This submission is based on my own personal views and observations during almost 30 years of employment in the public service.

**Skills**

Over the last 10 – 15 years the skill level of staff has significantly reduced as there was a change in the approach to training staff which broke apart each component delivered by payment areas into small chunks and then staff were trained in either some or all components of the work. Not actually provided all of the information required to do a well rounded job.

This approach has reduced the ability of staff to be able to deliver quality customer service and reduces their ability to process or take calls on a wide range of topics. In the past when staff were trained more thoroughly the excessive backlogs, phone wait times and engaged signals were not the issue that they are today. Some inroads are being made to address this, but we should not allow this to happen again.

These skills could be gained by having staff enter the public service at an APS1 or APS2 level allowing them to build up their knowledge to become proficient to be paid then as a fully competent APS3/4 staff member.

It’s time to build us up again as a public service, remove the frustration for staff of only being able to deliver part of a job. Make them and their skills valued again, there are some really smart people who work in the government but no recognition or respect is given to their ability.

Adequate training needs to be provided to staff, there is barely any face to face classroom training these days. Training has now been pushed online with no interaction, no ability to ask questions. Staff are told just read this information and now you have to know it all. This approach does not allow for the different ways people learn. Saving money over quality training is a short-term view of saving dollars. The long-term flow on effects and costs to manage escalated customer issues due to the lack of staff training costs so much more than it costs to deliver quality training. Poor training does not just affect the dollar bottom line, more importantly it impacts the reputation of the department, the government and let’s not forget about the customer impact - which is the most important one of all.

Leadership skills – get back to basics. Learn how to communicate, engage, develop, take staff on the journey rather than keeping them in dark. Use strong change management frameworks. It seems that performance management stops after staff reach the APS4 level, it’s time to focus on ensuring everyone has the skills and capability to do their job.

**ASL caps**

These need to be removed, they are simply an administrative and political effort to hide costs. The fact that the government needs to hire so many intermittent and irregular staff and then to further outsource thousands of jobs to IT contractors and call centre staff via private companies shows that there is a real need for a much higher work force to staff departments. The contracted arrangements are not short term, so to say they fill a gap at a point in time is untruthful. These ‘other’ staffing arrangements are not included in the ASL counts/ costs to deliver services and therefore the truth is being hidden about the real cost of running the public service and the true staffing levels required to achieve this.

The ASL cap is now hurting front line services, as we are no longer able to replace any staff who leave because further attrition of permanent staff needs to occur. It’s time to get serious about why the public service exists and that is to service the public.

The Department of Human Services is responsible for administering payments and services for just about every Australian, including those who are vulnerable and at risk, taking away their service options or not providing enough staff to support them during their time of need is not only unaustralian, it is heartless, cold and shows that people are no longer a priority.

**Outsourcing**

The risks of outsourcing departmental work to private companies is enormous, we have no visibility of the work practices and values of these private companies once the work has left our doors. APS staff uphold strict code of conduct rules; I suspect that these are not strongly promoted in private companies like the ones being used. We are told that Privacy Matters, but does it?

The risk of staff within these companies browsing customer information is enormous, they have access to so much information that could be used for dishonest purposes. I predict that the current outsourcing arrangements will result in an event that is catastrophic in nature due to someone accessing information illegally - that is a domestic violence incident where one or more people come to harm or private information being sold in large quantities.

Will these companies adhere to policies departments uphold, for example hiring of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff member, staff with disabilities, I suspect not. The public service needs to represent the community they serve.

Outsourcing isn’t the answer, staffing the public service adequately and providing staff with the tools they need to do their job efficiently is the answer. This means removing convoluted and difficult to apply legislation and only releasing new systems when they are proven to work, not because of some deadline or to cover a Senior Executives behind who must deliver at all costs.

Spreading the work across the APS and to a variety of different companies to deliver services means that these services will be delivered inconsistently and without clear control. Chaos and mayhem is what needs to be removed from current practices not built into them further.

**Policy and legislation**

Having Policy Departments that sit outside of the department delivering the payments or services creates a massive disconnect in the ease of delivery of services to customers. It would be beneficial to bring the policy into the Department delivering the service. This would allow sensible policy to be applied to the practicalities of service delivery. It would also reduce the overhead of running separate departments.

Legislation written to deliver payments and services has become extremely complex without good reason. So much has been built in to avoid risk that we actually avoid being able to deliver prompt quality service. Let’s not design our services for the few that abuse them, but for the majority that don’t do the wrong thing.

**Agency Agreements**

Individual Agency Agreements do not serve any purpose other than costing the government and more importantly the taxpayer millions of dollars while each agreement is being negotiated. The negotiation process creates massive ill will and discontent for those covered by these agreements. Additionally, dragging on the agreement negotiations, not starting them early enough is all about keeping money in government coffers, employees of the public service have families to feed and bills to pay like everyone else. We should not be used as cost saving measures.

It does not make sense when one department is paid more or provided with better conditions than another. This divide has only been built to ensure that there isn’t power for APS staff during the agreement negotiation process, as the power of all of us combined is something that the government is scared to deal with.

Agreements need to include EL staff to have the same rights as staff at the APS6 and below levels. EL staff don’t receive flex time but are expected to work extra hours (of which details are not specified and at the discretion of the manager). Personally I am expected to carry an additional 2 weeks of extra worked and unpaid hours at any time before I can have on day off in lieu, and even then time off is given grudgingly and only if I have a serious personal matter to attend to. This is an abuse of power and is unconstitutional, the government does not support ‘slave’ labour in this country and yet expects it of its public service. This cohort of staff don’t fit with the general group of staff and entitlements and also don’t fit with the SES group and entitlements, they are in limbo land and are treated accordingly.

Agreements should not be so vague that they require volumes of policy to deliver them. Policy allows for the intent of agreements to be watered down or twisted to suit the ‘business needs’ rather than to be a document that fairly represents the business and the staff. Any policy must meet the Fair Work Guidelines at a minimum.

**Structure and roles**

When you have an almost equal number of leaders to staff who do the grass roots work, you have a problem. Reviewing and streamlining structures needs to happen, part of that review means ensuring that staff at each level have the skills and abilities to do the job that they are doing.

Currently the public service does not align skills with roles, quite often it’s just putting someone or an entire team of staff in a role that’s vacant, not assessing their skills and abilities. If this were your business would you not align skills to jobs?

There is no easy and clear way to move around the public service, not departmentally or across agencies. There needs to be an easier way to do this, especially at level. This will allow for shared skills across departments, but also within each individual department. Currently if you want to learn about and move to a new business area as an APS3/4 level the answer you are at the whim of your direct manager, so people sit doing work full of discontent and unhappiness, neither things make for a productive work force.

There are large volumes staff who have acted in positions for 5 years or more, when someone has acted in the same role continuously the job is vacant. Staff are told ‘well you can’t rely on this being your wage forever you are only acting’ – really, after years you don’t get used to your wage being what it is? Again, a sign that staff are not appreciated or respected.

**The staff**

The majority of public servants are amazing, dedicated and go above and beyond to deliver services. The work performed in some departments means staff interact with people at their most vulnerable and with such horrible circumstances, that the personal toll on the staff dealing with this day to day is not recognised nor supported. The fact we then don’t give them good systems, training or information to do their job adds another mental hurdle to jump each day.

These front line staff deal with customer aggression issues every single day. It’s time to pull the fat out of Canberra, and have leaders and ‘national’ teams interact at grass roots levels. Perhaps then we might see positive and common sense changes applied.

Staff should be seen as people rather than machines or commodities, treating people fairly and justly will see better engagement at work and in attendance. Public service staff are slowly being destroyed by unsupportive people policies, unskilled leaders, red tape, poor training and poor systems.

I would also recommend some of these questionable but common work practices are reviewed:

* Forcing staff to bring sick young children into the office to use a carers room so that unscheduled absence results aren’t impacted – these are kids that are being forced to suffer, what has the public service become when this is okay? A parent should be allowed to decide if this is an option they can use for the day, it should not be something that a staff member is told they should utilise.
* Not allowing staff who have legitimate need for part time for flexible working arrangement to have these. Just because your child has turned three doesn’t mean you no longer need to work part time hours. Flexible work arrangements are specifically identified in the Fair Work Act.
* Re-visiting someone’s unscheduled absences especially when they took an extended period of time off for a long illness or death in the family is harassment, this practice needs to stop.
* Making staff feel guilty when they have time off due to genuine illness, it has become the norm for people to drag themselves into the workplace when it is clear that they shouldn’t be here, not only does it take them longer to recover they share their illness with everyone else. Again, not a smart people management policy.
* Flexible working arrangements should be for staff at all levels, we all have outside lives and impacts and if this is part of our working conditions let’s allow it for all. That means as well if you approve someone to work part time that their workload is a part time workload.

**We are not all in Canberra**

The majority of the public service business runs outside of Canberra, it’s time for a rethink on the Canberra centric structure of the public service. The public service needs to stop referring to national teams that are nationally disbursed as out posted teams. They are not out posted, they are nationally disbursed. With the massive push by the APS to get our customers using technology to do their business, perhaps the focus should be placed back on the APS to do the same.

There are many technologies which allow us to interact face to face without needing to be in the same location. Perhaps more money could be spent on enhancing these further rather than worrying about where people are located.

Canberra is a microcosm with the majority of people who live there either in the public service, a former public servant or related to a public servant. That’s not an accurate reflection of how the rest of Australia live, and therefore a blinkered approach to services, policy and what’s needed at the coal face.

Canberra holds the monopoly on the highest paid positions, it doesn’t hold the monopoly on the best people to work in those positions. Promotion to these roles is based on the best person who is willing to live in Canberra rather than the best skill set to do the job anywhere in the country.

**Systems**

It’s time to start delivering quality systems to allow staff to do the job they are employed to do. They spend so much time doing workarounds or waiting for lag times in the system that it is impacting not only on productivity but morale.

In the future before any system release is permitted to occur, there should be absolute rigour and evidence that the system being deployed actually increases productivity and delivers benefits. The systems that have been delivered (very poorly I might add) have been done in haste and have actually had a detrimental effect on our ability to deliver.

If we really want to transform our department, we need to get better at this. The billions of dollars recently spent over the last 5 years or more for little, or generally reduced functionality should never happen again. Systems are there to make the life of staff and customers easier, this should be the ethos and approach for every IT area – if you are not making it better, you should not be making it at all.

**Key Performance Indicators**

While having these is important, achieving them at all cost is not. The Key Performance Indicators are the sole focus of every department, so if we miss a deadline for processing a piece of work, that customer (and let’s remember these are real people) miss out on receiving a payment, which then puts them in hardship and at risk. The focus cannot just be on numbers, the focus has to be on people and delivering services. If the systems to deliver payments were improved and if the convoluted and messy legislation was removed, this could easily be achieved.

**Frank and fearless**

We hear this all of the time, be frank and fearless in your advice, your suggestions, challenge ideas and thinking, etc, etc. We do this now at our peril. Once upon a time the public service was apolitical, now we must serve our masters by putting a spin on the information to make the minister of the moment look good. This does not improve services, it does not raise issues so that sensible solutions can be applied to them. It is short-term cover up for no benefit and no purpose other than to make a hand full of people look good. We are here to serve the public not the politicians. It is time to get back to honest communication to ensure at the grass roots our staff and our customers do not suffer.

Internally we hear senior leaders say but the majority of them mean be frank and fearless with everyone else except for me. Those leaders that you can have frank and fearless discussions with are few and far between whereas in the past it was normal to challenge and test ideas.

**Red Tape**

We talk about removing it from the public service all of the time, so how do we do this, we fill out more reports. The fact is there is more red tape than is necessary, to get one report approved, it can easily go through 5 layers of approval process (not including the back and forth discussion and changes requested at each level), what a waste of tax payer dollars. For example, we have three different approval processes to move staff between Divisions depending on where you work. Why? This is a HR process, so why wouldn’t the same delegation levels be applied? It seems, that it is up to the whim of the SES at the time as to what these processes are. What we should have is a sensible, logical and with the least touch points process as possible.

More time is spent in the public service writing different reports containing exactly the same information in a variety of different formats to suit each individual’s personal preferences than the value that is gained from doing this. Some investment into determining the best way to provide information into one source for use by each group as required would surely save money in the long term.