



Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE) Cygnet Award Progress and Impact Report

Institution Details	
Institution name	Geoscience Australia
SAGE Cygnet number	3
Key Barrier	Access to flexible work and better leave arrangements

Key Barrier

Geoscience Australia has identified **access to flexible work and better leave arrangements** as the third key barrier to address in our SAGE accreditation journey.

Our objective was to reduce the impact of this barrier through the following interventions:

- improving the leadership capabilities of our people to provide education and accessibility to a range of flexible working arrangements
- improving flexibility and leave arrangements for parents, regardless of gender, who needed to access leave to care for their child(ren)
- improving the accessibility of paid and unpaid leave for all employees to cover a broader range of personal circumstances.

Evidence of Barrier

Our identification of this barrier began in 2018 when we were developing our decadal strategic plan, Strategy 2028. During this process, it became clear that we would need to have a workforce reflecting the diversity of the Australian community in order to continue to deliver impactful science and remain an employer of choice in the science and public sector industries. For context, in 2018, our organisation was 38% female, of which 31% of our Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) roles were occupied by females or gender diverse people.

It became apparent we needed to improve gender equality within the organisation to ensure we achieved our strategic outcomes. Our research into achieving gender equity revealed we needed to offer high remuneration or attractive non-monetary benefits to attract, progress and retain the best talent. As an Australian Public Service (APS) employer, we do not have the same level of flexibility to offer high remuneration when compared to private enterprise. Therefore, we identified access to flexible work and better, more inclusive leave arrangements would be required to attract, progress and retain the best talent that is representative of the Australian community we serve and to ensure we are best positioned to deliver on Strategy 2028.

Flexible work

We reviewed our 2017 APS Employee Census (census) results to identify opportunities to improve flexible work practices and identified that:

- only 56% of our employees were accessing formal or informal flexible working arrangements

- there was a lack of understanding of the benefits of working flexibly, and 79% of our employees did not understand the type of flexible work arrangements that were available to them and how to make a formal request
- there was evidence of gender bias when managers were considering whether or not to approve flexible work arrangements within the organisation.

In reviewing our Flexible Work Procedure and guiding documentation at that time, we identified we did not detail the benefits associated with flexible work clearly or provide sufficient guidance to managers when considering the approval for a formal or informal arrangement.

Access to better leave arrangements

In 2017 we provided a variety of leave arrangements for our employees, however we understood that our leave arrangements were no different from other APS organisations or from industry who were all competing for the same talent. We were hearing anecdotal evidence that our leave arrangements were not as generous as private enterprise and were not assisting us to attract or retain female employees and people from diverse backgrounds and genders.

To further understand this barrier, we reviewed our current paid and unpaid leave arrangements, benchmarked them across industry, including the APS, and identified our shortfalls. We identified we were not as progressive as we thought we were; specifically in relation to parental, cultural, ceremonial and gender affirmation leave.

This presented us with a significant opportunity to develop and implement better access to leave arrangements that were superior to other organisations to ensure we were seen as an attractive employer for all people, regardless of sex, gender or individual circumstances. Furthermore, and based on our research and understanding of APS offerings, it allowed us to realise that failing to identify this as one of our key barriers, in addition to access to better flexible working arrangements, and subsequently acting on it would create a compounding issue towards the attraction, retention and progression of current and prospective employees.

Activities and outputs

Since the findings of our internal audits, reviews and other data analysis, we have taken the following steps to address this barrier in our organisation:

- researched industry and APS offerings, and utilised our existing networks to determine best practice approaches that we could implement
- refreshed and consulted a new Flexible Work Procedure to provide greater awareness of the benefits of flexible work, what is available and how to access these arrangements. In addition to the more traditional view of flexible work which normally only includes part-time work requests, we have made the following flexible work options available; flextime (where hours can be credited and debited), flexible start and end times (in and outside the bandwidth of hours), time off in lieu, working from home, and compressed hours (where a full-time work week can be worked across a fewer number of days)
- developed a managers guide to assessing flexible work requests, to support the approval process of flexible working requests and to improve consistency in application across our organisation
- incorporated flexible working requests into our online Performance Development Plan to encourage their use, simplify the application process and encourage conversations between managers and employees to embed flexible work into our day-to-day practices
- launched an education and awareness campaign, led by our CEO Dr James Johnson, to demonstrate and model flexible work and access to better leave arrangements; subsequently, adopting an 'if not, why not' approach and making their use more visible to the organisation

- developed a new Family and Domestic Violence Policy and Procedure with new entitlements for paid and unpaid leave arrangements and additional flexibility
- developed a new Workplace Breastfeeding Procedure, checklist for managers and lactation break agreement form to provide a range of flexibility and paid leave entitlements for people returning to the office post parental leave. We also set up a private, dedicated breastfeeding and change room for parents
- refreshed and incorporated into our Leave Procedure broader examples of what suitable use of paid and unpaid miscellaneous leave looks like, including for:
 - medical treatment for dysmenorrhea, endometriosis, menopause, infertility, gender affirmation and reassignment
 - cultural and/or ceremonial activities that require the employee's absences to fulfil cultural, religious or ethnic responsibilities and obligations
- built contingencies into our budgets to ensure we always have funds to backfill maternity and parental leave
- incorporated into our enterprise agreement the provision of:
 - six weeks paid parental leave for supporting parents, regardless of their gender, who have completed 12 months service in the APS, or two weeks paid parental leave for employees with less than 12 months service. This is in addition to their entitlements under the National Employment Standards (NES)
 - full-time superannuation benefits for employees accessing a period of paid and/or unpaid maternity and parental leave to ensure they are not financially disadvantaged due to needing to care for their child(ren)
 - all employees, regardless of eligibility requirements under the NES, having the right to request a flexible working arrangement
 - paid cultural and ceremonial leave for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders
 - all employees being able to purchase and use, around operational requirements, up to eight weeks of additional annual leave per year with no deduction to superannuation entitlements and allows employees to have a larger pool of leave to use in a given year.

We also undertook a range of initiatives designed to support our employees in feeling comfortable taking time to look after new child(ren) and to return to the workplace, including:

- accreditation as a Breastfeeding Friendly Workplace by the Australian Breastfeeding Association in 2021 (this was recently reaccredited for 2022 and beyond)
- providing access to a private, dedicated breastfeeding and change room
- creation of a new family room to support parents who need to work unexpectedly from the office and supervise their kids simultaneously
- utilised the Gender Equity Network at Geoscience Australia (GENGA), to influence cultural and organisational change towards the pursuit of gender equity in the organisation. We worked with GENGA to launch a 'buddy' initiative to support employees who are taking long term leave and who want to stay in touch with the organisation whilst on leave to make the transition back to the workplace easier.

As an APS employer, we are bound by a legislative and whole of Government employment framework which sometimes makes it challenging to implement wide-ranging changes to some of our leave offerings. We are however, looking to lead from the front and have made formal submissions on two occasions to request

changes to the APS employment framework which would allow APS employers to provide better leave arrangements for new parents.

In 2020, as part of the APS Gender Equality Strategy consultation process, we wrote to the APS Commission to seek changes to the APS Bargaining Policy 2018. We requested that providing additional supporting partner leave entitlements for men should not be viewed as an enhancement, and that instead it should be viewed as a levelling of the playing field, so that family decisions on which parent should take parental leave did not fall disproportionately on women, potentially impacting their career progression and superannuation balances at retirement.

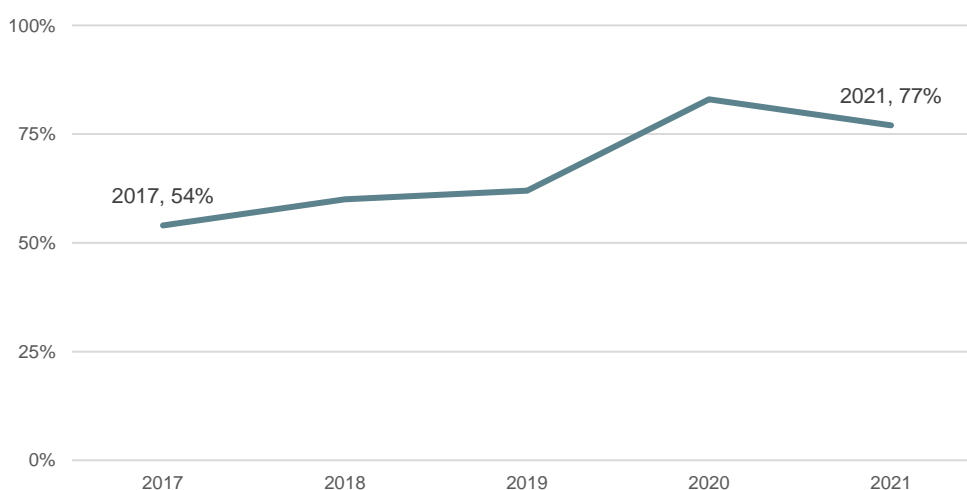
In 2022, we provided a submission into the review of the *Maternity Leave Act 1973 (Cth)* (ML Act) to provide evidence-based changes to the legislation to further promote gender equality, inclusion and flexibility within the Commonwealth legislation. We requested that the ML Act be revised as a Parental Leave Act, with equal leave entitlements for parents of any gender regardless of whether they are the biological parents of their child, which can be flexibly applied to meet the immediate needs and ongoing commitments of parents.

Whilst our requested changes to the Commonwealth and APS employment framework are still being considered by the APSC, we have continued to look for opportunities to improve gender equity within our own employment framework. One example is, as part of our enterprise bargaining position, we have proposed equal parental leave of 14 weeks for all employees regardless of sex, gender or individual circumstances. This has been approved in-principle by the APS Commissioner and if agreed by employees, their representatives and the Fair Work Commission, will be the first equal parental leave within the APS.

Outcomes

These activities and outputs have resulted in a reported improvement in our identified key barrier for our employees. In 2019, 92% of our census respondents agreed that our managers provided equal access to flexible working arrangements for all genders (refer Table 2); and in 2021, 95% of our respondents agreed we had a supportive flexible working culture. This equates to a 4% increase from 2017; and as at December 2021, 84% of our workforce had permanent arrangements in place, which is an increase of 28% from 2017 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Percentage of employees using flexible work arrangements 2017-2021
Australian Public Service Employee Census 2017-2021



Response to more information request – disaggregation of data by gender

Table 1. Disaggregation of Figure 1

Year	Gender	Currently using a flexible work arrangement	Percentage
2017	All	230	54%
	Male	119	47%
	Female	109	64%
2018	All	233	60%
	Male	115	54%
	Female	110	68%
2019	All	267	62%
	Male	147	60%
	Female	112	65%
2020	All	402	83%
	Male	211	81%
	Female	165	85%
2021	All	354	77%
	Male	187	75%
	Female	146	80%

Table 1 reflects data gathered as part of the annual APS Employee Census. Refer to [Appendix A](#) for a breakdown of respondents.

Table 2. Number of people who agreed that supervisors provide equal access to flexible work, regardless of gender

Year	Gender	Number	Percentage
2017	All	371	87%
	Male	217	86%
	Female	151	88%
2018	All	333	85%
	Male	185	87%
	Female	136	84%
2019	All	393	91%
	Male	222	90%
	Female	162	95%

Table 2 reflects data gathered as part of the annual APS Employee Census. Refer to [Appendix A](#) for a breakdown of respondents.

This exact question did not continue from 2019, as an alternative we added an agency specific question to understand if people felt supported to work flexibly in their role, this is presented in Table 3 on the following page.

Table 3. Number of people who agreed they are supported to work flexibly

Year	Gender	Number	Percentage
2020	All	425	88%
	Male	230	89%
	Female	174	89%
2021	All	422	92%
	Male	224	90%
	Female	174	96%

Table 3 reflects data gathered as part of the annual APS Employee Census. Refer to [Appendix A](#) for a breakdown of respondents

Response to more information request – potential impacts of COVID-19 on these initiatives

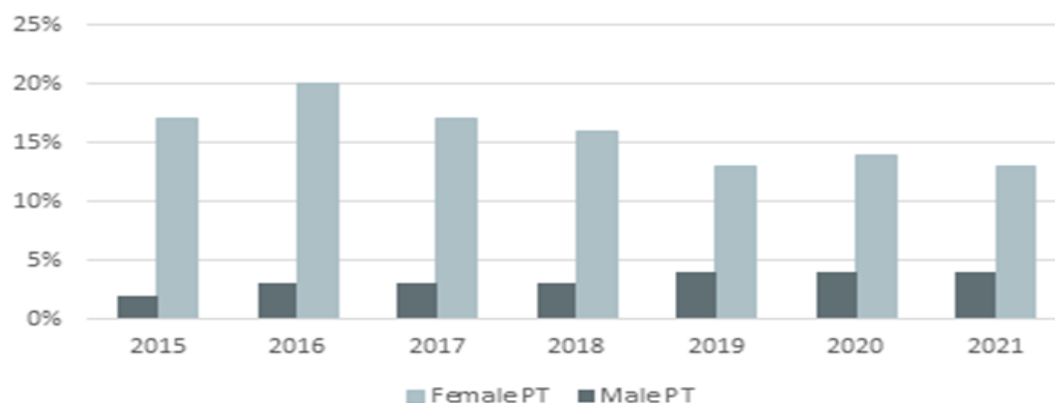
Our intent to improve access to flexible work arrangements began in 2018 with actions planned for early 2020. When the COVID-19 pandemic forced all non-essential personnel to work from home, we were forced to shift our focus away from these plans and implement more immediate and short-term guidance and support for employees and managers. It is likely COVID-19 accelerated the uptake of flexible work options and it also raised barriers that we had to overcome before progressing with this work. As time progressed, we moved back to our original intent to:

- Consult with all employees to ensure our actions were valuable and appropriate for the diversity of our organisation.
- Document these actions and embed them in governance processes to guide and educate managers.

In the years prior to 2020, our overall progress towards gender equity under the SAGE program resulted in an improvement in the number of people agreeing that supervisors provided equal access to flexible work, regardless of gender (Table 2). As we reverted back to pre-pandemic throughout 2021 we have experienced a small drop in the number of people utilising flexible work options (Table 1), but kept the significant ground gained since 2018. Additionally in 2021 our people reported feeling more supported to work flexibly than they were when the COVID-19 forced work from home was first announced (Table 3).

We have also seen our activities and actions improve the equitable use of flexible working arrangements. Since 2015, we have seen a 5 point reduction in the percentage of females accessing part time work arrangements, while male access remained steady (Figure 2 and Table 2). At the same time our people told us they were taking on increased caring responsibilities (refer Table 3), demonstrating that they are better able to balance caring and work responsibilities without reducing the time they are spending on their careers. This shows our efforts to improve the access and use of flexible work arrangements is increasing the time people have to pursue career development opportunities, regardless of gender.

Figure 2. Part time work arrangement use 2015-2021



Response to more information request – disaggregation of data

Table 4. Part time work arrangement use 2015-2021

Year	Gender	Headcount	Part-time employment	Percentage
2015	Male	398	7	1.80%
	Female	208	36	17.30%
2016	Male	379	12	3.20%
	Female	220	43	19.50%
2017	Male	374	13	3.50%
	Female	226	39	17.30%
2018	Male	373	13	3.50%
	Female	227	37	16.30%
2019	Male	373	16	4.30%
	Female	238	31	13.00%
2020	Male	356	15	4.20%
	Female	247	34	13.80%
2021	Male	362	13	3.60%
	Female	249	33	13.30%

Table 4 is sourced directly from our Human Resources information system. At the time of submission, zero (0) employees chose to disclose a gender other than male or female.

Response to more information request – disaggregation of data

Table 5. Number of people with caring responsibilities 2016 to 2021

Year	Gender	Number	Percentage
2016	All	93	27.30%
	Male	46	22.80%
	Female	46	33.80%
2017	All	183	42.90%
	Male	107	42.60%
	Female	74	43.30%
2018	All	158	40.40%
	Male	83	39.00%
	Female	69	42.60%
2019	All	191	44.00%
	Male	106	42.90%
	Female	81	47.40%
2020	All	227	47.10%
	Male	118	45.60%
	Female	98	61.60%
2021	All	214	46.80%
	Male	117	47.20%
	Female	82	45.10%

Table 5 reflects data gathered as part of the annual APS Employee Census, data this granular from 2015 is not available. Refer to [Appendix A](#) for a breakdown of respondents.

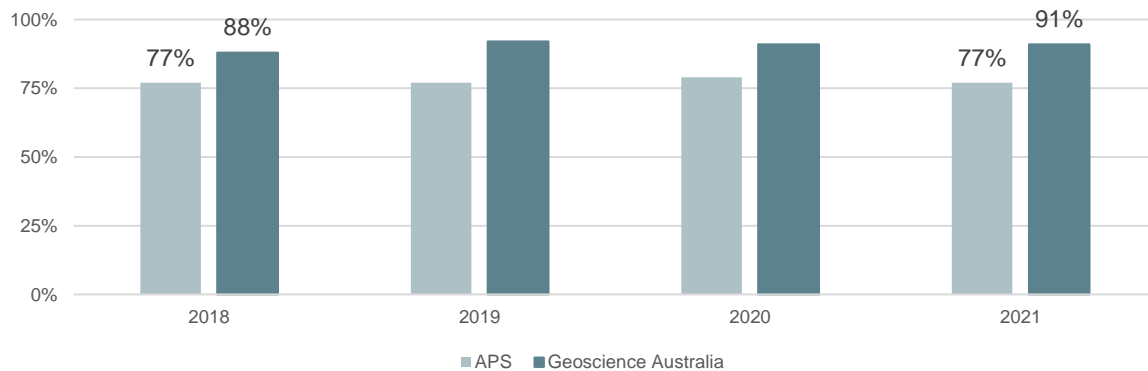
Response to more information request – flexible work use and part-time participation

The reduction in part-time workforce participation and associated increase in male part-time participation rates is seen as a positive outcome of our initiatives as they have been able to support more males to work part-time and more females to work full-time, should they wish to pursue it. At this stage we do not collect detailed information on the reason why people are choosing to utilise a particular flexible work arrangement. Our focus is on ensuring that all people are provided with the opportunity to use these arrangements in a way that is appropriate for them and our organisation. This is not to suggest that external pressures on these groups (such as financial pressures) were reduced by our initiatives or ignored as potential impacts. The outcome we have achieved is that our processes do not appear to be inhibiting any gender from accessing flexible work arrangements, in which part-time work is one, and we are experiencing overall high levels of satisfaction with these processes, which is discussed further in the next paragraph.

Our activities to provide more flexible leave arrangements have been well received, with 91% of our people satisfied with their flexible work and leave arrangements in the 2021 census, a 3 percentage point increase from 2018. These incremental improvements reflect our dedication to listen to our people and implement changes within the bounds of the employment framework we must operate in. Our colleagues across the APS, who are also bound by these restrictions, unfortunately have not been able to achieve the same results with 77% of APS employees satisfied with their flexible work and leave arrangements in 2021, which is no change from 2018 (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Percentage of people satisfied with non-monetary employment conditions

Australian Public Service Employee Census 2017-2021



Response to more information request – disaggregation of data

Table 6. Number of people satisfied with non-monetary employment conditions

Year	Gender	Number	Percentage	Difference to APS*
2017	All	380	89.0%	-1.01%
	Male	221	88.0%	
	Female	157	91.8%	
2018	All	339	86.7%	9.70%
	Male	181	85.0%	
	Female	145	89.5%	
2019	All	395	91.0%	14.01%
	Male	224	90.7%	
	Female	161	94.2%	
2020	All	436	90.5%	11.46%
	Male	232	89.6%	
	Female	179	91.8%	
2021	All	415	90.8%	13.81%
	Male	226	91.1%	
	Female	169	92.9%	

*Disaggregation of APS overall results is not available.

Table 6 reflects data gathered as part of the annual APS Employee Census. Refer to [Appendix A](#) for a breakdown of respondents.

Response to more information request – outcomes relating to other initiatives

Supporting partner leave

When bargaining for our 2022 Enterprise Agreement we sought to provide equal parental leave to all parents (primary carers, supporting partners and birth parents) regardless of gender or individual circumstances. This new condition was approved by the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) at the time, which is a legal requirement we have to follow before tabling new conditions of employment. Bargaining is currently paused whilst APS wide bargaining progresses continue for common core conditions; however, we have worked very closely with the APSC to advocate for equal parental leave as part of APS common core conditions.

We continue to offer six weeks of supporting partner leave, which is cited by the [Workplace Gender Equality Agency](#) to bring multiple benefits, one of which is contributing to the breakdown of gender stereotypes which leads to gender equity both within the workplace and society.

Payment of superannuation while on paid or unpaid parental leave

Since introducing this initiative in 2015, through to the end of 2021, 133 individual employees' accessed maternity or supporting partner leave and were provided superannuation (Tables 7 and 8).

Disaggregation of this by year is not provided as it was not our goal to improve uptake over this time but to make the provision available.

Table 7. Number of people who have accessed maternity or supporting partner leave 1 January 2015 to 31 December 2021

Gender	Number
Female	64
Male	69
Total	133

Table 8. Number of people in diverse groups who have accessed maternity or supporting partner leave 1 January 2015 to 31 December 2021

Gender	Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	Disabled	Born outside Australia
Female	0	2	17
Male	1	1	24

Previously these employees would have not been paid superannuation as it was not paid work, which the [Australian Human Rights Commission](#) cites as a reason for the existing gender gap in retirement savings.

We do not hold data to suggest that any person who would have been eligible for this provision chose not to access it. Additionally we have not been able to identify an instance where maternity or supporting partner leave was declined upon request.

Response to more information request – outcomes relating to other initiatives

Provision of leave to support employees experiencing family or domestic violence

Measuring the outcome of this initiative must be done with respect to employee privacy and the personal nature of the leave provision. Providing quantifiable results is challenging as:

1. Instances of this leave type are recorded as miscellaneous leave to protect the identity and privacy of individuals. Multiple other types of leave can also be categorised as miscellaneous.
2. Data is not collected from our employees on if they have experienced family or domestic violence but chose not to access this leave.

The outcome of this initiative we can measure is that any employee, regardless of gender, is now able to access paid and unpaid leave should they experience family and domestic violence. Research from the [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#) indicates women are more likely to experience family and domestic violence and these initiatives are intended to support all affected employees and reduce any impact on employees' earning capabilities and careers.

Other leave types and benefits to support employees

Throughout this process we have noted that producing measurable outcomes for some of our initiatives such as cultural leave and parental facilities is challenging. The number of people who may have been able to use these provisions, but chose not to, is not actively recorded; nor is it always appropriate for us to survey employees about these matters. We continually monitor our processes and reporting to catch instances where these leave types or other benefits designed to support employees may not be having the outcome desired. To date we have not been made aware of any such circumstances.

Educating and improving leadership capabilities when assessing flexible work use

Anecdotally our Human Resources team does not regularly receive requests for support where agreements cannot be reached between employees and supervisors, however, we are aware that this is not a centrally monitored process and relies on employee's notifying us. Ongoing support of all parties and monitoring is required to ensure our impacts and outcomes are maintained into the future.

Impact

Response to more information request – methodology to collect qualitative data on experiences of our people

To assess the impact of these initiatives on the experiences of our people we collaborated with our Gender Equity Network at Geoscience Australia (GENGA). GENGA is comprised of 114 staff members, of which 70% are women. GENGA also includes the Pride network, Women's network, Parents and carers group and Men's support and engagement special interest groups.

This data was collected in July 2022 via requests for feedback on experiences since the initiatives were introduced. At that time our intent was to be as inclusive as possible in the preparation and development of our cygnet award, one way to do this was to reduce the barriers to providing input, by allowing people to submit anonymously and without the need to provide demographics data. However, in reflection, we needed to provide more guidance and oversight in this data collection process. This is because we acknowledge that we are unable to provide further information and there is opportunity in the future to improve the robustness and validity of the data.

We have received anecdotal evidence that the outputs and activities to address the identified key barrier has improved access to flexible work and better leave arrangements:

“The approach to flexible work arrangements provided by Geoscience Australia is like nothing else I have experienced. In my previous employment, flexibility was provided as a trade-off type of thing – where I had to give up something to gain some flexibility. There were multiple times where I had to miss the last minute family and friend events as I couldn’t arrange the time I needed. Here we embrace that different working arrangements work for individuals and teams, and focus on how best we use these arrangements to achieve our goals. I didn’t realise I valued this flexibility when I joined Geoscience Australia, but after experiencing how it allows me to make my work and home lives the best they can be, I won’t go anywhere else without it.”

“I can genuinely say that the culture at Geoscience Australia is one of the best I have seen in the APS. It is clear to me that everyone is committed to championing our Diversity and Inclusion Strategy and making an effort to support individuals achieve their very best. Personally, I feel so supported to progress in my career, whilst having the opportunity to work flexibly. As a parent and grandmother, I love being able to change my hours or days of work to allow me to attend special events or support my children to care for my grandchildren, without feeling guilty, as flexibility is normal practice here at Geoscience Australia.”

“It is the first time in my APS career (12 + years) that I have worked in an organisation that provides a dedicated family room. The creation of the family room has provided me with greater flexibility as a working parent and allows me to bring my child to work in a safe environment, if required unexpectedly – which is great!”

“I have been in the public service for around 15 years and have found it to be quite rigid in applying for personal leave. Basically, if it isn’t ‘mainstream’ you can’t get leave. At Geoscience Australia, I have experienced a much more caring approach to personal leave and there appears to be a great deal of attention paid to issues that could be experienced across the entire community, such as gender affirmation or endometriosis. This is the reason I applied for a position at Geoscience Australia.”

Response to more information request

Where any negative quotes received

While collecting this information, there were no negative quotes provided to us. Noting the improvements that can be made in collecting this information above, we will provide the additional guidance required to ensure this is a more robust process.

Additional insights from our free text APS Employee Census results (refer to Appendix A for details on responses) show that these initiatives may not always be implemented as we would like:

“Flexible work is supported by the agency but supervisors at low levels can choose to overrule policy and just say No” – 2021 APS Employee Census

Anecdotally our Human Resources team does not regularly receive requests for support where agreements cannot be reached between employees and supervisors, however, we are aware that this is not a centrally monitored process and relies on employee’s notifying us. Ongoing support of all parties and monitoring is required to ensure our impacts and outcomes are maintained into the future.

Impact of COVID-19

As noted earlier in the report it is probable that COVID-19 accelerated the adoption of flexible work practices while also forcing us to focus our energy on immediate support of employees. This has meant that we were not able to release some of our initiatives when we would have hoped but they were more valued when they were released. Throughout this review of employee quotes and perceptions we were not able to identify any comments or received any feedback that the impact was lessened or accelerated for our people by COVID-19.

Further action

Our [Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2021-2025](#) identifies further themes that will be our priority areas of action as detailed in the table below.

Key Barrier	Rationale/ Evidence	Actions & Outputs	Timeframe (start & end)	Person/ Group responsible for implementing action	Senior Leader accountable for action delivery	Desired Outcomes/ Targets/ Success Indicators
Talent Attraction	As per SAGE Bronze and the Diversity and Inclusion Strategy	Ensure our pipeline of talented people is diverse to enrich our work, our culture and our science	2021 – June 2023	Human Resources Senior Leadership Team	Branch Manager, Digital Earth	Increased applications and recruitment received across key diversity and underrepresented groups in line with APS targets, to access the full pool of human talent based on skill alone.
Cultural and Linguistic Diversity	As per SAGE Bronze and the Diversity and Inclusion Strategy	Understand the experiences of, and the barriers faced by, cultural and linguistically diverse people in our organisation to inform the development of initiatives to remove barriers to their progression and retention	August 2022 – June 2024	Human Resources Senior Leadership Team	Branch Manager, National Positioning Infrastructure	Increased recruitment and retention of employees from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds across all Divisions and Increased promotion of employees from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds across all Divisions

Response to more information request – participant numbers of APS Employee Census

Appendix A: Geoscience Australia APS employee census participant breakdown

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Respondents	341	427	391	434	482	457
Male	202	251	213	247	259	248
Female	136	171	162	171	195	182
X	3	5	0	0	1	1
Aboriginal or Torres Strait islander	1	1	2	4	7	5
Ongoing disability	17	23	18	25	28	25
LBTQIA+	Not recorded	8	12	12	18	25
Carers responsibilities	93	183	158	191	227	214
Born overseas	Not recorded	Not recorded	122	141	Not recorded	152