

Examination of Auditor-General
Report No. 7 : 2018-19
Conserving threatened species

Report No. 20, 56th Parliament
Innovation, Tourism Development and
Environment Committee
September 2019

Innovation, Tourism Development and Environment Committee

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Acknowledgements

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Abbreviations

NC Act	<p><i>Nature Conservation Act 1992</i></p> <p>The Act regulates the protection of Queensland's native wildlife; supports the making of subordinate legislation, including regulations, notices, and conservation plans; and prescribes the classification categories of wildlife in Queensland.</p>
Auditor-General Report	Auditor-General Report No. 7: 2018-19 - <i>Conserving threatened species</i>
Biodiversity	The variety of all life forms on earth; the different plants, animals and micro-organisms; their genes; and the terrestrial, marine and freshwater ecosystems of which they are a part.
CAM	Common Assessment Method, a nationally consistent method for assessing and listing threatened species.
committee	Innovation, Tourism and Development Committee
Conservation	The protection and maintenance of nature while allowing for its ecologically sustainable use.
Department	Department of Environment and Science
Endemic species	Species only found within a defined area
IMOU	Intergovernmental Memorandum of Understanding
QAO	Queensland Audit Office
Regulation	<p>Nature Conservation (Wildlife) Regulation 2006</p> <p>The regulation lists Queensland's native wildlife under the NC Act prescribed categories; establishes the permit and licensing requirements for the take, keep and use of each species class.</p>
Species Technical Committee	<p>Assesses nominations to list Queensland's threatened native species and recommends classifications under the NC Act.</p> <p>Note: while the department provides the committee with secretariat support and most committee members are employed by the Department of Environment and Science, the Species Technical Committee is designed to be independent of the department.</p>
Threatened species	A species is considered threatened if it is classified as extinct in the wild, endangered or vulnerable.

Chair's foreword

This report presents a summary of the Innovation, Tourism Development and Environment Committee's examination of the Auditor-General Report No. 7: 2018-19 *Conserving threatened species*.

The committee examined the Auditor-General's findings in relation to whether Queensland public sector entities are effectively identifying, protecting and conserving threatened species in Queensland. The Auditor-General made seven recommendations which were directed to and accepted by the Department of Environment and Science. The committee has considered the department's progress in implementing these recommendations, and is satisfied that progress is in line with the actions and timeframes outlined within the department's formal response to the audit.

On behalf of the committee, I thank the Queensland Audit Office and the Department for Environment and Science for their assistance with the committee's examination.

I commend this report to the House.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "D. Pegg". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "D" and a stylized "Pegg".

Duncan Pegg MP

Chair

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

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The committee recommends that the Legislative Assembly note the contents of this report.

1 Introduction

1.1 Role of the committee

The Innovation, Tourism Development and Environment Committee (committee) is a portfolio committee of the Legislative Assembly which commenced on 15 February 2018 under the *Parliament of Queensland Act 2001* and the Standing Rules and Orders of the Legislative Assembly.¹

The committee's primary areas of responsibility include:

- Innovation and Tourism Industry Development and the Commonwealth Games, and
- Environment and the Great Barrier Reef, Sciences and the Arts.

According to s 94(1)(a) of the *Parliament of Queensland Act 2001*, the committee has responsibility within its portfolio areas for the assessment of the integrity, economy, efficiency and effectiveness of government financial management by:

- examining government financial documents, and
- considering the annual and other reports of the Auditor-General.

1.2 Role of the Auditor-General

The role of the Auditor-General is to provide Parliament with independent assurance of public sector accountability and performance. This is achieved through reporting to Parliament on the results of its financial and performance audits.

A performance audit evaluates whether an agency or government program is achieving its objectives effectively, economically and efficiently, and is compliant with relevant legislation. It does not consider the merits of government policy. Rather, it focuses on how that policy is implemented.²

The Queensland Audit Office (QAO) Report 7: 2018–19, titled 'Conserving threatened species' (Auditor-General Report) was prepared under Part 3 Division 3 of the *Auditor-General Act 2009* and was tabled in the Legislative Assembly in accordance with section 67 of that Act on 13 November 2018.

1.3 Referral of the Auditor-General Report

Standing Order 194B provides that the Committee of the Legislative Assembly shall as soon as practicable after a report of the Auditor-General is tabled in the Assembly, refer that report to the relevant portfolio committee for consideration. The Auditor-General Report was referred to the committee on 15 November 2018.

A portfolio committee may deal with this type of referral by considering and reporting on the matter and making recommendations about it to the Assembly.

1.4 Examination process

The committee received a public briefing from the QAO on 13 May 2019. See Appendix A of this report for a list of witnesses. A copy of the transcript can be accessed on the committee's webpage [here](#).

The committee wrote to the Department of Environment and Science in June 2019, seeking further information on the department's progress in implementing the recommendations outlined within the Auditor-General report. A copy of the department's response can be accessed on the committee's webpage [here](#).

¹ *Parliament of Queensland Act 2001*, section 88 and Standing Order 194.

² QAO Factsheet - About us, p 2.

2 Examination of the Auditor-General Report

2.1 Audit objective and method

The purpose of the audit was to assess whether Queensland public sector entities are effectively identifying, protecting and conserving threatened species.

The audit focussed primarily on the Department of Environment and Science (the department) which has overall responsibility for identifying, protecting and recovering Queensland's threatened species. In particular, the audit assessed whether the department:

- identifies and lists Queensland's threatened species
- is transitioning effectively to the Common Assessment Method (a nationally consistent method for assessing and listing threatened species)
- has strategies and plans in place to effectively protect threatened species and their habitat
- is effectively monitoring and reporting on threatened species outcomes.³

The Auditor-General made a number of findings and seven recommendations relating to these areas. These were accepted by the Director-General of the Department of Environment and Science in October 2018 and are discussed further in the sections below.

The audit process involved: interviews with staff from the relevant departments, document review and data analysis, and interviews with key stakeholders and experts. The QAO also undertook site visits to two nature refuges in central Queensland, and considered 31 written submissions from stakeholders including universities, conservation groups, wildlife parks and individuals.⁴

2.2 Listing threatened species

Nature conservation legislation aims to protect native species by providing systems for identifying and listing species as threatened. This legislation restricts people from taking, keeping or using listed species. Listing threatened species is therefore the first critical step in protecting native flora and fauna under the Queensland *Nature Conservation Act 1992* (NC Act).⁵

In Queensland, 955 species are listed as threatened wildlife in the Nature Conservation (Wildlife) Regulation 2006 (the regulation). Of these, 33 are extinct in the wild, 301 are endangered, and 621 are vulnerable.⁶ The QAO reported that the number of species listed in legislation as threatened is likely to be understated.⁷

2.2.1 Key findings and recommendations

The Auditor-General Report made a number of findings and recommendations relating to the listing of threatened species. Findings included: the department did not proactively nominate species for listing, or encourage relevant stakeholders to make nominations; delays occurred between the assessment process and the listing of approved threatened species in legislation; the department did not have a process that provided for the periodic review of existing classifications; and the transparency of the listing process could be improved by publishing the assessments completed by the Species Technical Committee following their consideration by the Minister.⁸

³ Auditor-General Report No. 7: 2018-19, p 1.

⁴ Auditor-General Report No. 7: 2018-19, p 54.

⁵ Auditor-General Report No. 7: 2018-19, p 5.

⁶ Auditor-General Report No. 7: 2018-19, p 17.

⁷ Auditor-General Report No. 7: 2018-19, p 6.

⁸ Auditor-General Report No. 7: 2018-19, p 6.

The Auditor-General's recommendations and the department's response to the recommendations are outlined in the table below.

Table 1: Listing threatened species – QAO recommendations and departmental response

No.	Queensland Audit Office Recommendation	Timeframe for implementation / Departmental response
1.	<p>Proactively nominate species for listing or reclassification under the Nature Conservation (Wildlife) Regulation 2006.</p> <p>Classification Reviews should be periodical.</p>	<p>Quarter 2 2019</p> <p>The department will enable and encourage nominations for listing or reclassification under the regulation.</p> <p>The department will implement an engagement and communication plan to promote better awareness of nomination process for species listing.</p> <p>Quarter 3 2019</p> <p>The department will establish a process to systematically update the classification of wildlife, consistent with that being developed by the CAM working group.</p>
2.	<p>Review the <i>Nature Conservation Act 1992</i> to ensure timely listing of threatened species. This should include amending the legislation so that the minister's decision of whether to add, delete or reclassify a species is reflected in the Nature Conservation (Wildlife) Regulation 2006 within a specified timeframe after receiving the Species Technical Committee's recommendation.</p>	<p>Quarter 2 2019</p> <p>The department will complete a review of the effectiveness of nomination and listing approaches used in other jurisdictions to achieve timely species listings.</p> <p>Quarter 2 2020</p> <p>The Nature Conservation (Wildlife) Regulation will be updated to include a timeframe for listing as indicated by review.</p>
3.	<p>Increase the transparency of the threatened species assessment process by publishing online:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a public request to encourage nominations to add or delete species from the current list or to change the classification of listed species • species nominations received allowing the public to submit future information that may assist the Species Technical • meeting dates and terms of reference for the Species Technical Committee • Species Technical Committee's assessments and recommendations, with supporting scientific evidence to inform future nominations. <p>It may be appropriate to refrain from publishing information that could result in further harm to the species.</p>	<p>Quarter 4 2018</p> <p>The department will publish online:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information to encourage nominations to add or delete, or change classification of threatened species from the current list • The list of species nominations received, including information received in support of nomination • Meeting dates and terms of reference of the Species Technical Committee • Approved assessments and recommendations, with supporting scientific evidence to inform future nominations. <p>The department will not publish information that could result in further harm to species.</p>

Source: Auditor-General Report No. 7: 2018-19, p 48-49.

2.2.2 Progress in implementing recommendations

In July 2019, the department advised the committee that actions to improve threatened species listing processes were well advanced:

Improvements to the process for listing threatened species, including encouraging nominations are well advanced. Enhancements have been published on the department's website, as recommended, to increase transparency.

A review of the nomination and listing approaches in other jurisdictions has now been completed. The process to revise the Nature Conservation (Wildlife) Regulation 2006 to include timeframes for listing is underway.⁹

2.3 Common Assessment Method

The Common Assessment Method (CAM) is a standardised approach to assessing and nationally listing threatened species.¹⁰ The CAM seeks to promote a more consistent and efficient process, leading to better outcomes for Australia's biodiversity. To date, all Australian jurisdictions with the exception of South Australia have signed an Intergovernmental memorandum of understanding (IMOU) which provides a framework for implementation of the CAM.¹¹

Under the IMOU, the department has a number of obligations. This includes: passing amendments to the NC Act; reviewing and reclassifying Queensland's endemic species on the threatened species list in line with the CAM; and reaching agreement with other jurisdictions about protocols and processes for the classification of new species.¹²

2.3.1 Key findings and recommendations

The audit found that 'Queensland is not on track to meet all its obligations in the IMOU to implement the Common Assessment Method'.¹³

The audit acknowledged that while work to transition to the CAM was ongoing, comprehensive project governance arrangements had not been developed and there was no overarching plan to coordinate activities.¹⁴

The Auditor-General's recommendations, the department's response to the recommendations including timeframes for implementation are outlined in the table below.

⁹ Department of Environment and Science, correspondence dated 5 July 2019, p 1.

¹⁰ Auditor-General Report No. 7: 2018-19, p 20.

¹¹ Intergovernmental MOU Agreement on A Common Assessment Method for listing of threatened species and threatened ecological communities.
<http://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/resources/36ece4ab-82dc-4de9-aac6-9cc54bd7a820/files/mou-cam.pdf>

¹² Auditor-General Report No. 7: 2018-19, p 20.

¹³ Auditor-General Report No. 7: 2018-19, p 20.

¹⁴ Auditor-General Report No. 7: 2018-19, p 20.

Table 2: Common Assessment Method - QAO recommendations and departmental response

No.	Queensland Audit Office Recommendations	Timeframe for implementation / Departmental response
4.	Further develop and implement its draft project governance framework and project plan for the Common Assessment Method project to ensure the department meets all its obligations under the Memorandum of Understanding.	<p>Quarter 4 2018</p> <p>A project governance framework and single project plan for the separate CAM projects will be finalised.</p>
5.	<p>Review the classification status of Queensland's native species currently listed in the Nature Conservation (Wildlife) Regulation 2006 to prepare for the transition to the Common Assessment Method.</p> <p>This includes reassessing Queensland's threatened species classifications where they are inconsistent with the Commonwealth's threatened species list.</p>	<p>Quarter 4 2021</p> <p>The department will complete a review of the classification status of Queensland's native species including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying those that are not listed consistently with the status reflected in the <i>Environmental Protection & Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999</i> • Re-assessing the classification of species that occur only in Queensland, consistent with the CAM. <p>The department notes that under the CAM, the Commonwealth has responsibility for assessing and listing species that occur across jurisdictions. The department will contribute to the process led by the Commonwealth Government in regard to these species.</p>

Source: Auditor-General Report No. 7: 2018-19, p 49.

2.3.2 Progress in implementing recommendations

In July 2019, the department advised that improvements to the CAM governance arrangements had been made and that the department is continuing to work with other jurisdictions to progress implementation of the CAM:

Improvements have also been made to governance and processes for the Common Assessment Method (CAM). The department continues to work with the Commonwealth Government and State jurisdictions to implement obligations under the CAM Memorandum of Understanding. A review of the classification status of Queensland protected species is progressing and planning for reassessment of species to align with the CAM has commenced.¹⁵

2.4 Planning and prioritising conservation

The NC Act requires that the department develop an integrated and comprehensive conservation strategy to achieve the conservation of nature for the whole of the state.¹⁶ The department previously developed and finalised a strategy in 2011, however, this was never implemented.¹⁷

¹⁵ Department of Environment and Science, correspondence dated 5 July 2019, p 1.

¹⁶ Auditor-General Report No. 7: 2018-19, p 7.

¹⁷ Auditor-General Report No. 7: 2018-19, p 7.

2.4.1 Key findings and recommendations

The audit found that the department had no strategy or framework for conserving or managing threatened species in place. The Auditor-General reported that ‘efforts in managing threatened species lacked purpose, direction and coordination’.¹⁸

The Auditor-General’s recommendation and the department’s response are outlined in the table below.

Table 3: Planning and prioritising conservation - QAO recommendations and departmental response

No.	Queensland Audit Office Recommendation	Timeframe for implementation / Departmental response
6.	<p>Develop an integrated and comprehensive conservation strategy for Queensland to meet the requirement of the <i>Nature Conservation Act 1992</i>.</p> <p>The strategy should be supported by plans for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • investment and implementation • engagement and communications • monitoring and evaluation. 	<p>Quarter 4 2018</p> <p>The department will engage with an expert forum of scientists to commence developing key principles for threatened species conservation under a biodiversity strategy.</p> <p>Quarter 1 2019</p> <p>The department will establish stakeholder consultation mechanisms for development of a biodiversity conservation strategy.</p> <p>Quarter 3 2019</p> <p>The department will complete an overarching Queensland Biodiversity Strategy, inclusive of specific strategies required under the Act. For threatened species, protected areas and wildlife. The strategy will be supported by an implementation and investment plan, engagement and communication plan, prioritisation framework and a framework for monitoring, assessing and reporting on progress. The implementation of the strategy will require consideration of additional resources required.</p>

Source: Auditor-General Report No. 7: 2018-19, p 50.

2.4.2 Progress in implementing recommendations

In July 2019, the department confirmed that a Biodiversity Conservation Strategy for Queensland is scheduled to be released by the end of September 2019:

*The overarching Strategy is planned for release by the end of September. The intent is that the department will work with partners to develop detailed implementation plans progressively. The Strategy and implementation framework will provide for a more comprehensive approach to biodiversity conservation in Queensland, including a strong focus on climate change, partnerships with First Nations peoples and key actions to protect Queensland Biodiversity.*¹⁹

The department also confirmed that engagement and consultation had taken place with technical experts and the conservation sector to develop the strategy:

The department has held a number of workshops and discussions with Queensland’s and Australia’s leading experts in threatened species and biodiversity conservation, to assist with the

¹⁸ Auditor-General Report No. 7: 2018-19, p 7.

¹⁹ Department of Environment and Science, correspondence dated 5 July 2019, p 2.

*development of the Strategy. Consultation with the conservation sector has also occurred regarding the key principles and components necessary for the Strategy.*²⁰

The department advised the committee that a new Threatened and Protected Species Steering Committee had been established to coordinate activities for existing actions and new programs. The remit of the committee will be to focus on effective ways to achieve conservation outcomes for threatened species. The department stated that this will address the need for improved coordination of activities across the department as highlighted through the audit.²¹

2.5 Protecting and recovering threatened species

Managing threatened species is central to limiting biodiversity loss. Entities need robust information on species population trends in order to do this. Recovery or conservation plans are also an important tool to protect threatened species. These set out management actions necessary to stop decline and support species recovery, and provide a basis for prioritising and directing funds.

2.5.1 Key findings and recommendations

The Auditor-General found that the department largely focuses efforts on individual species, rather than taking a strategic approach to conserving all threatened species. It noted that the department does not currently use a method to prioritise which species will be the subject to conservation and recovery plans.²²

The audit also found monitoring data is only available for a few species, and that the number of recovery plans for threatened species is low. The Auditor-General Report noted that the department does not have enough information to measure and report on many listed species which do not have recovery or project plans, and that the department does not have consistently collected data about the distribution and abundance of Queensland's threatened species.²³

Table 4: Protecting and recovering threatened species - QAO recommendations and departmental response

No.	Queensland Audit Office Recommendation	Timeframe for implementation / Department Response
7.	<p>Monitor and report on the population and trends of threatened species by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • prioritising species for monitoring to make the most of available resources • developing data collection protocols to ensure consistency and rigour • improving data management and access • reporting on recovery activities within government and by external partners • reporting on the effectiveness of conservation management outcomes. 	<p>Quarter 3 2019</p> <p>The department will establish a renewed framework to effectively monitor and report on the population and trends of threatened species including to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • prioritise species for monitoring • develop and publish a research prospectus • better capture outcomes from research permits • improve data collection, management and access • improve reporting on recovery activities and outcomes • establish formal partnerships with relevant external science research bodies.

Source: Auditor-General Report No. 7: 2018-19, p 50.

²⁰ Department of Environment and Science, correspondence dated 5 July 2019, p 2.

²¹ Department of Environment and Science, correspondence dated 5 July 2019, p 2.

²² Auditor-General Report No. 7: 2018-19, pp 8-9.

²³ Auditor-General Report No. 7: 2018-19, pp 8-9.

2.5.2 Progress in implementing recommendations

In July 2019, the department advised that actions to enhance monitoring and reporting on threatened species population trends are being delivered. The department reported that baseline information and gaps in information had been identified, and information systems and data management processes had been reviewed:

Actions to address recommendation 7 in the Report, to enhance monitoring and reporting on threatened species population trends, are being delivered. Key actions include identifying baseline information and knowledge gaps, and reviewing biodiversity information systems and associated data management processes. This work supports the development of a prioritisation method for recovery actions and associated monitoring to determine effectiveness.²⁴

The department also confirmed that a research prospectus was is being prepared, that existing partnerships with relevant research bodies were being formalised, and that latest technologies were being considered to improve monitoring and recovery efforts:

To ensure rigorous and comprehensive scientific approach underpinning the department's work, a research prospectus is being prepared. This will ensure a strategic approach is taken to partnership development and research investment. Existing partnerships are being formalised to ensure a consistent approach to achieving the department's goals for threatened species. The department also has projects underway which are harnessing the latest technologies – such as artificial intelligence and machine learning – to improve threatened species monitoring and recovery efforts.²⁵

2.6 Other issues

A number of other issues were canvassed by the committee during its examination. These are discussed below.

2.6.1 Cost of implementing the recommendations

The committee sought comment from the QAO on the anticipated cost of implementing the seven recommendations. The QAO advised that a dollar figure had not been determined. However, from the point of view of the QAO, it was not likely to be significant:

In terms of the recommendations, the costs probably are not all that high. It is more about harnessing the activity that is already occurring but sporadically. ... We have not put a dollar cost on it, but it is certainly, from our point of view, not likely that it would require a considerable amount of additional funding or potentially any additional funding.²⁶

In July 2019, the department advised that 'immediate improvements are being implemented through the reprioritisation of existing resources'²⁷. However, longer term actions represented a significant body of work, and would require technical skill sets. Detailed resourcing requirements would therefore be the subject of further consideration by government:

The immediate improvements are being implemented through the reprioritisation of existing resources. Longer term actions, such as re-assessing over 700 threatened species classifications to align with Commonwealth legislation, represent a significant body of work and require specialist skills. Implementation of the Biodiversity Conservation Strategy will represent a major program of work for the department over the coming years. Detailed resourcing requirements

²⁴ Department of Environment and Science, correspondence dated 5 July 2019, p 2.

²⁵ Department of Environment and Science, correspondence dated 5 July 2019, p 2.

²⁶ Transcript, Public Briefing, Brisbane, Monday 13 May 2019, p 5.

²⁷ Department of Environment and Science, correspondence dated 5 July 2019, p 2.

*for implementation are being considered through the development process, and will be the subject of further consideration by Government.*²⁸

2.6.2 Availability of funding for community stakeholders

As noted in the Auditor-General's Report, a number of non-government organisations and individuals are involved in the recovery of threatened species in Queensland.²⁹ The QAO stated that during the audit consultation process, the availability of funding to undertake relevant conservation activities had been raised as an issue by groups and individuals.³⁰

In July 2019, the department confirmed that it had recently completed a funding call for community-based conservation projects targeted at protecting priority threatened species, through the Community Access Grants program. The department advised that assessment of applications is underway and that once completed, funding of \$1.5 million (a maximum of \$100,000 per project) will be provided to support a range of initiatives tied to threatened species responses.³¹

2.6.3 Audit monitoring arrangements

As outlined in the tables above, the department has provided timeframes for implementation of each of the seven recommendations. The QAO stated that generally, they considered the timeframes to be 'reasonable'.³²

The QAO also outlined how implementation of the recommendations would be monitored going forward. The QAO advised that a self-assessed progress report will be requested from the department, which tracks progress against each of the recommendations. This occurs around two-years after the tabling of the original audit report (which in this case would be around November 2020). This information will be used in determining which follow-up audits the QAO undertakes.³³

Should the QAO conduct a follow up audit, the QAO will consider: whether the department has implemented the recommendations or taken alternative action to address an issue; and whether these actions have been successful in the addressing the issues that were identified in the original audit. These reports are also tabled in Parliament.³⁴

Mr Worrall, Auditor-General also emphasised the important role that departmental Audit Committees should play in monitoring Auditor-General recommendations, advising that Audit Committees should track recommendations on a register in order to hold management to account in implementing recommendations in line with agreed timeframes.³⁵

2.7 Committee comment

The Auditor-General's performance audit identified clear areas for improvement in the management of threatened species in Queensland. The Auditor-General directed seven recommendations to the Department of Environment and Science, aimed at improving: the nomination, assessment and listing of threatened species; the implementation of a Common Assessment Method; and the planning, coordination and oversight of threatened species conservation strategies and activities. The department has accepted each of these recommendations.

²⁸ Department of Environment and Science, correspondence dated 5 July 2019, p 2.

²⁹ Auditor-General Report No. 7: 2018-19, p 15.

³⁰ Transcript, Public Briefing, Brisbane, Monday 13 May 2019, p 6.

³¹ Department of Environment and Science, correspondence dated 5 July 2019, p 2.

³² Transcript, Public Briefing, Brisbane, Monday 13 May 2019, p 7.

³³ Transcript, Public Briefing, Brisbane, Monday 13 May 2019, p 7.

³⁴ Transcript, Public Briefing, Brisbane, Monday 13 May 2019, p 6.

³⁵ Transcript, Public Briefing, Brisbane, Monday 13 May 2019, p 7.

The committee has reviewed the department's progress in implementing the Auditor-General's recommendations at July 2019, and is satisfied that the department is adequately progressing implementation of these recommendations in line with the timeframes outlined within the department's formal response to the audit.

Recommendation 1

The committee recommends that the Legislative Assembly note the contents of this report.

Appendix A – Officials at public briefing on 13 May 2019

Queensland Audit Office

- Mr Brendan Worrall, Auditor-General
- Ms Danielle Bird, Deputy Auditor-General
- Mr Darren Brown, Director, Performance Audit