



Australian
Human Rights
Commission

Marine Deep Dive Project Summary Report

A close look at culture, identity, and behaviour
within the ABF's marine unit

March 2024



Note to reader: This Marine Deep Dive **summary report** is intended as a high-level overview of the Project's findings and recommendations only. ABF and Department personnel involved in the implementation of recommendations are advised to consult the further detail and guidance provided in the **full report**.

Acknowledgements

The Commission thanks the ABF Marine Deep Dive Project Working Group for their strategic guidance and support throughout the Project.

The Commission thanks the current and former officers from the marine unit who contributed their time in the course of consultations for the Project.

The Commission is grateful to the Marine Strategy and Improvement team for providing liaison support and advice during the Project.

The Sex Discrimination Commissioner thanks members of the Commission's ABF Partnership Team who worked closely with the ABF to produce this report.

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Cover image: ©Australian Border Force.

Suggested citation: Australian Human Rights Commission (2024). *Marine Deep Dive Project Summary Report: a close look at culture, identity, and behaviour within the ABF's marine unit*. Sydney: Australian Human Rights Commission.

Typeset by Lisa Carroll

2403_MarineDeepDive_SummaryReport

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1. Introduction

This Report presents summarised findings and recommendations arising from the Marine Deep Dive (the Project).¹

The aim of the Project was to work collaboratively to design a clear pathway forward to a healthy, supportive, and inclusive marine unit culture.² The Project expanded upon reform areas identified in previous reviews, concentrating on 3 themes: Identity, values, and culture; Diversity and inclusion, and Workplace behaviours.³

Marine unit officers are committed to their work and identify teamwork, camaraderie, and a service mindset as among the strengths of the unit. However, officers also face significant challenges in the marine unit, ranging from isolation within the ABF, to experiences of inappropriate workplace behaviour, to the limited diversity within the unit.

The Project highlighted an urgent need to prevent inappropriate behaviour in the marine unit. Officers mentioned behaviours including bullying, sexually suggestive and sexist comments, and incidents of sexual harassment described by officers as ‘serious’. The marine work environment presents unique challenges for preventing and responding to inappropriate workplace behaviours that remain unaddressed.

There is much work to be done in the marine unit to foster a workplace culture that genuinely supports diversity and inclusion, ensuring a safe and respectful environment for all officers regardless of their gender, sexuality, cultural or racial background, or disability.

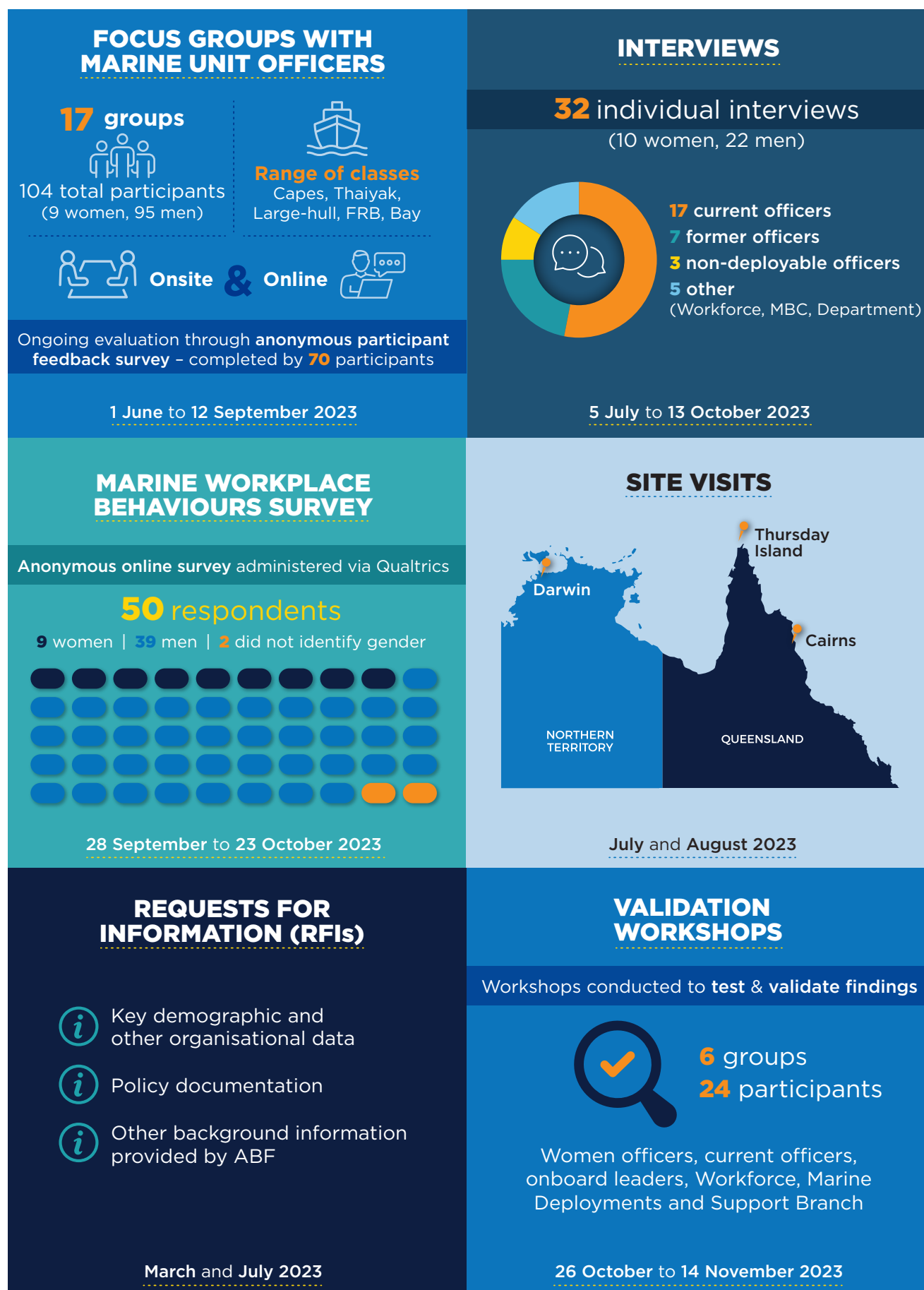
The Project recommendations aim to reset norms and ways of recruiting, supporting and leading the workforce that currently act as barriers to a more positive marine unit culture. They underscore the central role of both onboard leaders and ABF senior leadership in fostering a culture that prioritises safety, respect, and inclusion.

Further guidance and detail essential for the implementation of the outlined recommendations are available in the **full report**.



- 1 The Project is the first of the 5-year Partnership between the Australian Human Rights Commission (Commission) and the Australian Border Force (ABF). The purpose of this Partnership is to support the ABF to promote a safe, inclusive, equitable and diverse culture.
- 2 While an entity called the ‘marine unit’ does not exist, this term was used frequently by seagoing officers in the Marine Deployments & Support Branch to refer to the group of seagoing officers that serve in the ABF fleet under Maritime Border Command (MBC). It is used in this report due to its common usage amongst seagoing officers.
- 3 Marine Unit Risk Assessment’ was completed by Muru Consulting in November 2021 (Muru Report). The ‘Marine Improvements Programme’ (MIP) was initiated by the ABF in response. Further information in Appendix 1 of Marine Deep Dive full report.

Figure 1: Workforce engagement



2. Identity, values and culture

The marine work environment raises challenges for building a unified culture grounded in inclusion and respect for all officers. While the workforce is highly motivated, team-oriented and resilient, it is also largely isolated from the broader ABF. A positive workplace culture is essential to improving officer wellbeing and safety, engagement, and performance.

2.1 Key findings

(a) Strengths of the marine unit

Teamwork, camaraderie, resilience, experience, professionalism, and a service mindset were consistently identified by officers as key strengths of the marine unit.

(b) Core values of the marine unit

Collaboration, mutual support, communication, and trust are core values that underpin teamwork – identified as a strength of the marine unit – as well as broadly aligning with ABF Signature Values.

Many officers feel that they are treated with respect and that it's a core value within the unit however there are times when respect as a core value is challenged by incidents of inappropriate behaviour.

(c) Strong camaraderie and close bonds are a defining feature of the marine unit culture but can also lead to exclusion

Many officers enjoy the strong sense of camaraderie and closeness within their crews, describing them as a 'sea family.' However, there can be challenges associated with this closeness, with officers noting difficulties adjusting to working with different people or platforms, which can lead to exclusion of those not perceived as part of the team.

(d) 'Pockets of culture' and cliques in the marine unit can negatively impact the experiences of officers

Each vessel or crew can have its unique culture, influenced by the nature of the work, the personalities of the crew, and the onboard leadership style⁴. The variation in cultures can lead to differences in the work environment and experiences, with some officers (including leaders) referring to known 'bad crews' and 'good crews' in the unit. Existing cliques among some crews can pose barriers to inclusion.

(e) The culture of the marine unit is slowly improving but there remains work to be done

The 2023 APS Census results for the Marine Deployments & Support Branch show only 58% of respondents believe the ABF supports and promotes an inclusive workplace culture (**21% lower than the APS average**). This result shows an improvement from the 2022 results yet highlights the need for additional work.

There was a sense that the culture of the marine unit has evolved over the years. It was described as a previously 'alpha-male' dominated environment, but many believe it has become more inclusive. Despite this, significant improvement is still required, in particular where normalisation of inappropriate behaviours, cliques and absent leadership were noted.

4 Onboard leadership refers to all seagoing officers with supervisory responsibilities, including Commanding Officers, Enforcement Commanders, Deputy Commanding Officers, Chief Engineers, and Officers in Command.

(f) The marine unit has a unique identity and feels separated and disconnected from the rest of the ABF

The marine unit sees itself as having a distinctive identity with its own core values and culture.

There appears to be a tension between the idea of a unified ABF and recognising the marine unit's specialised role. Officers consistently expressed a feeling of separation from the rest of the ABF due to perceived differences in work culture, a lack of understanding about each other's work and associated challenges, and a feeling of exclusion from ABF-wide events and recognitions.

2.2 Recommendations

Recommendation 1

ABF senior leadership should prioritise building a unified marine unit culture that prioritises safety, respect and inclusion for all.

As part of an overarching strategy to enhance ABF culture more broadly, leadership must recognise and build on the existing strengths and values within the marine unit, identify alignment with the Signature Values, and build a sense of belonging and inclusion between the marine unit and the wider ABF. Concrete steps are highlighted in the full report and include leadership training, improved communication, recognition, and monitoring and evaluation of inclusion efforts.

Recommendation 2

ABF senior leadership should foster better connections with the broader ABF to reduce marine unit isolation.

This connection between the marine unit and the broader ABF should be two-way and based on respect and clear communication from both sides.

New opportunities for fostering improved connections between the marine unit and other ABF divisions should be considered. Existing successful initiatives should continue (such as regular leadership visits to vessels, and the Commanding Officer and Women in Maritime conferences).

The contribution of the marine unit to the ABF mission should also be communicated broadly and regularly, to support wider ABF understanding of their work.

3. Diversity and Inclusion

The marine unit remains male-dominated and there is limited cultural and racial diversity. While many officers welcome greater diversity in the unit, the current workplace settings are not inclusive and pose significant risks for both officers and the ABF as an institution. A diverse and inclusive workforce is key to ensuring a safe and respectful working environment for all.

3.1 Key findings

(a) The male-dominated nature of the marine unit presents risks and challenges for women officers

There has been a gradual increase in the overall number and proportion of women recruited into the marine unit over the past five years (July 2018-June 2023), but the workforce remains male-dominated. Women comprise just 10% of the marine unit, versus 44% of the ABF overall.

Women continue to face stigma and differential treatment in the marine unit, and experience discrimination and isolation. Women reported being frustrated at having to handle inappropriate jokes or comments; they noted feeling the need to overachieve or 'prove themselves' to be recognised as of equal value and accepted; and highlighted practical challenges such as bunk allocation when only one woman is on board and accessing toilets during long boardings. Although women generally feel included by their teams, they noted that being one of only a small number of women can be extremely isolating.

(b) The lack of flexible work arrangements is a significant barrier to the recruitment and retention of women in the marine unit⁵

ABF workforce data shows that over the past 5 years (July 2018-June 2023) only 5 marine unit officers have been approved for any type of flexible work/service arrangement. This fact is likely to continue to reinforce the unacceptably high attrition rate for women officers in the marine unit.

The disproportionate impact of limited flexibility on women considering having children and those with caregiving responsibilities was consistently highlighted by both men and women. Men with caregiving responsibilities and those pursuing flexibility encounter similar challenges.

Despite a past example of successful job-sharing, the current approval process for flexible work is perceived as too difficult, with the rationale for decisions reportedly arbitrary and dependent on individual decision-makers.

(c) The higher representation of First Nations officers relative to the broader ABF significantly enhances operational capability in key geographic areas of operation⁶

It was uniformly acknowledged that local First Nations officers with traditional knowledge of waters, relationships with communities and linguistic skills significantly enhance the unit's operational capacity and interactions with communities. There is strong support for the reinstatement of an Indigenous Traineeship Program, with a focus on the communities and waters in which the marine unit operates.

(d) There is limited cultural and racial diversity in the marine unit

Cultural and racial diversity in the marine unit does not reflect the diversity of the broader Australian community or the wider ABF. This is particularly the case in leadership positions, with many officers themselves referring to the onboard leadership as 'mostly white'.

⁵ Flexible work arrangements refers to job-sharing and other non-traditional work agreements.

⁶ First Nations is used throughout the report to refer collectively to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

(e) There is a lack of deep understanding of diversity and inclusion and its inherent benefits

Views of officers on the benefits and challenges of diversity and inclusion are varied, with the project uncovering the absence of a common understanding of its advantages for the workplace.

Officers primarily recognise the benefits of diversity from an operational perspective, emphasising the enhanced capability it brings during boarding and searches, in particular. Diversity of perspective and experience, and ‘diversity of thought’ was recognised by some as a competitive advantage, with many supervisors and officers noting greater diversity has a positive impact on team culture and behavioural standards.

Some officers expressed a fear that increased focus on diversity can be ‘tokenistic’ and undermine the high standards of the workplace. Some groups suggested that the like-mindedness and shared backgrounds of crews were important for cohesion onboard, avoiding the potential for political disagreements and the need to change attitudes and behaviours.

Efforts to ensure accommodation and inclusion of officers onboard appeared dependent on attitudes of individual teams, rather than part of a broader organisational approach.

While some officers recognised the importance of cultural awareness in the operational context and the contribution that a diverse workforce makes to this, there is limited ongoing learning regarding cultural awareness⁷. Offerings currently available via the ABF are mostly optional and delivered as eLearning courses.

(f) Recruitment strategies are not meaningfully targeting a broad range of potential officers

The absence of deliberate initiatives to reach a more diverse potential workforce emerged as a barrier to diversity. Recruitment initiatives were noted as not showcasing diverse experiences in the marine unit.

Some officers believe that the marine unit needs to be better advertised, particularly targeting certain groups like Torres Strait Islander communities and women. However, officers from these groups want to be consulted and be part of a representative portrayal of the marine unit not as, for example, a ‘token’ woman.

(g) There are significant data gaps preventing deeper analysis of cultural diversity and inclusion in the marine unit

There is a lack of clear, consistent, and accessible data on diversity indicators in the marine unit at each stage of the recruitment and career pathway. Where there is workforce demographics data, different and inconsistent indicators are being used.

The ABF was not able to provide data for each stage of the recruitment process disaggregated by diversity indicators.

⁷ Cultural awareness refers to a recognition of and sensitivity to a diversity of cultures. It includes being open and respectful of cultural differences and valuing the benefits of cultural diversity.

3.2 Recommendations

Recommendation 3

ABF should integrate diversity and inclusion training to foster a greater understanding of the experiences of women, First Nations and CARM⁸ officers.

Training should be foundational, mandatory, and participatory and aim to encourage discussion and shared understanding of diverse experiences and what it means to be inclusive, rather than focusing on compliance.

Recommendation 4

Access to flexible work arrangements should be normalised and routinely accommodated in the marine unit.

Implementing this recommendation will require the Marine Deployments & Support Branch to have open and constructive conversations about flexibility in line with personal circumstances, practices that have worked in the past, and operational requirements. It will also require adequate staffing levels beyond the current forecast, with associated committed funding.

Recommendation 5

ABF should reinstate an Indigenous Traineeship Program with specific outreach to Torres Strait Islander and other First Nations communities.

This program should be designed in consultation with key stakeholders able to offer lived experience and other expertise. Stakeholder groups should be given adequate time and resources to meaningfully assist in the program's relaunch, including time to consult with local communities, to increase the chances of its success. It should commence initially as a pilot.

Recommendation 6

ABF should adopt a cohesive recruitment strategy to progressively increase the recruitment of women, First Nations officers and CARM officers.

This strategy should involve a rigorous merit-based selection approach that is equitable and consider changes to recruitment advertisements and campaigns. Targets that aim to progressively increase recruitment of women, First Nations and CARM officers should be incorporated, as well as formal mentoring and support for these under-represented groups.

Recommendation 7

ABF should collect rigorous recruitment and separation data.

Rigorous data collection regarding the recruitment process is essential to inform and monitor a cohesive recruitment strategy. To help identify any structural barriers within the recruitment process, it should include easily accessible data on the number of women, First Nations, and CARM applicants, as well as tracking the stages of attrition and the reasons for it.

⁸ Developed by the Diversity Council of Australia in early 2023, the term CARM (Culturally and Racially Marginalised) is preferred for its acknowledgment of racial marginalisation and cultural discrimination.

4. Workplace behaviour

The marine unit exhibits a high prevalence of inappropriate workplace behaviours, including sexual harassment and bullying, which demand immediate intervention. These issues pose a significant safety risk for officers and an institutional risk for the ABF. Achieving a positive culture within the marine unit is contingent on the effective prevention and response to these behaviours.

4.1 Key findings

(a) There is an urgent need to prevent inappropriate workplace behaviours in the marine unit

The results of a workplace behaviours survey conducted for this project indicate a significantly high prevalence of inappropriate behaviours within the marine unit.^{9, 10} It portrays a workplace that is not safe for women and challenges efforts to build a genuinely inclusive culture. Key survey results are noted below.

Sex discrimination, sexual harassment and sex-based harassment

- 100% of women had witnessed sex discrimination, sexual harassment and/or sex-based harassment in the marine unit, compared with 33% of men
- 78% of women had experienced sex discrimination, sexual harassment and/or sex-based harassment in the marine unit, compared with 18% of men
- reported experiences included sexist, misogynistic or misandrist comments, jokes or banter, (67% of women, 8% of men), intrusive comments about their private life or physical appearance (56% of women, 5% of men) and sexually suggestive comments or jokes (44% of women, 3% of men).

Bullying

- 89% of women and 69% of men had witnessed workplace bullying
- 78% of women had experienced workplace bullying, compared with 51% of men

Women were more likely than men to be subjected to social isolation and deliberate exclusion from workplace activities.

Consistent with the survey results, in Project consultations some officers reported witnessing or being subjected to humiliating or threatening behaviour from colleagues, such as the deliberate denial of diet-appropriate meals during a patrol, 'career curtailing gossip' and yelling.

Other forms of inappropriate workplace behaviour

Women reported experiencing higher rates of discrimination than men on the basis of their race, sexual orientation, religion, age, and disability.

In consultations, one leader recounted having to manage 'poor behaviour around dealing with people of colour' and casual homophobic remarks. Some officers shared incidents of potential discrimination on the basis of disability and age.

⁹ The Marine Workplace Behaviours Survey (the workplace behaviours survey) was an anonymous, online survey open to both current marine unit officers and those who have left in the past 2 years. The survey was completed by 50 respondents (9 women, 39 men, and 2 who preferred not to identify their gender). Whilst not a representative sample, the results are consistent with information shared in focus groups and interviews, and the most recent APS Census.

¹⁰ The Department of Home Affairs defines inappropriate behaviour as being behaviour that would 'reasonably be considered offensive, belittling, abusive or threatening to another person(s); adverse to morale, discipline or workplace cohesion; or otherwise not in the interests of the Department. The workplace behaviours survey was structured around 3 categories of inappropriate workplace behaviours: (a) sex discrimination, sexual harassment and sex-based harassment; (b) bullying; (c) other inappropriate workplace behaviours.

(b) There is a perceived lack of accountability and consequences for inappropriate workplace behaviours leading to distrust in the system and in leaders

Many officers cited examples where inappropriate behaviour was reported but led to inadequate action or no visible consequences. Examples were given of mismanagement of inappropriate behaviours, including accused officers being transferred to other vessels rather than leaders directly addressing their behaviour.

(c) The marine work environment presents unique challenges for preventing and responding to inappropriate workplace behaviours that remain unaddressed

The overlap of personal and professional spaces in the marine work environment, challenging operating contexts and increased stress and fatigue, can intensify interpersonal interactions onboard and heighten the risk of inappropriate behaviour if not well managed.

Factors such as isolation from support systems, normalisation of inappropriate behaviour and a reluctance to report concerns through external systems all contribute to an environment where behaviour is difficult to identify, address and prevent on a systemic level.

(d) There are significant barriers to reporting including insufficient support

Many officers shared that they don't feel confident about taking a complaint outside their vessel. Reasons include:

- lack of familiarity with process and support services
- lack of confidence in response system
- widespread distrust in confidentiality of complaint and support services.

Poor internet connection and limited privacy onboard hinder access to external support services like Speak Safe and EAP. For onboard leaders, challenges in accessing timely, practical HR support and advice were highlighted.

(e) An effective and open leadership team is essential for preventing and responding to inappropriate workplace behaviours

There is strong agreement that the onboard leadership team sets behavioural standards and should be primarily responsible for managing inappropriate workplace behaviours. While many leaders do set high standards and promote positive team dynamics, a need for leaders to be better trained to deal with inappropriate behaviours was also highlighted.

(f) The current training approach to workplace behaviours is not suitable for the marine unit context

Views on the current training approach consistently highlighted a lack of relevance and interactivity, difficulties with internet access onboard, and time poorness as limitations for meaningful engagement.

4.2 Recommendations¹¹

Recommendation 8

ABF leadership at all levels should be held accountable for addressing reported and known incidents of inappropriate workplace behaviours.

There must be defined consequences for leadership failures to actively address all incidents of inappropriate workplace behaviours.

Expectations on leaders should include that they take direct action, document all known incidents of inappropriate workplace behaviours, monitor the impact of incidents, and communicate action taken while safeguarding the confidentiality and privacy of those involved. These expectations should be integrated into the Performance Development Agreements of all onboard and onshore leaders.

Recommendation 9

Onboard leaders at all levels should be selected for leadership capabilities and supported with ongoing leadership training.

Considering the critical role of the leadership team in establishing behavioural standards and managing incidents, promotion criteria should explicitly require demonstrated leadership skills and role modelling of appropriate behaviour.

Recommendation 10

ABF should undertake periodic risk assessments of inappropriate workplace behaviours in the marine unit and identify control measures.

The ABF is required to take a risk-based approach to comply with the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth) and the *Work Health Safety Regulations 2011* (Cth). This approach can be adapted from existing work health and safety processes and integrated into the overall safety culture onboard. The Marine Work Health and Safety Committee could be engaged in this process as part of their mandate.

Recommendation 11

Department and ABF should improve formal and informal support pathways for marine unit officers.

In the marine context, improved support pathways should include improving internet connection, expanding in-person support options, addressing concerns about the confidentiality of support services, and implementing measures to protect the privacy and confidentiality of officers making disclosures.

Recommendation 12

Department and ABF should implement and promote a person-centred approach to handling complaints of inappropriate workplace behaviour.

This should include ensuring officers who report sexual harassment or other forms of inappropriate workplace behaviours will not lose their sea-going commuted allowance during the resolution of the complaint; and prioritising the needs of the person/s who has raised the complaint ahead of taking any action.

Recommendation 13

Department and ABF should implement a foundational, ongoing, and multifaceted training approach on workplace behaviours that is suitable for the marine context.

Training for all officers should encourage attitudes and practices that foster respectful, safe and inclusive cultures. It should incorporate realistic marine-specific scenarios that encourage active discussion and engagement. It should be foundational, mandatory and participatory.

¹¹ These recommendations will also be informed by the enterprise-wide ABF Respect@Work Project.

5. Next steps

The Commission acknowledges the seagoing officers, both current and former, and other ABF personnel who generously shared their experiences and ideas on how to further enhance the marine unit workplace culture for everyone's benefit. Through the resulting interrelated recommendations presented here, the ABF has a clear pathway forward to a healthy, supportive, and more inclusive marine unit culture.

