

Western Australian Auditor General's Report



Verifying Employee Identity and Credentials



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The Office of the Auditor General acknowledges the traditional custodians throughout Western Australia and their continuing connection to the land, waters and community. We pay our respects to all members of the Aboriginal communities and their cultures, and to Elders both past and present.

WESTERN AUSTRALIAN AUDITOR GENERAL'S REPORT

Verifying Employee Identity and Credentials



**THE PRESIDENT
LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL**

**THE SPEAKER
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**

VERIFYING EMPLOYEE IDENTITY AND CREDENTIALS

This report has been prepared for submission to Parliament under the provisions of section 25 of the *Auditor General Act 2006*.

This focus area audit assessed whether 8 local government entities had suitable policies and procedures in place for screening new employees, and for monitoring existing employees for changes in their circumstances which may impact their employment.

I wish to acknowledge the cooperation of the staff at the entities included in this audit.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C Spencer'.

CAROLINE SPENCER
AUDITOR GENERAL
19 June 2019

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Auditor General's overview

This focus audit examined controls for verifying the identity and credentials of new employees and monitoring the status of existing employees.

We previously performed this audit in 2015 for state government entities. This report covers a sample of local government entities.

Our audit found that all entities need to improve their practices for screening employees. We identified many instances where local government entities were not checking the identity, right to work in Australia, employment history, qualifications and criminal backgrounds of new and existing employees.

While this audit was not designed to identify individual cases of inappropriate staff appointment, it did reveal significant shortcomings in policy and practices. If not addressed, these control weaknesses could impact the quality of employees in, and the integrity of, the public sector.

These focus audits can be considered as 'hygiene' audits as they give an indication of the health of various management controls. We conduct these audits as an extension of our annual financial audits, using more detailed testing than is required for forming our financial audit opinions.

The findings of these audits are likely representative of issues in other government entities that were not part of our sample. I encourage all entities, and not just those audited, to periodically assess themselves against these risks and controls on an ongoing basis. Our better practice checklist at Appendix 1 has been designed to assist entities to run their own hygiene checks.



Executive summary

Background

The activities and functions carried out by local government entities (entities) are diverse and involve a great deal of interaction with local communities. It is therefore essential that they recruit the right people.

Entities need sound, consistently applied employee screening processes to confirm the identity, integrity and academic credentials of potential employees. The screening process usually involves undertaking referee checks, checking criminal backgrounds and verifying employment history and educational qualifications. It is also important that entities continue to monitor employees, to identify changes in their circumstances which may impact their duties. The rigour of the processes may vary depending on the duties of the role and the related risks of employing the wrong person.

We previously performed this audit in 2015 for state government entities and found many instances where identity, qualifications, criminal backgrounds and right to work in Australia were not checked prior to employment.

Conclusion

All of the 8 entities we audited need to improve their policies and practices for screening employees.

We found many instances where entities did not check the identity, right to work in Australia, employment history, qualifications and criminal backgrounds of employees prior to their commencement. We also found instances where entities did not obtain a working with children check for positions which required it. These findings create a risk that an entity may employ inappropriate or unqualified staff.

Only the Shire of Boyup Brook and the City of Melville were monitoring their employees for all significant changes to their status which could impact their employment.

What we did

The focus of this audit was to assess if the sampled entities were adequately screening their employees to verify their employment history and performance, to check professional qualifications, to verify an employee's identity and right to work in Australia and, where appropriate, identify and assess criminal records.

We assessed the policies and practices at 8 entities, of varying size and location. We used the following lines of inquiry:

1. Do entities have suitable policies and procedures for screening employees?
2. Did entities adequately screen new employees to verify their identify, check employment history and educational/professional qualifications, and perform risk based criminal record checking?
3. Are entities monitoring existing employees for changes in their status (new criminal convictions or discontinuance of essential qualifications)?

The audit examined whether controls were in place to support good recruitment practices. It was not designed to identify individual cases of inappropriate appointment.

We tested a sample of 306 employees across 8 entities to assess screening practices. Our sample included a mix of new and existing employees.

We conducted this audit under section 18 of the *Auditor General Act 2006* and in accordance with Australian Auditing and Assurance Standards. The approximate cost of undertaking the audit and reporting is \$125,000.

The following 8 entities were included in this audit:

| Entities |
|---------------------------------------|
| City of Melville (Melville) |
| City of Subiaco (Subiaco) |
| Shire of Boyup Brook (Boyup Brook) |
| Shire of Coolgardie (Coolgardie) |
| Shire of Dundas (Dundas) |
| Shire of Williams (Williams) |
| Town of Claremont (Claremont) |
| Town of Victoria Park (Victoria Park) |

What did we find?

All 8 entities need to improve their practices in some way, with none of the entities displaying good policies or practices for verifying employee identity and credentials.

Only 3 entities had policies for verifying employee identity and credentials

Robust employee screening processes and procedures help entities to recruit appropriate staff and ensure that current staff remain suitable for their roles.

Policies and procedures for verifying employee identity and credentials should require checking of claims made by potential employees including their identity, relevant professional qualifications, memberships or licenses, prior work history, right to work in Australia and, where appropriate, criminal background. If there are any specific requirements for a position, such as qualifications or a working with children check, entities should clearly document these requirements in position description forms and these checks should also be part of the recruitment and monitoring processes.

Only Melville, Subiaco and Dundas had policies for verifying employee identity and credentials. Although the policies for these entities covered most requirements, there is scope for them to be improved by mandating a 100-point identity check and requiring periodic checking of staff for changes in their circumstances which may impact their employment.

It is important that recruitment policies and related documentation provide clear guidance to staff on instances where criminal background or working with children checks are required for the position. As noted in our 2015 report, criminal background checks are important for many positions, but not necessarily every position. Each entity needs to consider the need for criminal background or working with children checks based on the duties and risks of the position and the requirements of legislation.¹

While the majority of entities did not have specific policies and procedures for verifying employee identity and credentials, several had included the requirement for criminal background checks in position description forms. However, at Boyup Brook, Coolgardie and Williams, there was no requirement to perform criminal background checks for important positions. For certain positions, such as senior officers who approve key transactions and positions involving procurement, finance, human resource management and information system management, there should be some level of criminal background checks for potential employees.

Circumstances of individual employees can change over time, and it is therefore important that policies and procedures include requirements to monitor existing employees. This can include, where appropriate, periodic criminal background checks and requesting evidence that staff have maintained their essential qualifications. It is also good practice to require annual declarations from employees advising of any changes in their circumstances.

For the 3 entities with policies for verifying employee identity, only Melville's policy required periodic criminal background checks for positions requiring a criminal background check. In addition, none of the policies required employees to make annual declarations about changes to their status.

¹ *Working with Children (Criminal Record Checking) Act 2004*

There were many instances where staff identity or eligibility to work in Australia was not checked

It is essential to confirm the identity of all new employees. Australian Standard 4811-2006 'Employment Screening' regards this as an essential step in a recruitment process. This should be done prior to their commencement, preferably using a 100-point identity check. It is also important to verify that the potential employee has a right to work in Australia prior to engaging them in paid work.

From our sample of 306 employees, we found 81 instances (26%)² where there was no evidence that the entity checked the identity of the staff prior to employment. For a further 198 employees, across all 8 entities, the verification was inadequate because it fell short of the documentation needed for a 100-point check.

Of particular concern was the high percentage (89%) where there was no evidence of checking an applicant's eligibility to work in Australia. This shortcoming applied to every entity in our sample.

We found that most entities had identified the essential qualifications for positions, such as university degrees, first aid certificates or licenses, and clearly articulated these requirements in position description forms. For the regional entities in our sample, our testing confirmed that the entities were verifying that applicants held these essential qualifications prior to their employment. However, at Melville, Victoria Park and Subiaco, we found 54 instances (45%) where there was no evidence of this checking.

Reference checks were not done for more than half the new employees we tested

Reference or referee reports are an important tool to verify claims made by potential employees about their employment history and experience, and to clarify any uncertainties. In some instances, the checks may reveal information about a potential employee that was not readily apparent from other checks and documentation. They provide useful information about the integrity of applicants and should be a mandatory step in all recruitment procedures.

Entities can perform reference checks in a number of ways, including phone calls, emails or pro-forma forms. While a minimum two reference checks from appropriate referees is advisable, this may not be necessary for all positions. For more senior positions and roles that have significant financial responsibility, two reference checks are highly recommended.

We sampled 153 employees recruited by the entities in the period between 1 July 2015 and 20 September 2018. For more than half our sample (79 employees across all entities), we found there was no evidence that a reference check was performed as part of the recruitment process.

Most of the entities we reviewed had assessed whether a criminal background check was required for the position. However, entities were not consistently performing criminal background checks in line with their policies or position description forms. In total, we found 63 instances at 5 entities³ where a criminal background check was required, but there was no evidence that it was performed.

² City of Melville, City of Subiaco, Shire of Dundas, Town of Claremont, Town of Victoria Park

³ City of Melville, City of Subiaco, Shire of Dundas, Town of Claremont and Town of Victoria Park

Criminal background checks, before commencement of employment and periodically thereafter, are an important way of identifying employees whose background may represent a risk to the entity, other employees or customers.

Some entities were not consistently obtaining working with children checks

Because of the diverse nature of activities and functions performed by entities, there are a number of positions which involve working with vulnerable people in the community, such as children. The *Working with Children (Criminal Record Checking) Act 2004* and *Working with Children (Criminal Record Checking) Regulations 2005* require people engaged in 'child-related work' to have a working with children check card. While the requirements of the act may not apply to every position involving work with children, we believe it is good practice to perform these checks for these positions.

Melville, Claremont, Boyup Brook, Dundas and Williams had assessed the need for working with children checks and, based on our sample testing, were obtaining these checks as required. Subiaco, Coolgardie and Victoria Park had a small number of instances where management considered a working with children check was required, but there was no evidence that it was obtained.

Entities need to improve how they monitor existing employees for changes in their status

If a position requires an employee to hold a licence, working with children check card, or a professional qualification, entities should regularly monitor whether employees continue to hold the required qualification/clearance. Similarly, if the position requires the employee to have a criminal background check, there should be periodic checks to ensure that there has not been a change in circumstances which could cause a risk to the entity, other employees and customers.

Only Boyup Brook and Melville had procedures in place to regularly monitor employees for all significant changes in their status. Consequently, there is a risk that the other entities may be unaware if there is a change in circumstance, such as a loss of licence, which would affect the employee's capacity to perform their duties.

Recommendations

Public sector entities should:

1. have approved policies and procedures for verifying employee identity and credentials which cover:
 - using a 100-point identity check
 - criminal background checks, based on the risks associated with the position
 - periodic monitoring of existing employees
2. assess the positions which may require a criminal background or working with children check and ensure that these requirements are clearly documented in position description forms
3. for high risk positions, or positions where there is an ongoing requirement to hold a licence or professional qualification, obtain regular declarations from employees that there is no significant change in their circumstances
4. ensure that sufficient documentary evidence is obtained prior to appointment which supports an employee's
 - identification and right to work in Australia
 - professional qualifications and memberships
 - criminal background or capacity to work with children (where necessary)
5. perform appropriate referee checks for all potential employees and ensure that all employees' reference checks are retained in their employee or recruitment file
6. develop a procedure for monitoring the expiry dates of licences, certificates or working with children checks so that they can be followed up with the employee close to expiry date
7. perform periodic criminal background checks for positions which require it.

Under section 7.12A of the *Local Government Act 1995*, all sampled entities are required to prepare an action plan addressing significant matters relevant to their entity for submission to the Minister for Local Government within 3 months of this report being tabled in Parliament and for publication on the entity's website. This action plan should address the points above, to the extent that they are relevant to their entity, as indicated in this report.

Response from entities

The local government entities audited accepted the recommendations and confirmed that where relevant, they either have amended policies and practices or will improve human resource processes.

Appendix 1: Better practice principles

The following table shows control principles on which our audit focused. They cover a number of practices and controls related to verifying employee identity and credentials which are also recommended in Australian Standard 4811-2006 'Employment Screening'. They are not intended to be an exhaustive list.

| Verifying employee identity and credentials | Focus Area | What we expected to see |
|---|------------------------------|--|
| Policy | Policies and procedures | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policy is in place which covers the verification process for all potential employees and the monitoring process for existing employees. |
| | Risk Assessment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Entities have assessed the risk associated with each position and determined whether a criminal background or working with children check is required. Position description forms clearly document the requirements of each position including any essential qualifications, licences and memberships and whether any criminal background or working with children checks are required. |
| Recruitment and Appointment | Qualifications | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Entities verify essential qualifications, licences and memberships during the recruitment process. |
| | Past Work History | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Referee/reference reports are obtained and reviewed as part of the selection process. |
| | Identity and Right to Work | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Entities check the identity of successful applicants using a 100-point identification check. Entities confirm successful applicants' right to work in Australia by reviewing passports, visas and/or birth certificates. |
| | Criminal Background checking | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Criminal background or working with children checks are obtained (where required) and reviewed by the entity. |
| | Recordkeeping | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Entities retain documentation to demonstrate that they verified the potential employee's qualifications, past work history, identity, right to work in Australia and criminal background prior to the start date. |
| Monitoring of Existing Employees | Declarations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employees provide an annual declaration to advise whether there has been a significant change in their circumstance which could impact their employment. |
| | Review | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Entities monitor the expiry date of essential qualifications/licences and follow up with employees close to the expiry date. Where criminal background checks are required for the position, they are re-performed on a periodic basis. |

Source: OAG based on Australian Standard AS 4811-2016 'Employment Screening'

Auditor General's Reports

| Report number | Reports | Date tabled |
|---------------|---|------------------|
| 23 | Improving Aboriginal Children's Ear Health | 12 June 2019 |
| 22 | Opinions on Ministerial Notifications | 5 June 2019 |
| 21 | Engaging Consultants to Provide Strategic Advice | 5 June 2019 |
| 20 | Information Systems Audit Report 2019 | 15 May 2019 |
| 19 | Audit Results Report – Annual 2018 Financial Audits | 15 May 2019 |
| 18 | Firearm Controls | 15 May 2019 |
| 17 | Records Management in Local Government | 9 April 2019 |
| 16 | Management of Supplier Master Files | 7 March 2019 |
| 15 | Audit Results Report Annual 2017-18 Financial Audits of Local Government Entities | 7 March 2019 |
| 14 | Opinions on Ministerial Notifications | 13 February 2019 |
| 13 | Opinion on Ministerial Notification | 23 January 2019 |
| 12 | Managing Disruptive Behaviour in Public Housing | 20 December 2018 |
| 11 | Opinions on Ministerial Notifications | 20 December 2018 |
| 10 | Opinions on Ministerial Notifications | 18 December 2018 |
| 9 | Treatment Services for People with Methamphetamine Dependence | 18 December 2018 |
| 8 | Opinions on Ministerial Notifications | 10 December 2018 |
| 7 | Audit Results Report – Annual 2017-18 Financial Audits of State Government Entities | 8 November 2018 |
| 6 | Opinion on Ministerial Notification | 31 October 2018 |
| 5 | Local Government Procurement | 11 October 2018 |
| 4 | Opinions on Ministerial Notifications | 30 August 2018 |
| 3 | Implementation of the GovNext-ICT Program | 30 August 2018 |
| 2 | Young People Leaving Care | 22 August 2018 |
| 1 | Information Systems Audit Report 2018 | 21 August 2018 |

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