AEC
Australian Electoral Commission

Delivering the 2022 federal election

Addressing the challenges of an increasingly complex operating environment

March 2022

Table of Contents

Figures

Introduction

Delivering a federal election

One of Australia's largest and most complex peacetime operations

Free, fair, and impartial elections are the cornerstone of Australia's democracy. In support of our democracy, the Australian Electoral Commission's (AEC) role is to maintain an impartial and independent electoral system, most publicly through the conduct of successful federal elections every three years.

A federal election is one of Australia's largest and most complex peacetime logistical exercises, involving tens of thousands of staff, nearly 8,000 polling locations, just over 17 million electors, and 50 million ballot papers (not to mention countless sausages and cakes!).

The notion of a successful election rests on the ability of every elector to exercise their vote without let or hindrance. Australians are very aware of the value of the ballot, and the significance of the act of voting, and therefore expect a high standard of electoral administration. With this in mind, the AEC maintains an absolute focus on electoral integrity. We have robust planning and delivery processes in place, but we also remain agile and alert to identify and address any challenges that may adversely impact what we value so much – Australia's triennial free and fair festival of democracy.

The 2022 federal election

An increasingly complex operating environment

Delivering a federal election has always been an enormous challenge but the 2022 federal election will be delivered against a backdrop of an increasingly complex and unpredictable operating environment, posing unprecedented planning and delivery challenges.

The next federal election will be the largest and most complex in Australia's history. The sheer size and scale of the event, with the highest level of enrolment since Federation (over 17 million) and millions of election-time transactions, brings with it the need to further refine our processes, train greater numbers of staff, deploy more equipment, and design and deliver election services at scale that meet voters' changing expectations. In light of increased media attention and citizen engagement through social media, both here and internationally, we also expect the next event will be the most scrutinised election the AEC has ever conducted.

Notwithstanding the above planning and procedural considerations, there is also the potential for factors largely outside of the AEC's control such as natural disasters to impact our operations, or for malign actors to interfere in our electoral processes through cyber-attacks, foreign interference, and/or the spread of disinformation. As has been the case with the current COVID-19 pandemic, along with multiple legislation changes late in the electoral cycle, these challenges add layers of additional complexity to our planning and delivery of the next federal election.

The AEC has remained alert, focused, and agile, ready to pivot and ensure we can address this broad range of emerging challenges. In our ongoing preparation for the next federal election, the AEC has identified five key challenges that are informing all our preparations: electoral integrity and reputation; security and disinformation; COVID-19; labour force pressures; and service delivery expectations. Looking through the prism of these five areas, we have undertaken a concerted program of additional work across many parts the AEC, and with a broad spectrum of stakeholders, to develop holistic responses to these challenges.

This document sets out the detail of these responses and outlines how many parts of the organisation have come together to work collaboratively (noting a good deal of this planning has been done virtually during lockdowns), to develop responses (identified throughout the document in bold purple text) that are evidence-based and strategically integrated into our election readiness roadmap. This approach has ensured that the AEC is not just 'election ready' but able to deliver to the high standards Australian citizens continue to expect in these extraordinary times.

Figure 1: The key challenges of the next federal election

Key challenges

1. Electoral reputation and integrity

Maintaining a positive reputation for the Australian electoral system amongst citizens is critical in ensuring trust in election results: electoral integrity is central to this.

The challenge of electoral reputation management has only intensified in the era of social media and disinformation, particularly when some citizens and commentators can be astonishingly swift to reach, and then broadcast through social media, unshakably strong views about electoral events. These views, frequently untethered to the realities of law, process or context, can ooze into the mainstream and influence broader societal views. Anticipating those issues enables the AEC to deal with matters before they influence the reputation of Australia's electoral system.
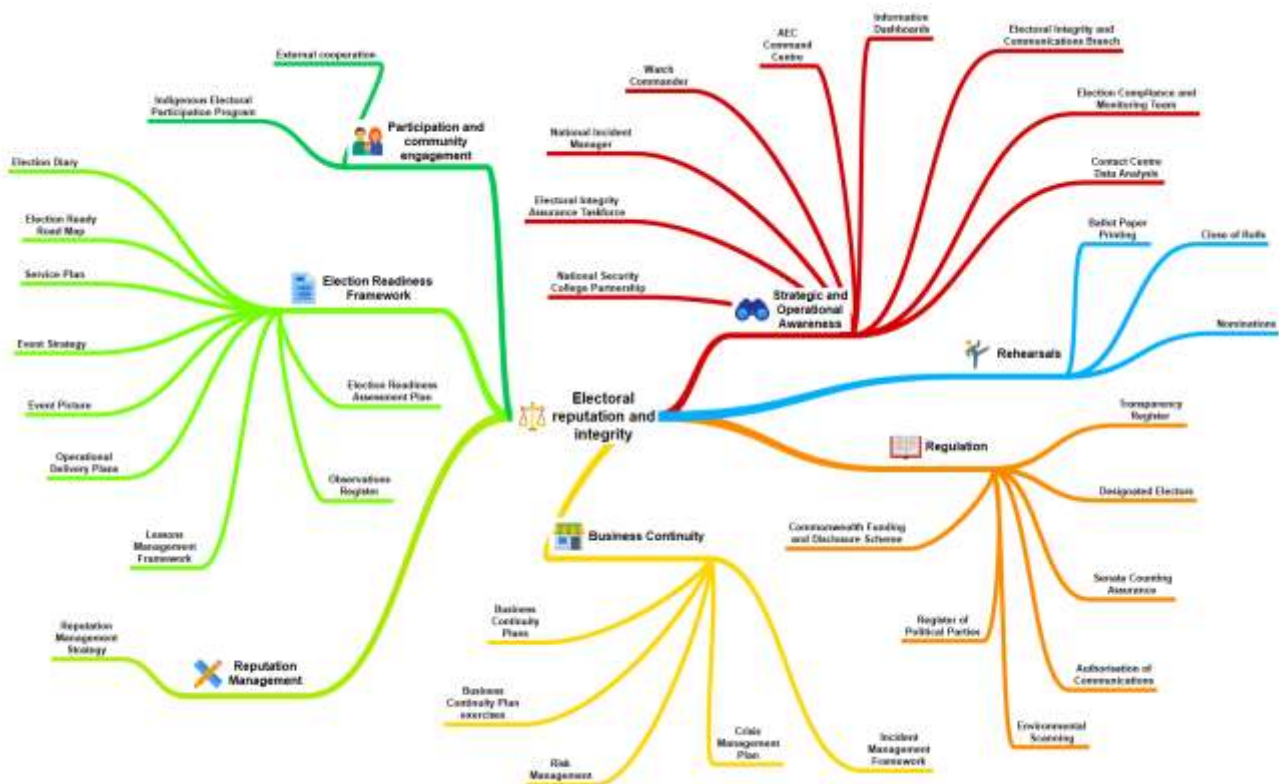

Figure 2: Electoral reputation and integrity challenges and responses

Reputation management

This year the AEC has developed an **Electoral Integrity: Reputation Management Strategy** that guides the agency's overarching approach to reputation management and electoral integrity. This strategy is underpinned by six key principles:

- be proactive in building a positive reputation for the Australian electoral system

- undertake open and regular communication with voters and stakeholders

- position the AEC as the foremost subject matter expert on federal electoral processes in Australia

- exercise judicious use of language, tone, and timing in political, media and social media environments

- back-up public statements with operational delivery

- actively monitor issues, manage risks, and plan for crisis situations.

The strategy sets out how we will embed these principles across three key elements of our work: **operations, security, and information** (see Figure 1 below). This section will focus on initiatives in the operational sphere, including crisis, incident, and risk management, while work undertaken to address security and information is detailed in the next section.
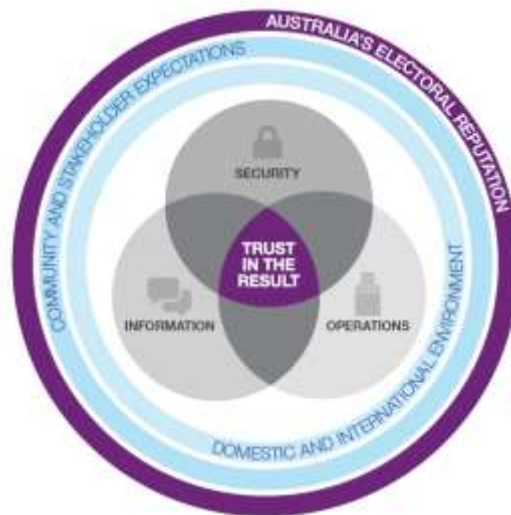
Figure 3: The elements of electoral integrity

Election Readiness Framework

Since the 2016 federal election, the AEC has prepared for and delivered electoral events through the **Election Readiness Framework**. This Framework ensures that the way the AEC plans and conducts elections always evolves to meet increasing public and stakeholder expectations, and the challenges presented by a dynamic operating environment. It also ensures that our preparation and planning always responds within the context of the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* (the Electoral Act) – the legislation that dictates how the AEC delivers the electoral process.

Core to the Framework are four key objectives that guide the planning and delivery of each election:

- good customer service, including minimal queue times

- positive customer experience

- integrity and timeliness of the result

- efficient processes and procedures.

In preparation for the 2022 federal election, additional planning has been undertaken and further procedural documentation and guidance developed to ensure our procedures are robust and can address complex challenges seamlessly through integrated planning, forecasting, assurance, and risk management processes.

Since inception, our Framework has been expanded to include the following elements:

- **Event Strategy** – an internal document that sets the strategic direction for the AEC in the lead up to the next election.

- **Event Picture** – an internal document capturing key policies, practices, training, and systems for the next election, including showing key changes since the last election.

- **Service Plan** – an external document that provides an overview of the service delivery AEC stakeholders and voters can expect at the next election.

- **Election Diary** – an internal document setting out day-by-day activities at the divisional level during the election.

- **Operational Delivery Plans** – cascading election delivery plans at the national, state, and divisional level that assist staff to articulate planning assumptions, detail preparation and delivery activities, highlight interdependencies, and assist with risk and business continuity planning.

- **Election Ready Road Map** – a live, outcomes-focused document that synchronises election preparation across the agency and assists with the identification of risks and issues.

- **Election Readiness Assessment Plan** – an assurance process that allows the AEC to evaluate election readiness progress and make recommendations for change.

- **Lessons Management Framework** – an internal process to review to conduct of the previous election, identify lessons to be learned, and define how these lessons can best be addressed.

- **Observations Register** – the AEC's primary tool for staff to record their observations about the AEC's processes, systems, materials, standard operating procedures, and policies during an election which then informs the "lessons learned" process.

All these documents have been updated continually throughout the lead up to this next election to ensure they reflect new policies and procedures to address integrity and reputation issues, security and disinformation, COVID-safe practices, and service delivery requirements (see the following sections for further detail about the work in these areas).

Rehearsals

We conduct **rehearsals** to confirm that changes and lessons from the previous election have been implemented, and we're ready to conduct the election – whenever it may be. They allow participants to practise key and critical election processes in role and become familiar with the interoperability between processes and business areas. They are an important learning tool for staff that are new to the AEC and new to role.

Lockdowns have significantly impacted on the AEC's ability to prepare and practice for the election. This has particularly impacted our ability to setup and rehearse with key suppliers. However, we have supplemented with a number of virtual exercises and developed workarounds to enable rehearsals to progress with suppliers. In some cases, this meant the suppliers ran tests on our behalf, and supplied us with outputs to check, in some cases remote technology was used such as a video link where normally we would have had staff on site, and where we couldn't send National Office staff to a process, local state or divisional office staff were used. In all cases where a rehearsal was unable to be run adequately due to lockdowns, we have then followed up with further processes once staff were able to travel again. Some examples of the rehearsals we conduct are the **National Intensive Enrolment Processing Event** (or close of the electoral roll), **candidate nominations**, and **the Ballot Paper printing** rehearsal.

Figure 4: AEC Rehearsals Snapshot

Business continuity, crisis, incident, and risk management

The AEC has undertaken considerable work to develop a robust **business continuity plan** (BCP) development cycle. Business continuity plans have been developed for core and program critical functions, for electoral events, state and divisional offices, and for polling premises. In late 2021 the agency conducted an **extensive BCP testing and review process** that brought together staff from across the agency to test plans against election scenarios. A range of additional COVID-19 scenarios have also been developed to further test these plans.

Over the past two years the agency has significantly refined its **Incident Management Framework** to more clearly define incident types and escalation processes, ensuring visibility to appropriate levels of leadership at all times.

As a key component of Reputation Management Strategy, the agency has also developed a more specific **Crisis Management Plan** which outlines the processes to manage a crisis, including preparation, response, and recovery.

The AEC's new Command Centre plays a critical role in both the Incident Management Framework and this plan, as it will facilitate a coordinated response across the agency to any critical incident (see the below section on **Strategic and operational awareness** for more detail).

The agency has further developed its approach to **risk management**, establishing the AEC Risk Management System (ARMS), which serves as a central repository of all projects, operational, enterprise, strategic, and federal election risks. Each have an identified owner, and indicate which controls are in place, ownership of those controls, potential treatments, ownership of the treatments, and delivery and review dates. Review of the strategic risks is undertaken every six weeks by the Executive Leadership Team, while election risks are actively monitored by the National Operations Readiness Committee. Additional risk management training was also undertaken by SES staff in the latter half of 2021.

Strategic and operational awareness

As part of the agency's modernisation program (see p 22 for more detail), the **AEC Command Centre** was established in late 2021 to provide a secure, leading-edge, central point of command from which elections (and the business-as-usual work of the agency outside of the election period), in all their complexity and scale, can be monitored, especially if a crisis emerges. In previous federal elections, the AEC has had limited visibility of operations across the country due to the lack of a central command capability and facility. The AEC Command Centre will greatly enhance our ability to monitor and resolve issues as they transpire during electoral events.

To support the operation of the Command Centre, and the preparation and delivery of electoral events, the Information and Knowledge Management team within the Organisational Transformation Division is developing a series of **information dashboards** to provide situational awareness to AEC executives and staff. The dashboards allow AEC executives and staff to monitor operational activities (including incident information and developing emergency situations) and election results. There are two types of information dashboards (both can be accessed digitally), namely *operational dashboards*, containing detailed operational information which can be used by operatives on the ground to make informed decisions; and *executive dashboards* showing an overall picture, at-a-glance, providing AEC executives greater situational awareness and better enabling timely decision-making.

The AEC Command Centre has a fulltime dedicated staff of six led by the **Watch Commander**. The Watch Commander oversees the day-to-day running of the Command Centre, reporting directly to the National Election Manager (NEM) in support of election readiness and to the **National Incident**

Manager (NIM) in the event of a major incident or crisis that may affect the AEC's ability to run the federal election.

The Watch Commander is reliant on the Command Centre staff through the use of dashboards, social media monitoring and external data, as well as experts within the AEC and other Australian Government Agencies, to collect and collate information to assist the NEM and NIM to make informed decisions. These areas include the **Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce**, the **Election Compliance and Monitoring Team**, **Contact Centre data analysis**, and internal and external communications. Other liaison officers from areas within the AEC will locate within the Command Centre at differing times of the writ to writ timetable.

The Watch Commander, under the authority of the NIM, is also the custodian of the AEC Incident Management Framework and the Crisis Management Plan.

As part of its overall more centralised approach to managing integrity and risk, in 2021 the AEC also established the **Electoral Integrity and Communications Branch**.

Participation and community engagement

Proactive strategies to build understanding about electoral processes, and to manage stakeholder and community expectations about electoral services are also a critical part of maintaining the integrity and reputation of Australia's electoral processes.

In the AEC's ongoing efforts to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation, we have established around 40 partnerships in targeted areas with Indigenous service providers through our **Indigenous Electoral Participation Program** (IEPP). The IEPP network are continuing to work with existing partners on promoting enrolment, voting and TEW, and working to establish new partnerships. Regular meetings with the National Indigenous Australians Agency have also been established to facilitate the sharing of information relevant to the IEPP.

One of our most recent new partnerships is with NITV, running a "that's why I enrol" campaign.

To ensure we continue to engage with the voters of tomorrow, the AEC is delivering a modern electoral education centre. The **refurbishment of the National Election Education Centre (NEEC)** in Old Parliament House includes technology upgrades that deliver innovative electoral education methods, including DemocraCity our new 3D electoral education video game, while also retaining the fundamentals of what has made the NEEC so successful over the last 21 years – and brought more than 1.5 million students through its doors – a high quality education program, linked to the Australian Curriculum for schools, facilitated by our team of expert Electoral Educators. A vast majority of visitors to the NEEC after we reopen will be school groups visiting as part of interstate school excursions to Canberra, but the NEEC will also showcase the AEC and our electoral system to our international visitor delegations, Parliamentary and other stakeholders, community groups, and hundreds of current and new AEC staff.

The AEC's will also launch a **new electoral exhibition**, which will open this year and be hosted inside the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House and celebrate the strength of Australia's system of democracy and elections. It will include historic innovations of Australia's electoral system, such as the secret ballot, and celebrate the AEC's contribution to Australia's democracy – our history, our success, and our role as an electoral management body. This offers us a wonderful opportunity to both educate the public on our electoral system, and also publicly showcase what we do to all of our stakeholders.
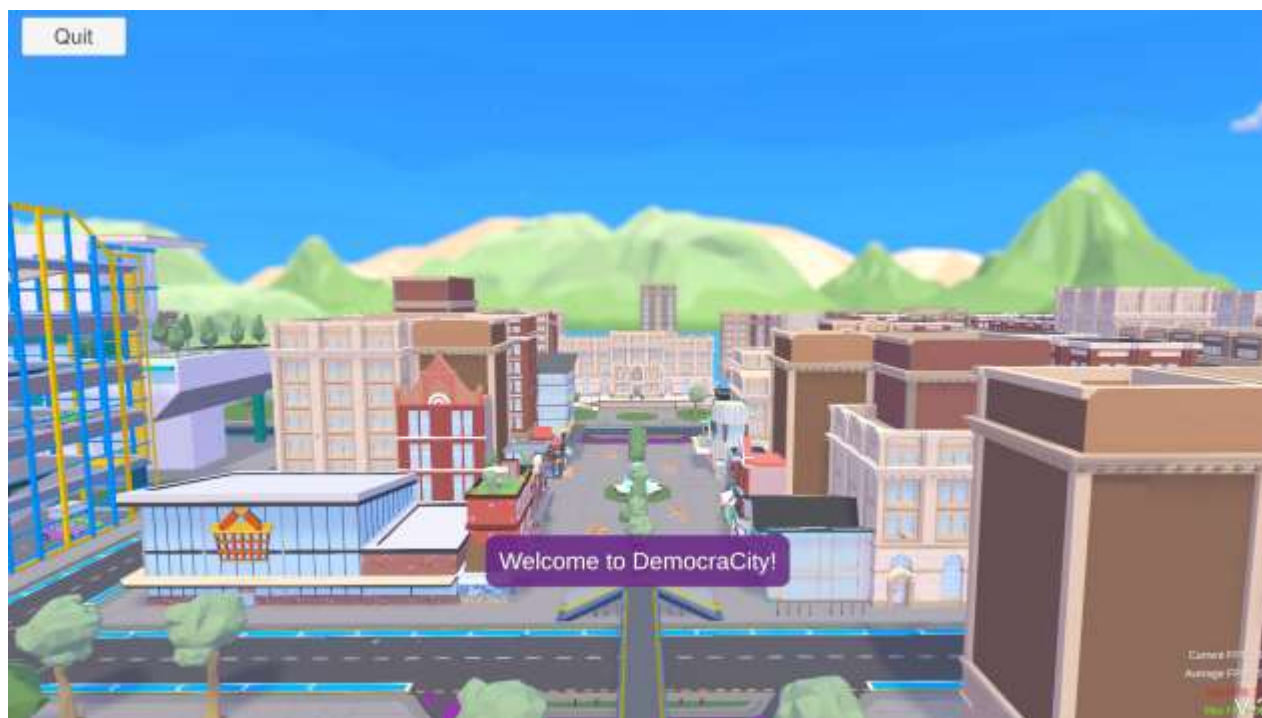

Figure 5: A screen shot from "DemocraCity" the AEC's new virtual election education game

External cooperation

External cooperation is critical to ensure the AEC succeeds in an evolving environment, delivering safe and effective elections into the future. We partner with a range of government organisations (such as the Australian Tax Office, Services Australia, Australia Post, the Australian Bureau of Statistics, and the Department of Home Affairs) and private entities to deliver Australian electoral events.

Of particular note is the work of the **Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce** (EITF) which was established ahead of the federal by-elections held in 2018. The AEC co-leads this taskforce and works with a number of other federal government departments (including the intelligence community when required) to safeguard against interference that may impact on the safe delivery of electoral events. Potential threats include malicious cyber activity, physical attacks, foreign interference, or disinformation.

Regulation

The AEC has three clear regulatory roles:

- Regulation of the **Commonwealth funding and disclosure scheme** detailed under Part XX of the Electoral Act which requires candidates, Senate groups, political parties, members of parliament, Senators, significant third parties, associated entities, and donors to lodge election or annual financial disclosure returns with the AEC. These returns are published on the **Transparency Register** enabling voters easy access to all disclosures under Part XX to increase the accountability and transparency of those involved in political finance.
- Administration of the registration of political parties under Part XI of the Electoral Act and maintenance of the **Register of Political Parties**. This lists those parties which are eligible to have the party affiliation of their endorsed candidates printed on ballot papers at a federal election.
- Administration of the **authorisation of electoral communications** in accordance with Part XXA of the Electoral Act.

With heightened media and political focus on groups that may be communicating electoral matter or otherwise engaged in electoral activities, and therefore have disclosure obligations under the Electoral Act, additional AEC resources have been dedicated to **environmental scanning** and investigation to ensure those with potential registration and disclosure obligations are made aware of these and comply. Changes to legislation which significantly affect the funding and disclosure in December 2021 have required the AEC to adapt processes and systems and communicate with stakeholders in a quick timeframe.

Figure 6: AEC financial disclosure communication product

Legislation

The *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Offences and Preventing Multiple Voting) Act 2021* passed by parliament in September 2021 allows the Electoral Commissioner to declare someone a '**designated elector**' if they are reasonably suspected of having voted more than once in the same election. This declaration can be made whether or not the elector has been convicted of a multiple voting offence. A designated elector may only vote by declaration vote, not by ordinary vote. Procedures used when processing declaration votes ensure that only one vote from a designated elector can be admitted to the count, ensuring that integrity and confidence in the election remains high.

The *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Assurance of Senate Counting) Act 2021*, passed by parliament in December 2021, strengthens the integrity of Australia's electoral system by increasing the transparency and **assurance of Senate counting**, including independent assurances of the computer systems and processes used to capture and count votes.

2. Security and disinformation

The AEC has measures in place to manage security (both cyber and physical), provide accurate information, and ensure operational integrity so citizens have faith in, and can trust, the election result. The AEC is steadfastly committed to maintaining high standards, and to applying the requirements of the Electoral Act without fear or favour.

A breakdown in public trust endangers electoral integrity. Everyone involved in the safe delivery of elections must be committed to reducing the footprint of disinformation. The risks of inaction are serious. Consequences could be an erosion of public confidence in our governing institutions, and the potential to disenfranchise electors.

In an evolving electoral context, threats range from influencing voters before casting their vote, to interfering with the mechanics of the voting process. The possible outcome could be a compromise in our ability to effectively conduct an election with a trusted result.
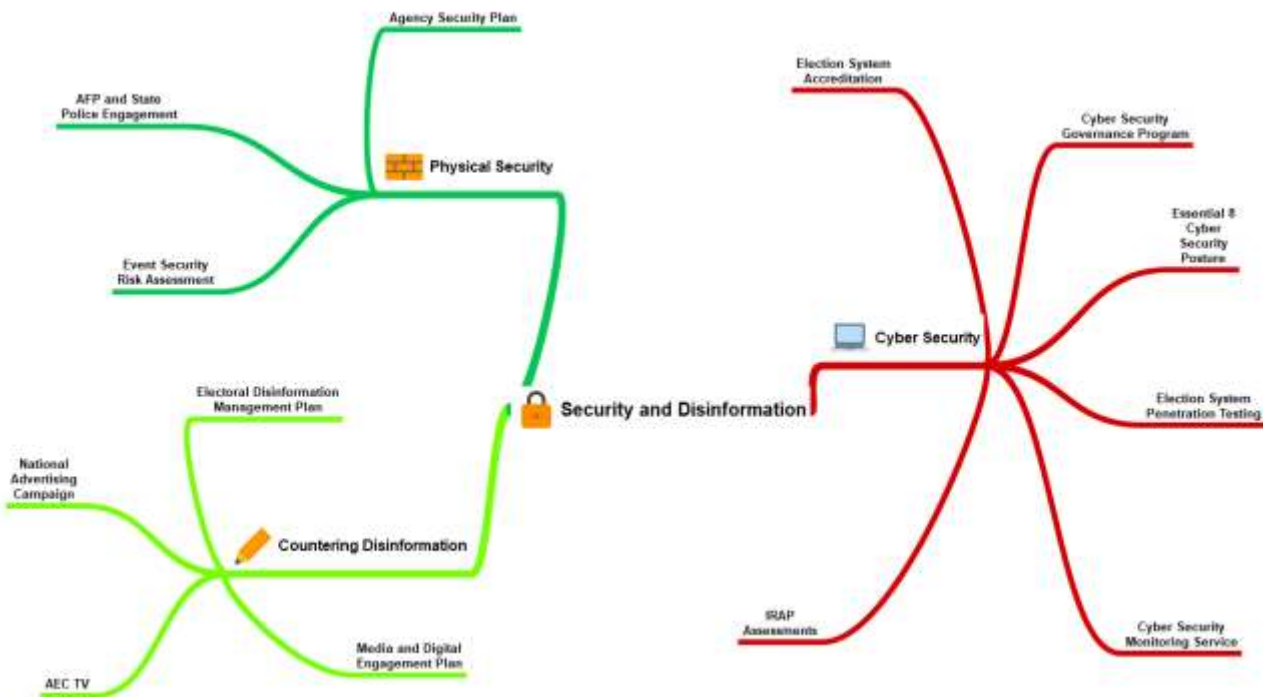

Figure 7: Security and disinformation challenges and responses

Physical security

The AEC produces an **Agency Security Plan**, which articulates the AEC's strategic security goals and objectives, the security management strategy, the key roles and responsibilities of the AEC's security organisation and a two-year forward security work program.

The AEC has **engaged closely with the Australian Federal Police** (AFP) and **state and territory police forces** to discuss the operating environment for the next federal election and the operating model required. This engagement will support the effective coordination and management of any incidents or disruptions on polling day and to help discharge the requirements outlined *in Australia's Strategy for Protecting Crowded Places from Terrorism*. All state and territory police forces will have their Command Centres operational on polling day and will link into the AFP as the coordinating body for the AEC to directly interact with (from the AEC Command Centre). The AFP is working with all state and territory polices forces and the AEC to further plan out the detail of this model before the next federal election. The AEC is also undertaking an **event security risk assessment** to further inform security arrangements for the next federal election.

Cyber security

The AEC operates a **cyber security governance program** to ensure that the risks associated with our systems and applications are known, remediated where appropriate and ultimately accepted by the organisation. This occurs in alignment with the relevant portions of the Protective Security Policy Framework (PSPF) and the Information Security Manual (ISM).

The AEC maintains regular working partnerships with relevant security agencies to provide additional operational assurance. This includes working very closely with the Australian Cyber Security Centre (ACSC).

In 2020 as part of the ACSC's Cyber Security Response Fund (CSRF), the AEC worked with IT consultancy resources made available through the ACSC, to materially **improve its cyber security posture against the Essential Eight** (E8). The AEC intends to also engage consultancies directly, to ensure out security posture against the revised E8 meets our maturity targets prior to the upcoming federal election. Prior to the upcoming federal election, the ACSC will undertake a series of activities to further strengthen the AECs cyber security environment.

The AEC is also undertaking a number of additional steps to further strengthen the security of its election systems:

- **Penetration testing of critical election systems** - Penetration testing of critical election systems and supporting IT infrastructure will be concluded in January 2022.
- **Cyber Security Monitoring Service** (CSMS) - The CSMS service provides a heightened support model for the election and includes a platform for the aggregation and correlation of

security logs in addition to monitoring of AEC critical systems by a Security Operations Centre (SOC). The CSMS will be operational in January 2022.

- **IRAP assessments** – IRAP assessments for the Easy Count and BPRD systems will be undertaken ahead of the election.
- **Accreditation of election critical systems** - Accreditation of election critical systems was completed October 2021.

Countering disinformation

Over and above the logistics of running an election, the potential for malign actors to attempt to interfere in our electoral procedures is a growing concern. The threat of disinformation is always present, and the AEC aims to take the lead in explaining to the public how we conduct elections.

In essence, community sentiment about electoral integrity must be fostered through effective and highly accurate communication. One of the most effective things an electoral management body can do to protect against the threat of electoral disinformation is to prepare citizens ahead of an electoral event. The AEC's approach is outlined in both the **Electoral Disinformation Management Plan** and the **Media and Digital Engagement Plan,** which also form part of the AEC's Reputation Management Strategy.

Figure 8: Tweet from @AECElectoralCom on 7 October 2021

To maintain awareness of electoral matters, the AEC is engaging with the public and a range of different communities and stakeholders throughout the electoral cycle, including through **AEC TV** on YouTube. At the federal election, the AEC will conduct a **national advertising campaign** across a range of communication channels and in many Indigenous and major community languages to maximise successful election participation.
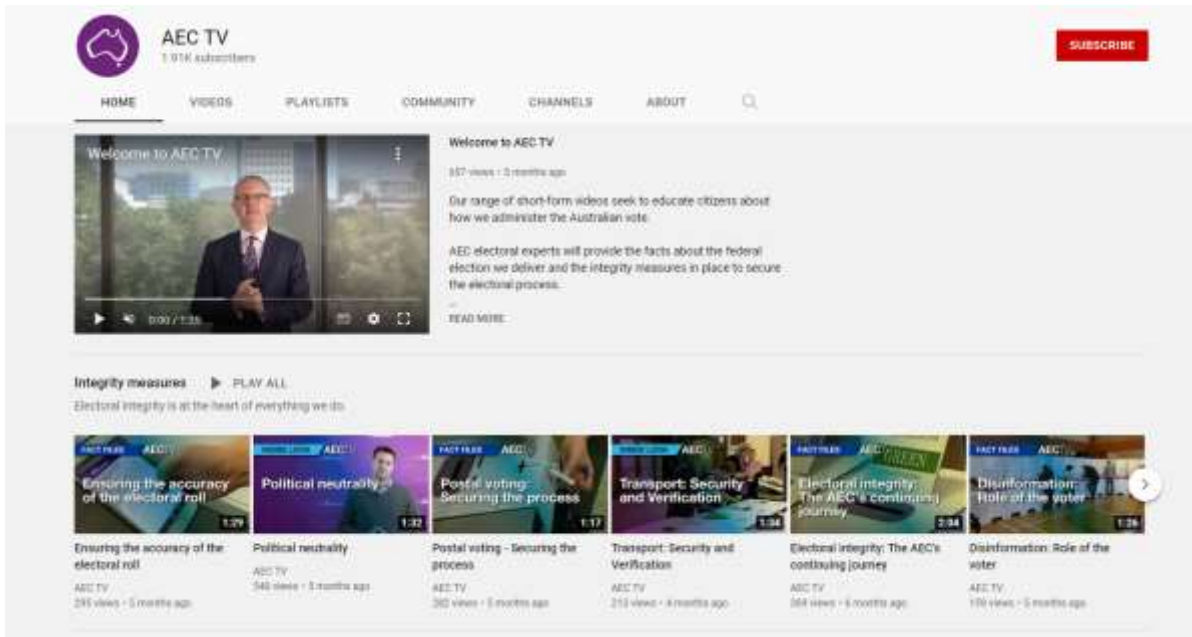
Figure 9: AEC TV on YouTube

3. COVID-19

It is crucial that we meet Australian Government and community expectations to provide a safe environment for the public to enrol and vote, and to stay informed and educated about our electoral system and services. While we have managed two by-elections during the pandemic, the 2022 federal election will be the first federal event that the AEC has delivered during a global pandemic. The implementation of COVID safety measures to comply with relevant health advice is an evolving situation. COVID-19 will continue to impact all aspects of our operations and we are working constantly to adapt to changes in the external environment and respond to manage our risks effectively, all within the parameters of the Electoral Act including the recent passage of the Contingency Measures Bill 2021. The measures we develop to safely manage within the COVID-19 environment are also being tested through an external assurance process.
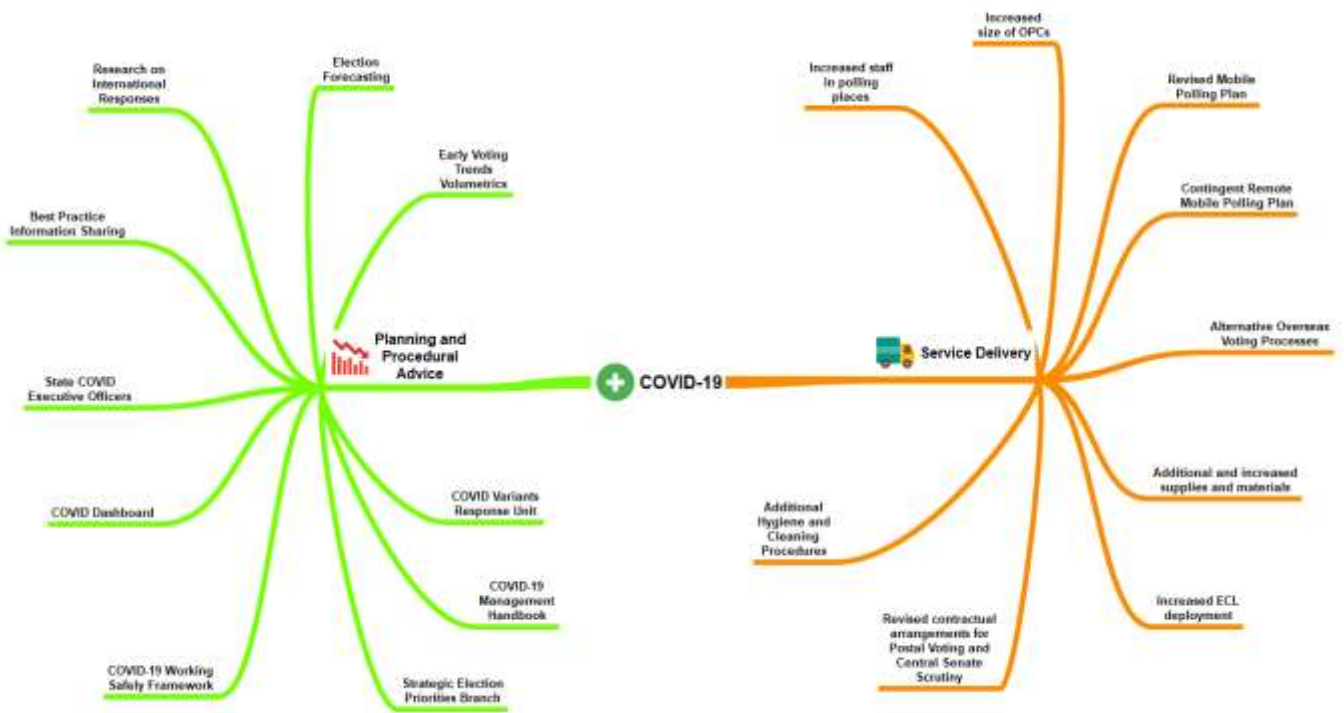

Figure 10: COVID-19 challenges and responses

Planning and procedural advice

Drawing on our by-election experience (Groom and Eden-Monaro) and those of the states and territories running state and local government elections throughout the last 18 months, we have dedicated resources to plan how to safely run a COVID-19 impacted federal election to ensure all eligible voters are able to exercise their franchise and the health and well-being of both staff and voters is protected.

Noting pre-poll and postal voting numbers from the last federal election and trends from the elections conducted during the pandemic, in addition to the unprecedented size of this election, we have undertaken an **Early Voting Trends Volumetrics Project** to analyse early voting trends and develop predictions to ensure early voting capacity can be met with respect to COVID-19 requirements for staffing, materials, and service levels.

While changing health requirements have impacted our ability to accurately forecast the polling footprint, staff, materials, and budget required, we have ensured that our **election forecasting efforts** have remained agile and able to adapt to the changing environment. Working with health authorities across multiple jurisdictions we have injected a COVID-19 overlay into all of our planning and forecasting.

The Delta COVID variant, and now Omicron, have meant that we cannot just set and forget our COVID-19 election posture. To ensure the AEC continues to adhere to the latest advice and directions from the Australian Government and State and Territory authorities, in August 2021 we established a **COVID Variants Response Unit** (CVRU). The CVRU, building on the extensive work done to deliver COVID-safe by-elections, is providing a coordinated effort to ensure a robust agency response to the particular challenges posed by the Delta and Omicron variants (and any future variants).

Situated within a newly established election-focused branch - the **Strategic Election Priorities Branch** – the CRVU provides the agency with a central source of up-to-date information across all Australian jurisdictions, acts as a central point of coordination with key external stakeholders such as the Chief Health Officers and the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) and has supported operational areas with scenarios to allow them to test their responsiveness to complexities of delivery that may occur during to COVID. Some of other the key outputs of this unit are:

- a **COVID-19 Management Handbook**
- updates to the **COVID-19 Working Safely Framework** with People and Property Branch
- **research on international responses** to delivering elections during pandemic conditions
- COVID election **best practice information sharing** with states and territories
- **COVID dashboard** leveraging Commonwealth and state data
- the establishment of **COVID Executive Officer roles** in each state and territory office.

Service delivery

COVID-safe considerations have informed the design of all our election period services, including voter services, premises management, the deployment of equipment, and required changes to our service delivery arrangements with key suppliers.

Voter services

- **Polling operations** – increased number of staff to accommodate additional time to issue votes, clean, and manage queues and the design of new materials and processes.

  - Issuing time data was collected at the Eden-Monaro and Groom by-elections where COVID-safe measures were in place, with outcomes showing issuing time was increased. We worked with Deakin University to run models on different table loadings (number of issuing staff) to ensure queuing was not adversely impacted.

  - Staffing models were further increased to account for hygiene officers and queue controllers at each polling place to administer COVID-safe measures.

  - New processes include regular cleaning of voting screens and issuing areas, sanitisation of hands at the entry and exit of polling places (and regularly for staff), sanitisation of voting pens and pencils between each use, management of number of people inside, QR codes and masks if required by local health authorities, and the use of social distancing markers.

- **Mobile polling** – On the basis of health advice, no mobile polling is planned for prisons or hospitals. However, a modest amount of mobile polling in aged care facilities is being undertaken subject to relevant health authority advice. Cells in each state office will support voting by other means for those facilities that will not have access to mobile polling services.

- **Overseas voting** – While the environment overseas remains fluid, we are working with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to determine how best to manage overseas voting. In the current environment will undoubtedly mean less in-person voting but we are putting alternative processes in place to establish postal receipt points and the courier services. We are also developing revised voter information materials to support overseas voters.

- **Remote mobile polling** – Mobile voting in remote areas of Australia will continue wherever possible with COVID-19 safety measures in place. A limited number of other mobile voting teams will continue to provide services where voters are not able to get to a polling place and/or where postal voting is determined to be inadequate.

Premises management

- **Out-posted Centres** (OPCs) – We have increased the size of OPCs, co-located a number of sites, and adjusted staffing models to accommodate social distancing and the impact on counting procedures.

Equipment

- **Security of our supply chain** – The global supply of materials as well as logistics services have been significantly impacted by the pandemic, for example there is increased competition for courier services and locations for pick and pack and storage of materials. To address this and to secure the AEC supply chain, longer-term stagging facility leases have been entered into. Additional materials above normal demand have been placed and shipped earlier in the electoral cycle. Purchasing and storage of materials including furniture has occurred to ensure viable supplies of mission essential equipment can be provided to address potential supplier shortfalls. Additional QA activities with logistics suppliers have been conducted including business continuity and contingency planning workshops.

- **New equipment and materials requirements** – we are supplying a range of bespoke products to all our election premises, including Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) supplies and screen inserts to enable wiping down of voting screens. The AEC has entered into an MOU with the federal Department of Health to provide bulk PPE supplies from the National Medical Stockpile, consisting of masks, gloves, and sanitiser to use across polling and counting venues.

- **Electronic Certified List (ECL) deployment** – Given we have increased the number of issuing staff and allowing for a potential increase in pre-poll voting, we have increased the number of ECLs. In addition, the ECL application has been enhanced allowing for improved monitoring and reporting as well as the ability to download election information remotely. This feature means ECLs can be dispatched earlier and have polling places, certified list updates and ballot paper images downloaded in-field. Previously this had to be part of the ECL build centrally prior to dispatch shortly before commencement of pre-poll.

Contractual arrangements

- **Postal Vote Application (PVA) scanning** – We have contractual arrangements with a key supplier to undertake PVA scanning. Our current contract has accounted for potential increases in PVAs, including party PVAs, due to the pandemic. Many voters may opt to use our online PVA service and this has also been enhanced to accommodate and increased number of users and applications.

- **Postal voting central print** - To account for potential increases in postal voting, we have worked with a key supplier to redesign the postal envelope to facilitate increased production capacity and this new design has been user tested and facilitated by a recent legislative. We

have also doubled the amount of normal stock ordered to cater for voters who are more likely to postal vote instead of attending a polling place or in lieu of mobile polling.

- **Central Senate scrutiny** – Working with our contracted supplier, building works and additional measures were required to apply COVID-safe requirements such as screens between data entry staff, creating zones to minimise impact of a positive case, and extra cleaning and safety measures.

4. Labour force pressures

Among the requirements for preparing to conduct the next federal election is the recruiting and training of a workforce that expands from around 800 to over 100,000 during an election period. This is a gargantuan task at the best of times, compounded by increased staffing requirements due to COVID, an annualised separation rate of 25.1 per cent of the workforce, and current economic conditions impacting our ability to identify, attract, onboard, and train the right people for the right roles. But we have a range of strategies in place to address these challenges.
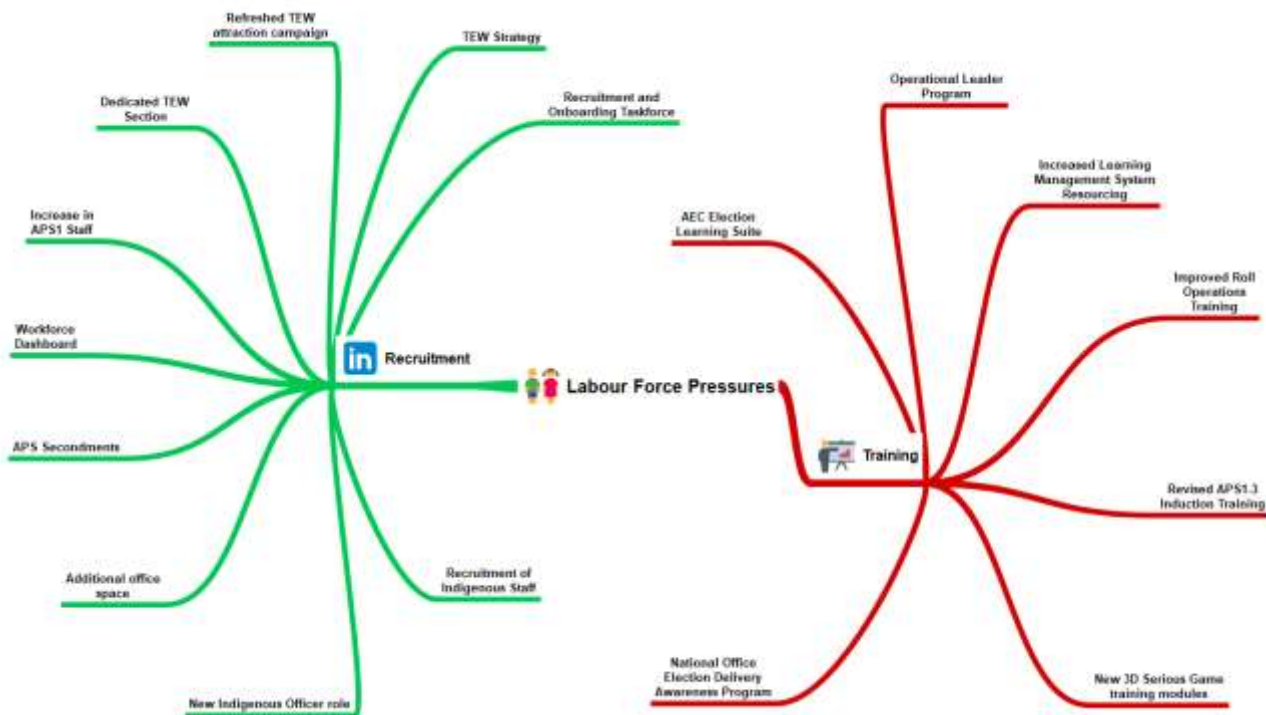

Figure 11: Labour force challenges and responses

Recruitment

Australia's unemployment rate is now forecast to fall to 4.25 per cent in 2021-22, and while this is economically good news, it does create significant labour force pressures, with demand greater than supply in an already competitive employment market.

To ensure we can attract the number of staff we require we have undertaken the following:

- Established the **Recruitment and Onboarding Taskforce** within the Strategic Election Priorities Branch to work in consultation with our People and Property Branch to streamline our recruitment and onboarding processes and work with recruitment agencies to identify election surge staff and our Temporary Election Workforce (TEW).

- Developed a **TEW Strategy** and **refreshed attraction communications** to attract a greater number and range of people to work at the election.

- Established a **dedicated section to support TEW recruitment** and electoral divisions with associated staffing matters during an electoral event, such as registering interest to work at an election and advice regarding pay and conditions of employment.

- Engaging an **increased number of APS1 staff** (up from 1,500 at the 2019 federal election to a maximum of 3,500) to support election activities.

- **Additional space** is being sourced and leased to accommodate the temporary surge workforce, which then requires varying levels of office fit out works. This is underway in consultation with national/state/territory offices.

- To provide reliable, timely and meaningful data, **new workforce dashboards** are being developed, and automated where possible.

- Co-designed a strategy for promoting TEW opportunities to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with an Indigenous service provider. This has resulted in the development of a State Guidance document on Indigenous TEW to assist divisions in **recruiting Indigenous people** to work at the next federal election, further promoting TEW opportunities through our IEPP partners, and working with the Indigenous Electoral Participation Working Group to further disseminate information.

- Working with the **Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) to access APS surge reserve staff** from across the APS to potentially take up roles as Divisional Returning Officers and other support and delivery positions.

Training

The AEC has developed and implemented people and learning strategies to ensure the agency can attract, develop, and retain a talented, agile and professional workforce. This includes both AEC's regular APS and temporary election workforce. While this has been a long-stranding strategic objective of the agency, a number of new learning programs and supporting resources have been developed and deployed ahead of this next federal election and to support training during COVID restrictions.

- **AEC suite of election learning** - 18 'election task' programs have been created to provide a flexible, practical and personalised approach to election training to enable existing AEC staff to continue to build and enhance their operational skills and to also support the training of staff in critical operational roles who are new to the AEC.

- **Operational Leader Program** – The OLP was designed to allow for 100 per cent virtual delivery due to COVID. Separate programs were developed for DROs, Operations Managers, Senior Leaders, and Directors/AEOs. Further face to face sessions have been developed to allow for states to bring their staff together for hands on training and networking. DRO and Operations Managers programs have been further redesigned to allow new staff to undertake the training on an 'as needs' basis depending on their election role and timing of their onboarding.

- **Learning Management System (LMS) resourcing** - Due to the increased number of TEW staff under COVID-safe measures, the resourcing for the AEC's Learning Management System (LMS) has been increased. This includes increased helpdesk support and budgeting for increased fees which are based on the number of users.

- **Roll Operations Program** - Improved roll operations training has been developed in conjunction with business area improvement of reference materials and system functions. New training is partly in response to the increased complexity of enrolment processing as system automation manages the simpler tasks, and to support the onboarding of new processing staff.

- **APS 1 induction information** - In response to the changes in the profile of the AEC's workforce, the National Induction Program has been tailored to support the induction of the APS 2 and 3 non-ongoing workforce and the APS 1 workforce to ensure their induction is relevant to their role and responsibilities.

- **National Office Election Delivery Awareness Program** – A two-hour program election awareness program was delivered across the AEC's national office in response to decreased election operations knowledge in Canberra-based business areas, many of which have

experienced a high turnover of staff since the last federal election. Participants on this program are generally not assigned to election roles and do not undertake the more extensive election operations training.

- **3D games** – In an AEC first we have developed 3D Serious games for simulated training. ElectionSim modules are being developed to allow staff to practise and apply their OLP learning in a simulated election environment. Staff will complete the training online via AEC Learning.

Figure 12: A scene from the AEC's first new 3D ElectionSim training module

5. Service expectations

In a trend that has been observed since the 2016 federal election, the Australian public increasingly seeks more flexible options at election time, particularly regarding pre-poll voting. Within the current pandemic context, voters will expect greater voting accessibility and choice. We have focused on a range of enhancements to both our external and internal facing service delivery processes.
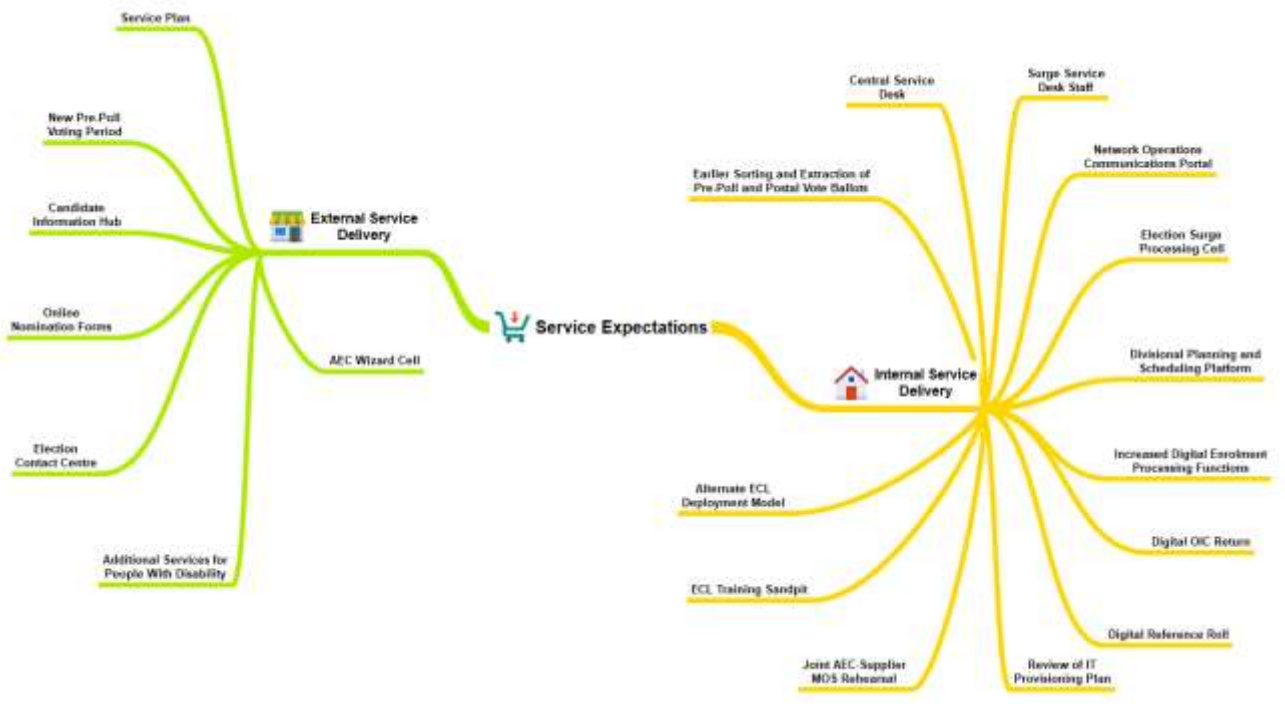

Figure 13: Service expectation challenges and responses

External service delivery

The AEC's **Service Plan** sets out our election service standards, which will underpin the delivery of the 2022 federal election to the electorate and candidates. This document will be published on the AEC website in early 2022 and will provide members of the public with a detailed view of how we plan to deliver this next election.

Included in the Service Plan are the key legislative changes since the last election and how they will impact the delivery of our services. One key change that came into effect in September 2021 was the

reduction in the pre-poll voting period to a fixed two-week period (previously up to three weeks depending on the timing of nominations.)

The AEC has taken a new approach to candidate briefings for this election, moving away from face-to-face delivery and focusing on centralised, consistent communications that can be accessed at candidates' convenience. In December 2021 the AEC launched a new **candidate information hub** on the AEC website that provides all candidates with a one-stop shop on everything they need to know to participate as a candidate in a federal election.

When an election is announced, candidates will also be able to access **online nomination forms** on the AEC website. They will be able to complete an online form which produces a PDF of their candidate nomination form and section 44 qualification checklist. While online submission of nominations is not yet accepted, use of the online form to create the PDF will ensure greater accuracy and compliance, and reduce errors due to handwriting interpretation.

The AEC is also continuing to consult with the Disability Advisory Committee to improve our service offering. In this election, additional services will be made available at targeted polling places, such as **text to speech pens** and **portable hearing loops**. Information on polling place accessibility and related services will be made available on the AEC website when the election is announced.

The AEC will again partner with Services Australia to deliver an **election contact centre**, email, and fulfilment services to the public at the next federal election. At the 2019 federal election approximately 380,000 calls were received (650,000 in 2016) as well as over 27,000 emails and 40,000 orders for products.

The external facing election contact centre will be supported by an internal AEC escalation (**Wizard Cell**) that will manage the complex enquiries from members of the public. At the 2019 federal election 7,600 calls and 3,100 emails were escalated to the Wizard Cell. It is expected that the number of enquiries at this year's election will greater than the 2019 federal election given the impact and concern to voters of the COVID-19 environment.

Internal service delivery

Working within the new AEC Service Operations Election Operating Model, the AEC established a **central service desk** on 1 November 2021 for AEC staff election inquiries. All key internal election preparation and delivery inquiries are managed through this service, with the service desk managing routine responses and triaging more complex inquiries through to business areas. This central service desk approach ensures AEC staff receive appropriate responses to their policy and procedural inquiries in a timely manner. We have also recruited and trained **additional AEC Service Desk surge staff** for the federal election delivery period, including onboarding election swell analysts and enacting a comprehensive training program.

To ensure our managers across the entire election network receive timely election preparation and delivery messaging and instructions, we have also developed an internal **Network Operations Communication portal**. This portal delivers key messages in easy to digest formats, providing a central repository of preparation and delivery instructions, in addition to acting as a ready reckoner for due and outstanding work.

We are also establishing an **Election Surge Processing Cell** to assist with all internal election processing work, noting the number of legislative changes to the Electoral Act that impact AEC processes, the volume of new staff, and the record number of electors that will participate in this next election. The core of the Surge Processing Cell will operate out of the AEC's National Office and, depending on surge workloads, may extend virtually across the country. This Cell will provide support to a range of election processes such as enrolment applications, postal vote applications, membership checking for party registration, and, if required, assisting the Wizard Cell with public inquiries.

We have also worked to digitise and automate some standard functions to relieve our people from routine administrative tasks. Working in conjunction with Deakin University, we have developed a new **Divisional Planning and Scheduling Platform**. Using the data and modelling collected and refined over various election events, the Platform will be used to schedule all scrutiny activity required for each division, to assist them to plan for counts accurately and efficiently and meet legislative and other requirements.

We have also made a number of enhancements to our **enrolment application systems** to ensure we can more efficiently manage enrolment applications and the Close of Rolls process. We have **improved elector access and user experience** through increased accessibility options for electors and additional options to provide evidence of identity online; further **automated application processing** by eliminating or better supporting manual processes with technology to distribute workload and improve reconciliation tasks; and we have further **streamlined backroom functionality** by increasing system capability and enhancing the utilisation of data and elector contact details and communication options.

We will also be **trialling a number of in-field digital initiatives** to inform our future delivery model for polling place technology, including a **digital Officer in Charge (OIC) Return** with selected OICs, **digital reference roll for selected declaration vote issuing points**, an **Electronic Certified List (ECL) training sandpit** and the **alternate ECL deployment model** with in-field update of ECL data.

To ensure all our Out Posted Centres (OPCs) and Central Senate Scrutiny teams have the IT equipment necessary to administer the election**, we have undertaken a comprehensive review of our IT equipment provisioning plan and operating guides.** Our **Mobile Office Solution (MOS) for our OPCs** has also been thoroughly rehearsed with our third-party partners, Dell and Verser and is event ready.

In September 2021 the *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Counting, Scrutiny and Operational Efficiencies) Act 2021* changed the Electoral Act to (among other things) allow the AEC to **begin the unfolding and sorting of pre-poll ordinary ballot papers from 4pm on election day** and **begin extracting ballot papers form postal envelopes (without yet counting them) from the Monday before election day**. Shifting these processes to earlier in the timetable will support the AEC in meeting stakeholder expectations in ascertaining a timely result, particularly given the expected increase in both pre-poll and posting voting in this election.

2022 and beyond

Our thinking about the ongoing challenges to delivering successful federal electoral events does not stop at the end of the next federal election. We will continue to work to mature our Election Readiness Framework, refine our lessons management process, expand out ECL capacity and capability, and ensure we are prepared for a potential referendum. However, outside of our regular and ongoing business improvement processes, we are focusing well beyond this next election and the year ahead. We are also thinking about the next three election cycles and the services that the voter of the future will expect

A modernisation program for 2030 and beyond

Voter 2030 and the Transformation Strategy

To that end, we have been considering what elections might look like in the year 2030 and, more importantly, what electors will expect from the voting experience in the longer-term. In doing so, our key aim is to facilitate, not complicate, the electoral process. Concrete steps towards this Voter 2030 vision are already underway.

The Electoral Commissioner first introduced the concept of Voter 2030 following the 2019 federal election and highlighted that adopting an 'elector centric' viewpoint will help us develop strategies to help maintain the AEC's relevance into the future.

Updates to Voter 2030 have highlighted some of the realities that need to be factored into the AEC's modernisation journey, such as the availability and cost of technology, legislation, the external environment, and the ever-increasing threat of disinformation and cyber security. There are also some known unknowns – such as future legislative change – that will impact planning towards Voter 2030.

To translate Voter 2030 into action, the Investment Change and People Strategy (ICPS) Committee and ELT endorsed the development of a Transformation Strategy (Strategy) for the AEC in December 2021. The Strategy will ensure a common vision, aligned to the strategic goals of the organisation through a transformation lens. The Strategy will aim to recognise the continued evolving needs and expectations of stakeholders to support the AEC in service delivery. The Strategy will also map the relevant work programs that contribute to transformation outcomes and provide a cohesive view of existing and future modernisation activities to ensure they are coordinated and contribute to realising the Voter 2030 vision. The Strategy will encourage staff to feel engaged with, and contribute to, transformation outcomes.

For the agency's transformation to be effective and enduring, it will require a whole-of-agency effort. Key to success will be sponsorship by the ELT and implementation by all business areas, as illustrated in the figure below.
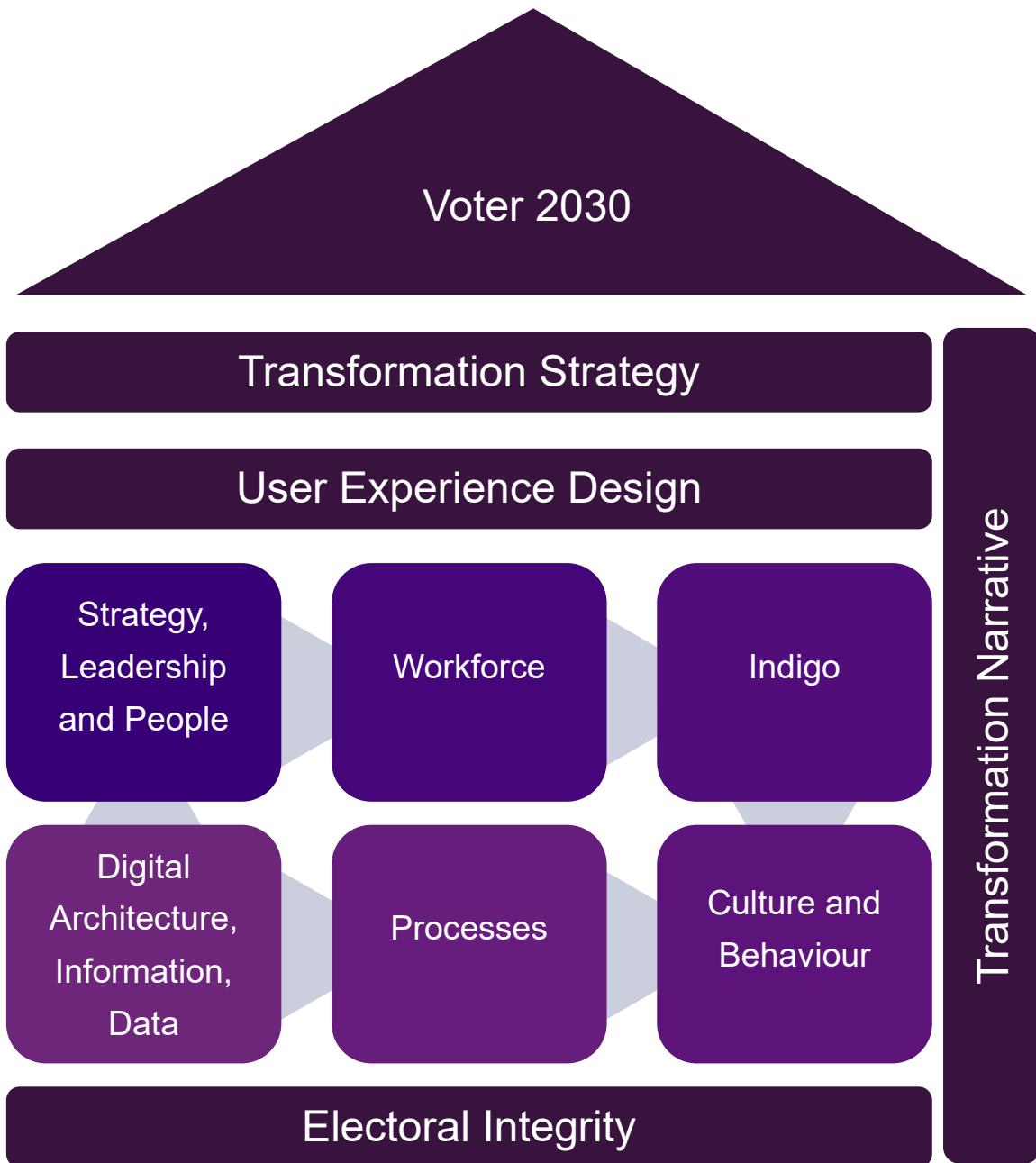

Figure 14: The AEC's Voter 2030 and Transformation Strategy

Election Systems Modernisation Program (Indigo Program)

The AEC is undergoing a business-led transformation following the Australian Government's announcement of $96.4 million in funding in October 2020.

A modernised electoral management system will improve our capacity to adapt to the ever-changing environment and citizens' expectations, as well as to effectively manage security risks. Through the Indigo Program, the AEC aims to enhance our ability to detect, prevent and respond to external interference in Australia's elections.

The Indigo program is a shift in the AEC's approach which will deliver a citizen-centric, agile technology platform. The seven-year transformation journey will reposition how we provide electoral services and ensure ongoing integrity of the electoral system. This work has also enabled the AEC to think well beyond the next election and to expand our capability to meet the needs of all Australians.

The Indigo program will be managed through a series of tranches, with the first delivering:

- new IT platforms to ensure readiness for future planning
- updated supply chain management processes
- streamlined recruitment and management of the AEC's temporary election workforce
- improved election contact centre operations to better facilitate voter self-service
- agile business processes to drive productivity
- uplift to security capabilities supporting the AEC's coordination of federal elections.