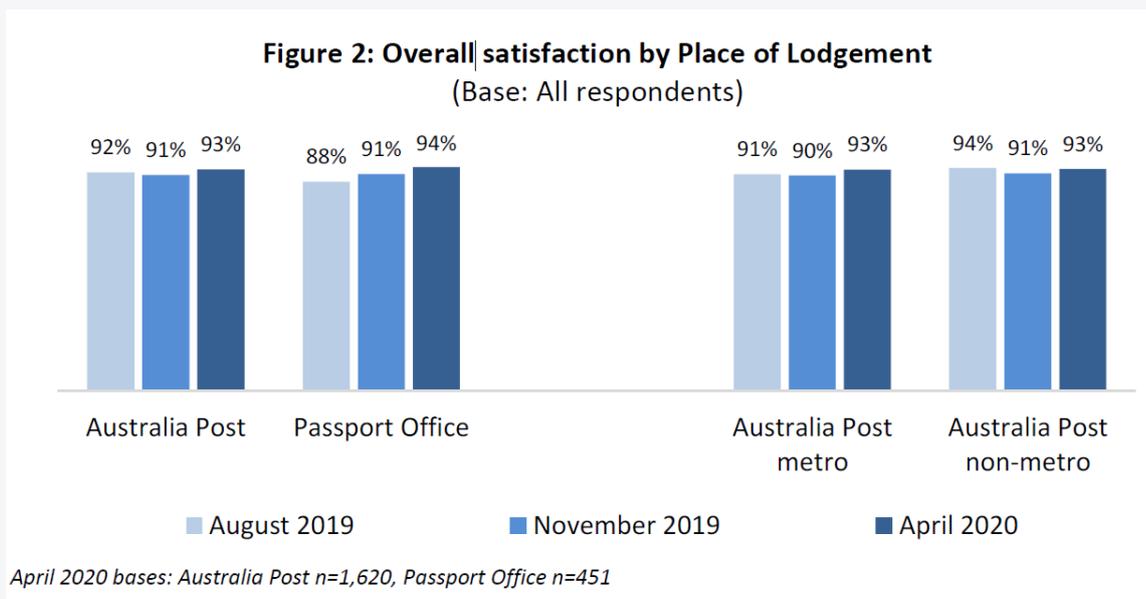
To free up SA resources so that they could help Australians affected economically by COVID-19, at the end of April 2020 we took over operation of the APIS service. Call answering times and average handling times between May and June 2020 remained on par with those recorded before we took over the service.



APO Customer Satisfaction Survey

ORIMA Research’s surveys measure satisfaction with services provided by the APO, and its agents in Australia Post.

ORIMA’s quarterly survey results as at the end of April 2020 indicated overall satisfaction was broadly the same for customers who lodged their application at an Australia Post outlet (93 per cent) and those who lodged at a passport office (94 per cent).



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.

We continued to work on the challenging task of retiring our legacy passport processing IT systems. Among other considerations, moving off these systems is critical for introducing new and more dynamic online application forms that will reduce the number of documents that existing customers need to resubmit when applying to renew their passports.

We piloted a mobile app for our overseas staff to use when accepting passport applications. The app allows staff to take the customer's passport photo and submit it to us electronically without scanning it in. Once we have finished rolling it out, our overseas customers will no longer need to bring their own passport photos. This will address the considerable problems that customers in many overseas locations face in getting passport photos that comply with Australia's high-quality identity requirements – problems which often result in us telling customers that they need to go and have their photos re-taken. COVID-19 restrictions in many countries hindered rollout of the app in 2019-20. We will take this forward in 2020-21, where conditions permit.

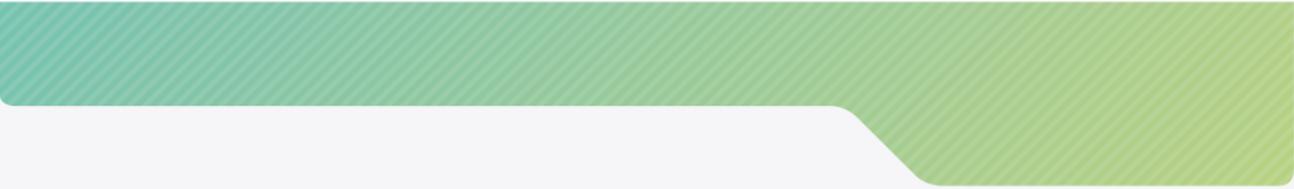
We did not allow improvements in customer experience to compromise the integrity of Australia's passports. Specialist staff individually scrutinised 100 per cent of high-risk applications, including 48,464 applications referred to our face comparison experts for manual scrutiny and assessment. A separate specialist team managed 7,482 applications that were complex for other reasons, usually because of issues related to parental consent for child passports.

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 is baked into all aspects of our passport application and processing systems. A specialist fraud and compliance team coordinates these activities.

We continuously improve our 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 our ongoing policy review and risk assessment processes. In 2019-20, by employing a new face comparison algorithm, we detected three historical cases of passports that had been obtained in false identities. Separately, we refused to process 73 current applications on suspicion of fraud or dishonesty. Nearly all of these related to forged parental consent for child passports. We completed all administrative investigations promptly, on average in less than a day. We referred six matters to the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions (CDPP) in 2019-20.



The CDPP accepted five of these matters for prosecution and one remains under assessment. The CDPP also finalised its assessment of, and accepted for prosecution, one referral made in 2018-19. We worked closely with other agencies to maximise prosecution outcomes where related offences could be proven.

We continued to contribute strongly to whole-of-government digital identity and biometric interoperability, including as a key provider agency for the Document Verification Service and the Face Verification Service.