



ACT AUDITOR-GENERAL'S OFFICE



Ms Caroline Le Couteur MLA
Chair
Standing Committee on Public Accounts
Legislative Assembly Building
London Circuit
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ms Le Couteur

Auditor-General's Report No. 4 of 2009 Delivery of Ambulance Services to the ACT Community

I refer to statements made about the above report by the Minister for Emergency Services, Mr Simon Corbell MLA (the Minister) at the Public Accounts Committee's public hearing on 3 March 2010.

Given the strong level of community and media interest in this audit, I believe that it is important for me to provide my response, through the Committee, to the following statements made by the Minister:

1. The Auditor invented her own methodology, which is not used by anybody except her and which is not recognised as a credible way of managing risks and delivering emergency services in an urban environment.¹

The Audit found that the ACT Ambulance Service (ACTAS) was not meeting the ACT Government's accountability indicator for ambulance emergency response times. Consistent with this audit finding, I reported that:

ACTAS has responded to only 37 per cent of all Priority One incidents across Canberra within eight minutes, compared to its own target of 50 per cent.²

I would have expected that when an agency was not meeting the ACT Government's performance indicator for its business and its performance has also declined over time, then that agency would have undertaken further analysis to identify any weaknesses in its operations or systems so that effective action could be undertaken to remedy these weaknesses.

¹ Standing Committee on Public Accounts Proof Transcript of Evidence 3 March 2010, page 17.

² Auditor-General's Report No. 4 of 2009 'Delivery of ambulance services to the ACT community', page 41, paragraph 4.48.

In this case, ACTAS only had a very recent and limited analysis of time of incidents and had not fully analysed and used the demand and response data to better manage ambulance crews and to improve service delivery.

As a result, Audit undertook further analysis of ambulance demand and response data (by location, response time and number of incidents) and reported that:

*Audit undertook further analysis and found that the reported performance for 2007-08 was not consistently achieved for the majority of Canberra suburbs. Nor was the Government's target of 50 per cent of emergency responses within eight minutes or less calculated across Canberra achieved.*³

The analysis performed by Audit was comprehensive, and was based on the full set of 2007-08 ambulance incidents data as recorded in ACTAS systems. This analysis should have been performed by ACTAS as part of sound management and planning practices, because such internal analysis provides the evidence-based information needed to improve the delivery of ACTAS services to the ACT community, including risk management and decisions on ambulance locations.

The Minister refers to a fundamental and robust analysis of information on ambulance incidents to inform Audit's assessment of ACTAS performance as '*the Auditor invented her own methodology, which is not used by anybody, except her*'.⁴

This statement is of particular concern as it could undermine the credibility of the report by misinterpreting a sound and valid analysis used to support the audit findings. The statement effectively dismisses the importance of using properly analysed evidenced-based data to identify risks and weaknesses in the delivery of services and to improve services.

I note that other evidence provided at the same public hearing by the Minister and ACTAS staff seems to contradict the statements by the Minister about the analysis done by Audit.

The Minister and ACTAS staff indicated that, following the audit, ACTAS commenced data analysis, similar to that undertaken by Audit, of the incidents to better inform its decisions on service delivery. For example:

- the Chief Officer of the ACT Ambulance Services, Mr Foot stated that:

We have also undertaken recently modelling where we are looking at ambulance deployments from Priority 1 point of view on a suburb basis between weekdays, so from 0800 to 1800, and also from 1800 through to 0800 the next morning.

*We are doing that on both the weekday, a weeknight and a weekend, which will much better inform our decisions about how we deploy resources into the community. That will also inform further work as we move forward into the state relocation feasibility study, where we are looking at the station placements into the future.*⁵

- The Minister for Emergency Services, Mr Simon Corbell MLA stated that:

*We are doing a detailed analysis of all emergency incidents for the 2009 calendar year by time of day and location, and this will help with our future deployment of resources. Those are the types of steps that we are taking in relation to dealing with demand.*⁶

³ Ibid., page 42, paragraph 4.50.

⁴ Standing Committee on Public Accounts Proof Transcript of Evidence 3 March 2010, page 17

⁵ Standing Committee on Public Accounts Proof Transcript of Evidence 3 March 2010, page 7.

⁶ Ibid., page 18.

- The Deputy Chief Officer of the Ambulance Services, Mr Dutton stated that:

The work that we are currently doing, looking at the 2009 calendar year, looks at both the time of day and the geographic distribution of all our emergency incidents.⁷

The Audit Office maintains its strong view that on-going proper analysis of the actual incident data, together with other information, is essential to inform decisions about the deployment of resources and locations of ambulance crews to meet the needs of the ACT community.

2. The Auditor-General seemed to take the view that we had to be 100 per cent confident in every situation that we could to ensure a response to each and every suburb in Canberra. That is not the way an emergency service goes about its business.⁸

The Minister's statement is misleading as it seeks to attribute views not expressed or inferred in the audit report. Indeed, this statement mis-represents the following Audit views as stated in the audit report:

In order to be able to match appropriate resources to current and future demand for ambulance services, ACTAS should further analyse demand data by call time and geographical distribution of incidents. ACTAS should then used this data to guide both ambulance resourcing and geographical positioning of ambulances close to known high call demand locations;⁹

Audit acknowledges that it is difficult to achieve the overall target (i.e. 50%) for each individual suburb, but Audit was concerned about the poor response time for many suburbs, and this issue should be;¹⁰ and

Audit considers that further strategies need to be in place to constantly monitor, review and improve the delivery of ambulance services, specially to cover a larger percentage of suburbs within the response time targets.¹¹

The above comments by Audit are also consistent with the policy of ACTAS of deploying resources to the various stations to improve coverage to the community.

Audit maintains that the failure to achieve targeted response times for the majority of locations/suburbs for Priority 1 emergencies is a significant issue that needs to be addressed.

3. There are a number of assertions which are not followed through in recommendations and with any real substantive evidence to back them up.¹²

All audit findings and comments made in the audit report are supported by sufficient and appropriate evidence. It is difficult to understand the basis for this comment because the Minister has not supported his broad statement by referring to any specific areas where there is insufficient evidence to support the audit findings.

The Audit Office is fully aware that ACTAS is required to deliver a complex range of services, and has examined comprehensively all key aspects of ACTAS operations, from

⁷ Ibid., page 20.

⁸ Ibid., page 5.

⁹ Auditor-General's Report No. 4 of 2009 'Delivery of ambulance services to the ACT community', page 22, paragraph 3.3.

¹⁰ Ibid., page 42, paragraph 4.51.

¹¹ Ibid., page 43, paragraph 4.58.

¹² Standing Committee on Public Accounts Proof Transcript of Evidence 3 March 2010, page 17.

both strategic and operational perspectives to ensure sufficient audit coverage of this important service.

I am pleased that since the tabling of the report, ACTAS has commenced addressing many of the issues raised by the audit.

I hope my comments will assist the Committee in its consideration of this audit report, and I look forward to the opportunity to respond to any questions by the Committee when I appear before the Committee's inquiry.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T. Pham', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Tu Pham
Auditor-General
18 March 2010