

# Chapter 2:

Chief of Defence Force  
Action Plan for the  
Recruitment and  
Retention of Women:  
How effective was it?

## In summary

- Very little progress has been made in implementing the Chief of the Defence Force's *Action Plan for the Recruitment and Retention of Women*.
- The progress that has been made has had limited impact and the Action Plan is not widely known across the ADF.
- The lack of progress in implementing the Action Plan suggests that commitment and buy-in from the leadership of each Service is a pre-condition for success.
- The implementation of the Action Plan should be discontinued in its current form.

## 2.1 Overview

As Chapter 1 has outlined, a strong case for change exists within the ADF to increase the representation of women across the services. The ADF has initiated strategies aimed at reform in this regard.

One strategy is the Chief of the Defence Force *Action Plan for the Recruitment and Retention of Women* ('the Action Plan'), intended to address organisational and cultural issues in relation to women in the ADF.

The Review's Term of Reference (c) requires the Review to review, report and make recommendations on:

The effectiveness of the cultural change strategies recommended by the Chief of the Defence Force Women's Reference Group in the Women's Action Plan including the implementation of these strategies across the Australian Defence Force.

The Action Plan was developed to increase participation of women in the ADF, with a 'small number of initiatives and targets' for which Service Chiefs could be held accountable to the Chief of the Defence Force (CDF). These targets are aimed at 'closing the gap' between men and women in regard to retention rates and length of service.

The Action Plan contains 30 initiatives grouped under six themes:

1. Increase enlistment of women into the ADF
2. Reform of career management policy and practice
3. Make commanders accountable for retention
4. Provide a workplace that accommodates career flexibility and difference
5. Develop mentoring and networking frameworks
6. Communicate organisational attributes and the suite of available working conditions.

As this Chapter outlines, there are several important lessons to be learned from the lack of success in implementing the Action Plan. Most critically, commitment and buy-in from senior leadership is essential to ensure accountability and a clear organisational understanding of the case for change.

## 2.2 Background

In 2008, the Minister for Defence Science and Personnel, the Hon Warren Snowdon, hosted a series of meetings with ADF and Defence Australian Public Service women from all ranks, levels and backgrounds, culminating in the *Report of the Roundtable Meetings between Defence Women and the Minister for Defence Science and Personnel (2008)*.<sup>1</sup> The Report identified common issues of concern such as cultural change, career management, training and professional development, recruitment initiatives, access to flexible working arrangements, work/family balance, support mechanisms, childcare, schooling and housing.

Also in 2008, the CDF set up a Reference Group on Women that consisted of a panel of senior women with a track-record of success in male-dominated and non-traditional work environments.<sup>2</sup> The Reference Group was guided by the following Terms of Reference:

- a. Consider the existing range of policies and practices within the ADF that should assist in attracting women to the ADF and aid their progression to the senior leadership levels.
- b. Identify possible gaps in these policies and programs that need to be addressed through new initiatives in order to achieve substantial momentum in the attraction and retention of women in the ADF.
- c. Identify barriers to accessing the existing policies and programs and make recommendations to overcome those barriers.
- d. Identify the action required to ensure enduring change once these barriers have been overcome.

As the themes of the 2008 Roundtable Report closely aligned with the work of the Reference Group on Women, these were merged and considered jointly. This means that the development of the Action Plan reflects a consolidation of the various gender initiatives being undertaken by Defence's Values, Behaviours and Resolution Branch (formerly known as the Fairness and Resolution Branch and which provided support for administration of the Reference Group and coordination of progress reports on the Action Plan to COSC<sup>3</sup>), the Reference Group, Defence Force Recruiting (DFR) and the activities of each Service.<sup>4</sup>

The Action Plan was launched by the CDF on 19 November 2009. A scheme was established through which quarterly reports were to be provided to the Chiefs of Service Committee (COSC) on all the Action Plan's tasks, with each Service giving progress updates on implementation. A Working Group was established comprising representatives from the Office of the CDF, VCDF, each of the Services and non-Service groups.<sup>5</sup>

In a meeting of the Working Group in November 2011, it was reported that COSC had directed that the Action Plan initiatives would be integrated with the outcomes of the Defence Cultural reviews. In the interim, quarterly updates would be provided to the Personnel Steering Group through the Working Group process.

The Review was initially provided with COSC's Quarterly Report for April 2011. This Quarterly Report stated that work on all 30 initiatives had commenced. Thirteen tasks were reported as 'complete'. Only one task was identified as being 'of concern', with all the remaining tasks reported as being 'on track'.

Where an action was listed as 'complete', however, this did not necessarily mean that it was accompanied by the cultural change intended by the initiative. In recognition of this, in November 2011, COSC also directed that the tasks previously listed as 'completed' be reviewed to ascertain if any further action was required, moving away from 'traffic light' reporting (where items were moved from 'red' to 'green' as the result of a single action being undertaken).

Following the Working Group meeting in November 2011, progress on the Action Plan was amended to indicate that only two of the initiatives were complete: the launch of the Action Plan (initiative 28) and development of a 'behavioural compact' (initiative 21). Other initiatives which had been marked as 'on track' or 'complete', but where no substantive change had resulted, were to be reconsidered. A further Working Group meeting was scheduled for March 2012, however this has been put on hold.

Appendix E.1 provides a snapshot of each of the initiatives and their status as at April and November 2011. It is clear that indicators of success in relation to each of the initiatives are lacking.

Appendix E.2 provides a broad description of the six key themes and corresponding initiatives contained in the Action Plan. Many of the key themes are the subject of detailed discussion throughout this Report.

## 2.3 Key findings

### (a) Structural issues

The updates referred to above indicate that little progress has been made on the implementation of the CDF Action Plan. This appears to stem from a number of structural problems associated with unwieldy internal processes, and from a broader lack of commitment and accountability.

For example, the Review heard that progress on the Action Plan has been slow in part because of resourcing and process issues.<sup>5</sup> Further, while the provision of progress reports through the chain of command and coordination through the Values, Behaviours and Resolution Branch should allow each Service to learn from each other, the process seems cumbersome in application. One member suggested that this 'bureaucratic' process should be streamlined so it is less 'committee based':

Everything that then gets resolved at this working level has to go...to a higher level, and then a higher level, and then a higher level, and so, it's ridiculous.<sup>7</sup>

Another member commented that the Action Plan was no longer being 'driven':

It is just a plan that every quarter we have to report on what on we're doing, and we've already reported it and gone through our Chief to get half of these things going.<sup>8</sup>

The Working Group process also seems to have contributed to the lack of progress and there was a view that it needed to be 'reinvigorated'. Following the November 2011 meeting, the Working Group is producing minutes of meetings for the first time, and, as already noted, is now in the process of revisiting each of the initiatives.

More fundamentally, there is a perceived lack of commitment to implementing the Action Plan and ambivalence about making genuine change within the Services. One senior leader within Defence made the following observation:

The progress of the CDF Action Plan has really been down to the working group of the service representatives and [the Values, Behaviours and Resolution Branch] to tick and flick a number of initiatives, but there has been no genuine oversight or commitment to... ensuring the proper progress of strategies by the individual services. I don't see any genuine commitment from the senior leadership to actually really actively pursue that plus more.<sup>9</sup>

Further, competing strategic or resourcing priorities appear to exist which may further test leadership commitment. For example, the *Strategic Reform Program* (SRP), released in 2009, aims to make Defence more efficient and effective and will result in significant savings<sup>10</sup> but, as the former CDF has noted, the SRP's proposal to 'civillianise' non-deployable ADF positions may well come at the expense of many positions currently held by ADF women.<sup>11</sup>

In 2009, an advisory report by leading human resources and business consultant, Christine McLoughlin ('McLoughlin Report') examined the Action Plan in the context of its contribution to women's participation in Navy.<sup>12</sup> The McLoughlin Report made several recommendations to improve implementation of the Action Plan, including changing its governance structure so that ownership and delivery comes from leaders within each

Service rather than personnel or human resources branches (further key findings from the McLoughlin Report are at Appendix E.3). This was reiterated by one member who told the Review:

If we are going to have a CDF Action Plan, if we are going to be doing anything to change things and support women you have to have that commitment from the senior leadership group, and they have to be driving it for their individual services, not people down at my rank or down lower.<sup>13</sup>

The importance of engagement and commitment of senior leadership to the success of such initiatives is clearly demonstrated by the experiences of other organisations and businesses. The way in which buy-in from senior male leadership is essential to increasing the representation of women in senior positions has been emphasised in the corporate sector.<sup>14</sup>

## (b) Content and communication issues

The Review also encountered a significant lack of awareness or understanding about the Action Plan amongst ADF personnel. In some cases, those who had heard of the Action Plan or its initiatives considered that it was not relevant or that it was 'overkill' and that there was no need for initiatives such as women's mentoring programs.<sup>15</sup> More fundamentally, there has been no compelling case made as to why achievement of the Action Plan initiatives is vital to Defence, nor has such a case been communicated. In the absence of this, it is not surprising that progress on the Action Plan has been slow and inconsistent.

Meanwhile, in identifying the key areas of concern within the Action Plan, members of the Working Group observed that the issue of flexible work was now less controversial and 'just needed time to sink in'.<sup>16</sup> The initiatives around career management and accountability, on the other hand, still faced significant cultural barriers to their implementation.

To combat these cultural barriers, the McLoughlin Report observed that change initiatives need to be supported by both men and women in leadership, but the difficulties of communicating the case for change message consistently was highlighted in the Review's focus groups. One participant noted that in speaking about the Action Plan at a staff promotional course 'you can see them all roll their eyes':

I said there's 28 initiatives here; 21 of them it doesn't matter if you're a bloke or a girl because they're about improving the way we help people work and actually have a life while we do things. The problem is the people who are at the top and because we don't laterally recruit ... our ability to be able to look like we're doing something different is really hard because we've only got people at the moment in those more senior areas who've followed that straight [career path].<sup>17</sup>

## 2.4 Conclusion

The CDF Action Plan was a genuine and well intentioned attempt to address issues of enlistment, career management, retention, flexible work practices and organisational culture. However, progress on its initiatives has stalled, with many strategies slowed by organisational inertia and little changing as a result. Further, the Review spoke to over 1,600 ADF personnel in focus groups, most of whom were not aware of the Action Plan, let alone had any personal or professional buy-in to achieving its aims. In fact, only a handful had heard of the Action Plan and often they were the people involved in its implementation.

The Action Plan's six key themes clearly intersect with the areas of focus of this Review. In some areas, the Action Plan initiatives are consistent with the Review's recommendations.<sup>18</sup> For example, several Action Plan initiatives focus on increasing enlistment of women through implementation of the Recruitment of Women Strategy. Given the Review's recommendations regarding improving the recruitment of women, there should be continued monitoring and evaluation of the Recruitment of Women Strategy initiatives to see if they are increasing the attraction/conversion of women through the recruiting pipeline (see section 4.2 and Appendix E.2). However, the Recruitment of Women Strategy will not be enough on its own to increase

the representation of women across the ADF. This means that particular strategies are needed to enhance recruitment at different ages and stages of their lives, and to broaden the occupational opportunities available to women.

In other areas, the Review's recommendations extend far beyond the initiatives contained within the Action Plan. They also address the key criticisms of the Action Plan as outlined in the McLoughlin Report – for example, the commitment by senior leadership, systemic barriers, accountability and the need for targeted interventions.

While the Review has no doubt about the positive intent of the Action Plan, there are critically important lessons to be learned from the lack of success in its implementation, and the Review proposes that the implementation of the Action Plan should be discontinued in its current form. Lessons from the Action Plan's lack of success should, in turn, be acknowledged in the implementation of this Review's recommendations – implementation which will require commitment and focus by senior leadership, a broader organisational understanding of the case for change, strengthened and transparent governance and reporting, clear and consistent communication, new and innovative organisational responses, and accountability built into performance management.

It will also require a determination to grapple with the cultural and attitudinal forces that often greet the implementation of change in any organisation. Consequently, the next Chapter of this Report offers an insight into these powerful and sometimes contradictory forces – using the words of ADF personnel, and women in particular, to highlight those factors which affect their decisions and day to day experiences.

- 1 Expressions of interest were called from Defence women interested in talking about their career experiences and perceptions as a member of ADF or APS employee working in Defence: see Minister for Defence Science and Personnel, *Report of the Roundtable Meetings Held Between Defence Women and the Minister for Defence Science and Personnel* (December 2008). At [www.defence.gov.au/fr/RR/Womenindefence/Progress.html](http://www.defence.gov.au/fr/RR/Womenindefence/Progress.html) (viewed 13 June 2012). Participants ranged from Gap Year representatives and junior ranks to Senior Executive Service women. Meetings were held in Canberra, Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Hobart, HMAS *Cerberus*, Townsville, Darwin and RAAF Base Tindal.
- 2 The Reference Group on Women group comprised:
  - Elizabeth Broderick
  - Christine Charles
  - Margaret Gardner AO
  - Sam Mostyn
  - Christine Nixon APM
  - Elizabeth Proust.
- 3 The Values, Behaviours and Resolution Branch has policy responsibilities for equity and diversity, indigenous matters, privacy and the integrated complaint handling system.
- 4 Meeting with Defence personnel on CDF Action Plan.
- 5 The CDF Action Plan Working Group included: representatives from Navy (Navy Strategic Command); Army (Workforce Strategy); Air Force (Workforce Diversity); Defence People Group (People Strategy and Culture, Defence Force Recruiting, People Policy and Employment Conditions, Directorate of Strategic Personnel Policy Research; Defence Support Group (People Services); Office of the Chief of Defence Force; Vice Chief of Defence Force (Cadet Reserve and Employer Support Division, Joint Health Command); the Defence Community Organisation; and Public Affairs: A Brentnall, email to the Review, 15 June 2012.
- 6 Meeting with Values, Behaviours and Resolution Branch.
- 7 Meeting with Defence personnel on CDF Action Plan.
- 8 Meeting with Defence personnel on CDF Action Plan.
- 9 Focus group 2A. A recent report notes that the Values, Behaviours and Resolution Branch also 'has many competing priorities', such as its equity and diversity oversight role and a heavy workload in managing complaints: Department of Defence, *The Review of Employment Pathways for APS Women in the Department of Defence* (2011), p 8. At [www.defence.gov.au/culturereviews/docs/epapsw/index.htm](http://www.defence.gov.au/culturereviews/docs/epapsw/index.htm) (viewed 17 June 2012).
- 10 Department of Defence, *The Strategic Reform Program 2009 – Delivering Force 2030* (2009), p 5. At <http://www.defence.gov.au/SRP/> (viewed 14 June 2012).
- 11 'Action Plan for Improving Recruitment and Retention of Women', Chiefs of Service Committee, Agendum Paper 04/09 (21 July 2009), para 19, provided to the Review.
- 12 C McLoughlin, *Women's Participation in the Navy*, Report of the Participation of Women in New Generation Navy Review, 7 October 2009, provided to the Review. The CDF appointed McLoughlin to conduct a review into the participation of women in the Royal Australian Navy in response to a request by the former Minister for Defence, Senator Faulkner.
- 13 Focus group 3A.
- 14 See Australian Human Rights Commission, 'Our experiences in elevating the representation of women in leadership. A letter from business leaders' (October 2011), p 20. At [http://www.humanrights.gov.au/sex\\_discrimination/publication/mcc/index.html](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/sex_discrimination/publication/mcc/index.html) (viewed 2 May 2012).
- 15 Focus group 8C.
- 16 Meeting with Defence personnel on CDF Action Plan.
- 17 Meeting with career management representatives.
- 18 See Appendix E.1.





