

STATEMENT OF EXPECTATIONS FOR
THE AUSTRALIAN BUREAU OF STATISTICS (ABS)

Introduction

This Statement outlines the Government's expectations of the ABS when carrying out its role and responsibilities. It forms part of the Government's commitment to the good governance of statutory authorities and reducing the regulatory burden on business and the community.

The ABS is the central statistical authority for Australian governments. It is the main provider of Australian statistics used in the development and implementation of public policy and for a range of purposes by businesses, non-government organisations and the wider community. It also coordinates the activities of other official statistical bodies to promote and encourage the efficient provision of statistics.

The ABS exercises leadership of Australia's national statistical system by overseeing the quality of official statistics and working in partnership with other countries and international organisations on statistical matters, including ensuring consistency with internationally accepted frameworks.

The *Australian Bureau of Statistics Act 1975*, the *Census and Statistics Act 1905* and the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* set out the primary functions, duties and powers of the ABS. The Statistician¹ controls the operations of the ABS, subject to relevant laws.

The ABS should carry out its functions in a way that ensures it maintains its reputation as a world-class statistical agency, and supports and promotes the efficient and effective delivery of official statistics and statistical services for Australia.

Independence and accountability in exercise of functions

The ABS operates as part of the Australian Government and is accountable to the Parliament, and ultimately to the public, through the Treasury Ministers, the Parliamentary Committee process and the tabling of its annual report. While it is imperative that the ABS acts independently and objectively in performing its functions and exercising its powers as set out in legislation, the Government expects the ABS to take into account the Government's broad policy framework in performing its role and meeting its responsibilities.

It is particularly important for the integrity and perceived integrity of official statistics that the ABS acts with independence, objectivity, transparency and with a view to best practice in both the collection, analysis and dissemination of statistics and in the determination of the methods and procedures for their production.

The Government's priorities and policies will be clearly documented and communicated to the ABS, and the ABS, like other agencies, will be accountable for adherence to, or performance against, these requirements.

¹ Hereafter, the functions of the Statistician are referred to as those of the ABS.

The ABS should, where possible, participate in initiatives that are directly relevant to it. The ABS should also consider the outcomes or recommendations of relevant Government-established panels, reviews or inquiries.

Ministerial direction

Where the Minister directs the collection of statistical information under section 9 of the *Census and Statistics Act 1905*, the Government expects that the ABS will determine, in accordance with best practice, the methods and procedures for producing this information, and the extent, form and publication of that information.

More generally, where the Minister exercises powers of direction, those directions will be given transparently.

The Government's deregulation agenda

The Government is committed to reducing red tape and compliance costs for business and the community as a critical step towards improving Australia's productivity.

The Government expects that the ABS will look for opportunities to reduce compliance costs for businesses and the community and contribute to the Government's \$1 billion red and green tape reduction target. This includes greater use of existing administrative, transactional, commercial and other digital sources, where suitable.

The Government also expects that the ABS will comply with the Government's enhanced Regulatory Impact Analysis requirements for all regulatory proposals, including considering the impacts of regulation on business and the community and costing proposals before they are introduced, using the Regulatory Burden Measurement framework.

The Government's Regulator Performance Framework, which applies from 1 July 2015, provides further detail on the Government's expectations for the performance of the ABS and other relevant agencies against specific performance indicators.^[1] The aim of the Framework is to encourage relevant agencies to undertake their functions with the minimum impact necessary to achieve their objectives. In particular, agencies are expected to demonstrate that they are adopting a risk-based approach to compliance obligations, engagement and enforcement, allowing for proportionate approaches that, in the case of the ABS, balance the risk of poor data quality with the compliance burden for respondents. This allows the agencies to achieve their objectives more efficiently and reduce the overall compliance burden, particularly for small businesses.

The Government expects that the ABS will act in accordance with best practice in its decision-making, policies, processes and communication practices to maximise effectiveness, efficiency and transparency, and minimise compliance costs. The ABS should regularly review its policies and procedures to identify improvements to achieve these goals.

^[1] The Regulator Performance Framework complements the broader performance reporting requirements set out in the Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013 and related instructions from the Department of Finance.

Effective provision of key statistics and use of data

The Government expects the ABS to prioritise its resourcing to ensure the maintenance of core statistics. This includes the economic, social and population statistics that stakeholders consider to be the most important.

The Government expects the ABS to deliver high quality, objective and flexible official statistical solutions and to improve the accessibility, timeliness and relevance of Australia's statistical information. The ABS should also work to improve the management of official statistics and promote their informed use.

The ABS should, where possible, avoid the duplication of statistical data collection and help to minimise such duplication by other agencies or researchers. In particular, the ABS should work collaboratively to unlock public sector, transactional and other 'big data' holdings.

Engagement with stakeholders

The ABS has important relationships with the providers and users of its data, including Australian households, businesses and governments. The Government expects that the ABS will manage these relationships to ensure that it is able to perform its statutory functions well, including by consulting with data providers and instituting procedures that minimise the burden of providing data to the ABS.

Where the ABS makes decisions that impose compliance requirements or exercises powers in a way that would pose significant implications for businesses or households, the Government expects that the ABS will consult as appropriate with stakeholders and the Government.

The Government expects the ABS to engage data users to ensure that the range of statistics collected and disseminated by the ABS is appropriate to their needs, and to consult stakeholders regarding significant changes to the ABS' work program.

The Government expects that the ABS will endeavour to maintain the trust of Australians, and the public and private sectors, in Australia's official statistics.

Collaboration with other bodies

The Government expects the ABS to maintain robust, effective and collaborative working partnerships with other producers of official statistics in Australia to ensure the proper functioning of the National Statistical System. The Government also expects the ABS to be a respected leader in international statistical communities and bodies, and ensure that Australia's interests in international comparable statistics are taken into account.

Relationship with the responsible Minister

The ABS plays an essential role in ensuring that the Government is well-placed to respond promptly to issues that may arise in the collection and dissemination of statistics.

The ABS should therefore provide Treasury portfolio Ministers with accurate and timely advice on significant issues in its core area of business. Significant issues might include: matters on which the

Government may be called to comment in Parliament or in public; important ABS operational or budgetary issues; and the ABS's decisions regarding the appropriate action for it to take following substantial problems or disruption which may result in substantial revisions to key statistics.

In view of the important role that statistics and their analysis play in policy development and implementation, the ABS should consult the Minister on its work plan annually, or when significant changes to it are contemplated.

Relationship with Treasury

Treasury's key role is to support and advise the Treasurer and other Treasury Ministers in their responsibilities by being the principal source of advice on the economy and a range of policy issues, including statistical policy issues.

The Government expects that Treasury and the ABS will maintain a close relationship. Treasury is expected to take into account the views and experience of the ABS when considering and advising on changes to statistics policy and legislation and to ensure that the objectives of legislation are fulfilled. By advising Treasury on the operational implications of Government policy initiatives, the ABS is expected to contribute to policy development.

In view of the above, the ABS should inform the Secretary of the Treasury of all significant statistical, financial and operational matters, including all strategically important correspondence between the ABS and Treasury portfolio ministers. The ABS should keep the Secretary of the Treasury informed of significant meetings between the ABS and Government Ministers and other key policy figures. The ABS should also advise Treasury about changes to legislation or policy that, in the ABS's opinion, would improve the regulatory framework or minimise compliance costs for businesses and the community. Treasury will also ensure that relevant information is passed to the ABS in a timely manner.

The Government expects that the ABS will continue to provide Treasury and other relevant agency and ministerial officials with access to key ABS statistics under appropriate 'lock up' arrangements for the purposes of preparing briefs for the Government where access during an embargo period is required.

Organisational governance and financial management

The ABS employs staff under the *Public Service Act 1999* (PSA). Under the PSA, agencies are required to uphold and promote the APS Values. All APS employees are required to adhere to the APS Code of Conduct. The ABS is also required to comply with the APS Bargaining Framework in relation to APS employees.

The ABS further engages staff in accordance with regulations made pursuant to the *Census and Statistics Act 1905*. These staff are also made subject to the provisions of the APS Code of Conduct as part of their employment contracts and the ABS Interview Enterprise Agreements.

The requirements for the ABS's financial management are set out in the relevant legislation, including the PGPA Act and associated PGPA Rules and instruments. The Government expects that

the ABS will be efficient in its use of resources and pursue opportunities to continue improving the efficiency of its operations and to demonstrate value for money for the services that it delivers.

The Government expects the ABS to put in place appropriate security arrangements for data protected by security and privacy provisions in laws or Government policies. The Government also expects the ABS to put in place appropriate controls to manage the risk of unauthorised disclosure of market sensitive information.

Conclusion

The Government's aims for the ABS are that it: delivers services that are timely, relevant, responsive and of the highest integrity and quality; is efficient and effective in its use of resources; administers its responsibilities in a way that minimises compliance costs for business and the community; and, in exercising leadership of Australia's national statistical system, works in partnership with other organisations to expand and improve the quality and awareness of statistical services available to governments and the community.