



# Case study

## Operation Kingscliff

Operation Kingscliff was an investigation into whether a Senior Executive Service (SES) officer in the Department of Home Affairs (Home Affairs) improperly used her position to influence employment processes for the benefit of her sister and her sister's fiancé.

The Commission found the official engaged in corrupt conduct by abusing her office and by misusing official information.

### Themes – nepotism and cronyism

The National Anti-Corruption Commission receives a high number of referrals about recruitment and promotion in the Australian Public Service (APS), typically alleging nepotism and cronyism. The [2024 Commonwealth Integrity Survey](#) confirmed this to be an area of widespread concern.

Recruitment and personnel decisions in the APS are important. Roles come with taxpayer-funded salaries and other benefits. When public officials abuse their office and misuse official information to give preferential treatment to family and friends, it undermines merit-based selection, damages morale in the workplace, and diminishes public confidence.

Operation Kingscliff demonstrates the risks and vulnerabilities of nepotism and cronyism in public sector recruitment and promotion, and the importance of corruption prevention measures.

### Referral

This matter came to the Commission's attention because a Home Affairs staff member chose to report their concerns through the proper channels within Home Affairs.

In January 2024, the Secretary of Home Affairs made a [mandatory referral](#) to the Commission.

This case shows the value of a good reporting culture – where staff feel confident using internal reporting frameworks, and where leadership pursues matters raised.

### Assessment – serious and systemic

The Commission decided to investigate, having assessed the matter as potentially involving corrupt conduct that could be [serious and/or systemic](#).

## What happened

Joanne\* was an SES Band 1 officer in Home Affairs. Her sister, Melissa\*, and Melissa's fiancé, Mark\*, were employed by other Australian government agencies.

### Case 1

A key element of the investigation was the transfer of Mark from his agency to Home Affairs under section 26 of the *Public Service Act 1999*.

Joanne's involvement in Mark's recruitment into Home Affairs included that she:

- proposed his transfer into Home Affairs
- promoted his candidacy and qualities to other staff
- created the recruitment requisition
- nominated herself as the delegate approver
- took steps to fast-track onboarding, including by forging a witness signature on paperwork
- did not declare a conflict of interest
- actively concealed the family relationship from other staff involved in the process.

The Commission found that Joanne had abused her public office: she used her position to procure the transfer of her sister's fiancé into Home Affairs for the purpose of benefitting her sister's fiancé and her sister, knowing it to be improper.

### Case 2

Following Mark's commencement at Home Affairs, Joanne assisted attempts by Melissa to obtain an EL1 position within Home Affairs. Her assistance included disclosing interview questions to Melissa in advance.

The Commission found that in providing interview questions to her sister, Joanne had abused her public office and misused official information.

Home Affairs stood Joanne down from her SES position while the investigation was underway. She resigned from her role, and left the APS.

## Corruption finding

Joanne's abuse of her public office and misuse of official information was corrupt conduct, which was both **serious** – not negligible or trivial – because of the seniority of the public official, the deception involved, and the significant benefits of securing a public sector role; and **systemic**, because the public official engaged in corrupt behaviours on multiple occasions, against a backdrop of widespread concern about nepotism and cronyism in the APS.

The Commission did not find that Joanne's sister or her fiancé engaged in corrupt conduct.

**A detailed account of events and evidence can be found in the [investigation report](#).**

\*This case study, and the investigation report, uses pseudonyms.

## Recommendations

The Commission made recommendations to strengthen Home Affairs policies and reduce corruption risks in recruitment. These are relevant to other public sector agencies.

### 1

#### Manage conflicts of interest in recruitment

- Require all staff involved in recruitment (including section 26 transfers and temporary employment registers) to declare any personal or professional relationships with applicants, consistent with [APS Commission guidance](#).
- Provide training to staff involved in recruitment on how to identify, declare and manage conflicts of interest, with a focus on SES officers who are often delegates in recruitment processes.

### 2

#### Read the full [Investigation Report](#)

#### Prevent improper disclosure of interview questions

- Remind panel members that access to interview questions should only be given to people with a legitimate need to know.
- Restrict access to questions, including past interview questions, to those with a legitimate need to know.

### 3

#### Strengthen conflict of interest policies for 'section 26' staff transfers

- Update internal policies to make specific provisions for declaring and managing conflicts of interest in transfers between agencies.