



Public Sector  
Commission

GOVERNMENT OF  
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

# Agency Capability

Department of Biodiversity,  
Conservation and Attractions

## Executive Summary



September 2022

## Introduction

A review of the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions under the trial of the [Agency Capability Review Program](#) was carried out from November 2021 to June 2022.

The role of the agency in the management and conservation of the state's biodiversity and natural resources is vital to enrich people's lives and enable sustainable nature based tourism and recreation experiences.

The agency must therefore have the capabilities to address issues such as climate change, an increasing population and the demands of tourism, all within a complex administrative and legislative environment.

The findings of this review around increased collegial leadership, a more strategic approach to improving service delivery and workforce planning will help the agency to better meet current and future demands and challenges.

The agency has an excellent foundation from which to commence this improvement work. Its strategic use of information and data; the engagement and consultation practices it undertakes with Aboriginal people and communities; and its governance of ICT are strengths that will help drive improvement.

## About the Agency Capability Review Program

The Agency Capability Review Program takes a comprehensive, whole of sector approach to improvement, and sets standards based on a clear understanding of what constitutes a high performing public sector agency in Western Australia.

The program is being trialled over 2 years (2021-22 and 2022-23) in 8 government agencies. This review was one of 3 undertaken at the same time.

Reviews provide valuable insight into how agencies can improve and deliver the quality services expected of them. They also contribute to the development and improvement of the sector as a whole.

Reviews are conducted by independent lead reviewers with public administration expertise and experience. They are supported by senior executives from the government sector who are co-opted for each review as well as the Agency Capability Review team at the Public Sector Commission.

Each review is conducted against a standardised [Agency Capability Framework](#) of the 5 most significant areas of public sector management and administration. The framework is relevant and applicable to all agencies regardless of their remit, purpose, functions and services.

The framework supports agencies to ask 4 key questions:

- What are we meant to achieve?
- How well are we currently doing it?
- How do we know?
- Where can we do better?

## Agency background

The agency was formed on 1 July 2017 through machinery of government changes. The changes amalgamated the Botanic Gardens and Parks Authority, Rottnest Island Authority, Zoological Parks Authority and the Department of Parks and Wildlife, including the Conservation and Parks Commission and Swan River Trust.

The agency is responsible for promoting biodiversity and conservation to enrich people's lives through sustainable management of Western Australia's species, ecosystems, lands and the attractions in its care.

The agency's vision is that Western Australia's biodiversity and lands are valued, natural, conserved and protected in partnership with the community.

The agency describes itself as working "to conserve WA's biodiversity, cultural and natural values. We also provide world recognised nature based tourism and recreation experiences for the community."

The new climate action portfolio reflects a growing focus for the agency in the context of a warming and drying climate, and as public interest and community expectations continue to rise.

The agency employs approximately 2,050 full time equivalent staff, with around 50% based in regional areas. Its annual budget is in the order of \$481 million.

## Future operating environment

Western Australia's biodiversity and natural areas are both unique and fragile, and their conservation is vital to enrich people's lives and enable sustainable nature based tourism and recreation experiences.

The government is looking for the agency to enable sectors and industries to support the diversification of the state's economy through tourism and attractions. Investment by the state in the Perth Zoo Master Plan is one example of this endeavour. This will require the agency to develop and implement a model for sourcing funding to contribute to the joint investment by the government to establish a world class zoo in Perth by 2040.

Government, community and industry are all increasingly reliant on the agency for accurate environmental information as it relates to climate change, conservation, biodiversity, bushfire prevention and management, and the environmental implications of the inevitable urban spread in Perth and major regional centres.

Government and community expectations for well supported native title agreements mean there is an increased role for the agency to support these. This includes ensuring support for initiatives and activities involving joint land management, increased partnerships with Traditional Owners and Aboriginal communities, and incorporation of traditional science and knowledge into decision making.

## The review process

The review was undertaken by Emeritus Professor Margaret Seares AO as the independent lead reviewer with support from Dan Volaric as senior reviewer co-opted from the Public Sector Commission, and the Commission's Agency Capability Review team.

Professor Seares has had lengthy involvement with public administration, education and the arts, retiring from the position of Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor at The University of Western Australia in 2008. She has been a public sector chief executive officer and has led multiple reviews. She has been a member of a wide range of boards and councils over many years and is currently chair of the WA Salaries and Allowances Tribunal.

The review looked at all 21 capabilities and identified 3 lines of inquiry for in-depth investigation. This involved further engagement and investigation with the agency and research into how practices might be improved or capability gaps addressed.

The review also identified good practices that the agency and sector can build on and share.

The review involved 6 months of investigation and research, collecting information from the following:

- comprehensive review of a large number of published and unpublished documents
- over 50 external stakeholder meetings and submissions including group sessions and workshops with stakeholder reference groups
- a workshop with committee members of statutory authority volunteer groups
- a workshop with members of statutory authority boards
- staff interviews, consultations and workshops including groups of staff from various business areas and regions
- a self assessment by corporate executive against the Agency Capability Framework
- workshops, briefings and meetings with the executive team and Director General
- individual interviews with each corporate executive member
- a comprehensive capability information questionnaire gauging staff perceptions of the agency's capabilities
- an iThink challenge inviting staff to share what they felt the agency did well, what could be improved and ideas for improvement.

## What the review found

- The agency has a significant remit in diverse areas but ones where there are nonetheless common threads that can be built on more effectively.
- The agency has had to merge several long standing and distinct organisational cultures. Balancing the individual and unique functions of each of the previous entities, alongside the need to create central oversight and coordination of shared activities, has been challenging.
- The existence of statutory accountability requirements, inherent in the legislation of the 3 statutory authorities, has inevitably meant that the boards and senior management have focused on those accountabilities, and expected the same

level of focus from the agency's corporate areas. This has created some tension, given the wide remit those corporate areas are required to cover.

- The journey has been challenging but there are some dividends now being enjoyed. There is an increased recognition of similar activities across various divisions that could contribute to communities of practice. There also appears to be significant support from board members for the boards to contribute to the bigger picture of this agency.
- There have been some challenges for the agency in communicating effectively with all stakeholders, both in timeliness and 2 way dialogue. This is something the agency has recognised and is working to overcome.
- Staff appear to be committed and passionate, and intrinsically identify a role for themselves in serving the state of Western Australia.
- There is insufficient future planning around workforce planning and staff training and development and decisions need to be made to ensure these activities are prioritised so that the agency has the capacity and capability to respond to future challenges.
- The agency has significant relationships with volunteers who contribute to and support activities. This includes but is not limited to Friends of Kings Park, Kings Park Guides, Parks and Wildlife campground hosts, Rottnest Voluntary Guides Association, science research volunteers and Perth Zoo Docents.
- The agency has fostered and strengthened its relationships with public sector agencies, ministers and boards. There are still some challenging stakeholder and delivery partner relationships but the agency is aware of what is required to develop these relationships.
- The agency is responsive to government priorities and has taken on a significant number of projects and initiatives in recent years and this is anticipated to continue well into the future.
- The agency's scientific work is a significant asset to the state. There is an opportunity to ensure its role in underpinning the work of the agency and the state is both effective and effectively communicated.
- There is increasing demand from other government agencies and outside of government for advice and information to inform decision making. This is reliant on accurate data being more easily available and accessible. This is a considerable area of work for the agency.
- In maturing the agency's approach to being a single entity with component parts, there will be an opportunity to identify any duplication of effort as well as potential collaborative approaches to enhance efficiency.

## Lines of inquiry

The 3 lines of inquiry were explored in more detail based on the initial review. These provide insight to where the agency could focus improvement. By addressing these key areas, the agency can maximise the benefits of the amalgamation, deliver more efficient and effective services, and increase the capability of employees and the agency as a whole. In this way it can be better prepared in facing future challenges.

## Line of inquiry 1: Leading with a more collegial approach

Forging a collaborative future following the merging of an existing agency with 2 former statutory authorities and 3 existing statutory authorities is challenging. Many of the agency's corporate executive members should be commended for their individual work to date. However, they need to work towards opportunities more collectively to fully realise the benefits that the amalgamation might bring.

The organisation structure is characterised by division silos which are partly the result of the complex legislative framework but also because of the way the agency has organised its functions. This is further complicated by a large regional cohort of staff which has further impacted cohesive decision making across the agency. Further, based on internal and external submissions to the review, the agency seems to view itself as the Department of Biodiversity and Conservation and has not yet fully incorporated or maximised the Attractions component of the portfolio. Increasing the agency's ability to work in a coordinated, collegial and strategic way needs to be a priority for the agency.

The review found complex governance structures with 3 statutory authorities each reporting to a board; the director general is also the Chief Executive Officer for each of the statutory authorities, and day to day management of the authorities is the responsibility of executive directors. This complexity might inhibit collaboration unless there is more cooperation between board chairs, the agency and ministerial offices, and synergies developed in how the statutory functions are delivered. Reviewing governance and secretariat support to ensure a continued and consistent high standard, and updating memoranda of understanding with the statutory authorities can help develop greater consistency and collaboration.

Corporate executive must collectively deliver on the amalgamation, and work together to drive organisation reform. Leading collegially is important for the agency to become more strategically focused and united with a shared purpose.

Corporate executive meetings need to move away from being predominantly operationally focused and become more strategic, with each member of executive recognising they have a shared responsibility to drive change in their divisions and across the agency. Practically, this might mean that each member leads a part of the corporate reform agenda.

The agency continues to maintain unique brand identities in its public engagement and internal functions such as Kings Park, Perth Zoo, Rottnest Island, and Parks and Wildlife Service. These separate identities appear to hinder the agency's attempts to reframe its work with a shared purpose. The agency should review the purpose of its different product and division brands, and only maintain those that benefit the agency's service delivery and shared purpose. A brand architecture could distinguish corporate, destination and commercial product brands.

The agency needs to consider the allocation of resources as they have not been reviewed since before amalgamation. Separate budgets and systems for administering them hinder the agency's efforts towards its shared purpose. The complexity of reviewing budget allocations is recognised, especially considering statutory objectives and reporting obligations, but this work is necessary for the benefits of amalgamation to be realised.

There are clear commonalities in services in different divisions which could benefit from horizontal connections between areas. The agency should take deliberate steps

to develop these connections so they can support each other to improve their services; create a shared understanding of what the agency does; and share metrics to measure and assess how well it does its work. Through effective horizontal connections the agency can capture good practice and share it to elevate the quality of service delivery across business operations.

## **Line of inquiry 2: A more strategic approach to delivering outcomes**

With the scale and complexity of the agency's work increasing year on year, the agency needs to seek ways to improve how it delivers its services to continue meeting the requirements and expectations of the community and government.

A policy of continuous improvement should be established that supports efficient and effective delivery of services and promotes review and reflection. There are examples of excellent infrastructure development, such as the Skywalk (Kaju Yatka) in Kalbarri National Park, however there is no deliberate mechanism to share the lessons learnt from significant projects across the agency to improve service delivery.

There are no mechanisms that provide central oversight of service delivery. The review identified that the department only captures information centrally about projects that relate to government commitments such as those made at elections or as part of the WA Recovery Plan. This impacts its ability to plan resource allocation, understand capability gaps and identify opportunities to collaborate across divisions.

Adding to this, the agency does not have an agreed project management methodology. Instead, projects are managed in silos and oversight is inconsistent. This inhibits the agency's ability to effectively and efficiently plan for emerging demands as leaders cannot easily track and monitor current demands.

Collecting and using feedback from end users and delivery partners to improve services is not common. This insight is critical for ensuring service delivery is relevant, opportunities for improvement are identified and building relationships with stakeholders is maintained. The agency's work on improving the cycle of using feedback from end users and delivery partners to improve services should be informed by 'Good practice 1: Strategic use of information and data' and 'Good practice 2: Achieving greater outcomes through partnership and co-design with Aboriginal people'.

The robust approach to strategic ICT governance ('Good practice 3: Governance of strategic ICT') could be leveraged to inform a broader approach for strategic service delivery management. Embedding a cross-agency project and program governance group - supported by good operational and corporate data and performance metrics - would better support service delivery. It would also enable executive to understand the nature of the work and priorities across the agency, and make better resource and financing decisions.

An intentional collaborative and supported approach to project delivery would enable the agency to plan and operate more efficiently while also driving continuous improvement and continuing to deliver high quality work. Such an approach would also support the transfer of knowledge between employees and business areas.

### Line of inquiry 3: Workforce planning

Significant opportunities and challenges to the agency including an ageing workforce, along with extraordinary changes and pressures in the labour market, have impacted the agency's workforce planning capability. The agency does not have a coordinated, strategic or systematic approach to workforce planning and development which is critical to their ability to continue to respond to the requirements of government and the public.

In developing and implementing a strategic workforce plan, the agency needs to consider strategies for contemporary talent identification, innovative recruitment, performance management, and learning and capability development practices as these are currently limited. As staffing reductions have impacted the business area responsible for this function, the agency should consider how to resource this critical work.

Development of a whole of agency workforce plan would also serve as an important mechanism to support the development of a shared focus. It would enable each area to apply the principles in a way that addresses the context in which they function while drawing on the knowledge, experience and needs of the whole agency.

Although the agency has an ageing workforce, it has not developed agency wide mechanisms for knowledge transfer and key person risk management. The Biodiversity and Conservation Science division is deliberately employing junior scientists and supporting them with senior scientists to develop their knowledge base. The issue is likely impacting other areas of the agency, and the approach could be shared with other areas for collective understanding and improvement.



## Good practices

The following 3 areas are examples of where the agency has demonstrated good practice that can contribute to learnings for other agencies.

### Good practice 1: Strategic use of information and data

The review found examples of good practice across the agency in the strategic use of data and information. Rottnest Island Authority, for example, is using business intelligence dashboards that present key operational and business information in one place. The leadership team accesses the data in one location rather than going to different areas for datasets and information on different processes. The dashboards also maximise the interactivity of the business intelligence software. Where previously data was largely used to meet reporting requirements, it is now a strategic asset providing insights that inform business decisions.

The review also found discrete examples of research data being used as a strategic asset. The agency undertakes and commissions research to understand who is using its services, for what reason and what other services it should deliver. It also deliberately gathers and analyses stakeholder feedback to help make decisions and develop policies and programs based on key behaviour insights and contextual information. Examples of this include using community feedback to examine the impact of anti social behaviour on one of the agency's parks, and analysing the agency's approach to swimming with humpback whales along the Ningaloo Coast.

The principles and characteristics of these can be applied to other areas to support the agency to continue to improve its capability in the strategic use of information and data.

### Good practice 2: Achieving greater outcomes through partnership and co-design with Aboriginal people

The agency has been recognised throughout the review as a leader in establishing partnerships and undertaking co-design with Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal Ranger Program specifically was referenced by a number of review stakeholders as an example of this expertise in co-design.

Core to the agency's land management responsibility is to protect and conserve the value of the land to the culture and heritage of Aboriginal people. This shared aspiration underpins the effectiveness and ethos by which the agency and Aboriginal groups and corporations partner. The agency's approach emphasises the importance of leadership, recognises Aboriginal people as partners rather than stakeholders and adopts a deliberate cycle of continuous improvement.

Most, if not all divisions in the agency, have relationships with Aboriginal people and communities in one way or another, and would benefit from the experience and lessons learnt of those involved with the Aboriginal Ranger Program. Other parts of government might also benefit from this agency's understanding and experience in how the program was developed and implemented.

### Good practice 3: Governance of strategic ICT

The agency's Office of Information Management has made important advances to overcome the challenge of establishing horizontal connections across work areas to

benefit service delivery highlighted earlier in this report. Implementing a central, strategic and robust ICT governance structure supports strategic ICT planning and local delivery.

The role of the office as a strategic partner rather than service provider, and the role of the areas it supports, are clearly defined, communicated and managed. The office has a strong governance framework for the procurement of information and data systems that divisions must follow. This results in a centralised decision making process which aims to achieve a unified approach to procurement, governance and compliance. This has not only improved the quality of significant ICT projects and provided greater efficiency in the use of resources, it has also supported collaboration across the agency.

With key features of a deliberate planning cycle, performance monitoring and governance framework, the structure enables and supports collaboration for shared ICT outcomes. It also supports the agency to think and plan collectively. There is a significant opportunity to look at this model for other functions that could benefit from an overarching approach and collaboration.