

Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit — response to questions on notice

Lawrence McDonald and Catherine Andersson of the Secretariat for the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision appeared before the JCPAA in Canberra on 21 September 2011.

At the Hearing, we undertook to seek permission from the Heads of Treasuries Committee on Federal Financial Relations to provide the JCPAA with a copy of the National Agreement data gaps report prepared by the Steering Committee for the HoTS Committee. We have contacted the Secretariat for the HoTS Committee, and understand that it is seeking the views of HoTS Committee members. We will keep the JCPAA Inquiry Secretary informed of developments.

At the Hearing, the Chair asked the following question on notice:

- If you could change two things in the next year to improve the quality of the data you receive and the work you do, what would those two changes be?

Following the Hearing, one of the Committee Members requested answers to two further questions on notice:

- Service providers in my electorate complain about the different reporting forms required for different agencies. Is the reform process moving towards universal reporting forms, taking into account the differing objectives and outcomes of programs and projects?
- Can the Productivity Commission detail the steps it is taking to make data collection more efficient and effective. For example, is the reform process exploring technologies/systems that allow service providers access to a “one stop data entry shop”/a secure form of Cloud?

We have responded to the questions below.

If you could change two things in the next year to improve the quality of the data you receive and the work you do, what would those two changes be?

The Steering Committee has endorsed the following National Agreement data gaps principles (many of which are being implemented as part of the current COAG-endorsed reviews of performance indicators in National Agreements).

- The fundamental principle is that the benefits of performance reporting must outweigh the costs:
 - the benefits of new data collections or improvements to collections and reporting must be reasonably expected to outweigh the associated costs to service providers, data agencies, reporting agencies and agencies required to respond to reports
- Across National Agreements, the highest priorities are:
 - to assess the appropriateness of indicators — not all indicators are supported by evidence demonstrating their significance, and the links between indicators and outcomes are not always clear
 - to address conceptual issues — such as defining ‘socio-economic status’, ‘homelessness’, ‘rental stress’ and ‘disability’.
- Across National Agreements, mid-level priorities include:
 - improving the ability to measure outcomes for Indigenous Australians, and people from low socio-economic backgrounds (subject to addressing the underlying conceptual issues)
 - improving the reliability of survey data — to allow more accurate assessment of differences across jurisdictions and over time
 - assessing the need for more frequent reporting of some outcomes — balancing the likely speed of change in an indicator against the costs of increased frequency of data collection.

Service providers in my electorate complain about the different reporting forms required for different agencies. Is the reform process moving towards universal reporting forms, taking into account the differing objectives and outcomes of programs and projects?

Can the Productivity Commission detail the steps it is taking to make data collection more efficient and effective. For example, is the reform process exploring technologies/systems that allow service providers access to a “one stop data entry shop”/a secure form of Cloud?

A single response is provided to these two questions.

The Steering Committee does not collect any information directly from service providers. As far as possible, the Steering Committee draws data from national data agencies, to benefit from their validation processes, to ensure consistency in national reporting, and also to reduce the burden on respondents.

Many of the service sectors included in Steering Committee reports have mandatory National Minimum Data Sets (NMDS), established as part of related intergovernmental funding agreements. The Ministerial Council for Federal Financial Relations is responsible for maintaining a register of the national minimum data sets required for NA reporting, and for coordinating improvements in data collection processes, data quality and the timeliness of performance reporting for the National Performance Reporting System. Each NMDS is under the authority of the relevant portfolio Ministerial Council. The Secretariat is an observer on Ministerial Council technical sub-committees that advise on NMDSs, and can assure the Committee that respondent burden is a key issue to be balanced against the desire for accountability and comprehensive performance monitoring.

Once data are collected, the marginal cost of reproducing it in different reports for different purposes and different audiences is relatively low. As far as possible, the Steering Committee endeavours to align its reports with related reports (for example, they report the same indicators using the same definitions and data sources, unless there is a good reason for difference. Where differences across reports are appropriate, the reason for any difference and its impact on reported results are also reported).

The Secretariat is aware that some providers may provide services for different levels of government or different government agencies, each of which may have its own reporting requirements (not necessarily as part of a NMDS). The Committee may be interested in a recent agreement by Health Ministers to establish a Data Rationalisation Working Group to review opportunities to improve the effectiveness

of health data reporting. Although the Secretariat is not involved with this group, we understand that it is examining many of the issues raised in the questions on notice.