

**Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee:
Answers to written Questions on Notice Budget Estimates 2014–15
Parliamentary Departments Portfolio
May 2014**

Department	Parliamentary Budget Office
Topic	Costings
Senator	Senator Bernardi
Question reference number	90
Type of question	Written

Question

- 1 How many costing requests has the PBO received since Additional Estimates in February?
 - a How many are from Parliamentary Parties?
 - b How many are from Individual Parliamentarians?
- 2 How many costing requests have been withdrawn and why?
 - a How many were from Parliamentary Parties?
 - b How many were from Individual Parliamentarians?
- 3 How many costing requests have been completed since Additional Estimates in February?
 - a How many were from Parliamentary Parties?
 - b How many were from Individual Parliamentarians?
- 4 Of those not completed, what is the reason (i.e. complex or awaiting information from departments?)
 - a How many are for Parliamentary Parties?
 - b How many are for Individual Parliamentarians?
- 5 What is the PBO average response time for completed requests? As at 31 January 2014 the PBO average response time for completed requests was 21.7 days. Can you give an update about this?
 - a Please explain if the response time has improved or not.
 - b The *Charter of Budget Honesty Policy Costing Guidelines* state that costings should be completed in five working days. What is the PBO doing to achieve this?
 - c What is average response time for completed requests for Parliamentary Parties?
 - d What is the average response time for completed requests for Individual Parliamentarians?
- 6 What has been the longest costing request turnaround and why?

- 7 Is the PBO undertaking information requests?
- Please give general information on the types of information requests you are processing.
 - How many are from Parliamentary Parties?
 - How many are from Individual Parliamentarians?
 - What is the turnaround time for information requests?
- 8 How is the general workload of the PBO?
- Has this increased or decreased since the 2013 general election?
 - How does this compare to 12 months ago?

Answer

- Between 1 February and 16 May 2014 (the date of the PBO's activity report to the Committee for its Budget estimates hearing), the PBO received 145 costing requests from parliamentary parties and 9 from individual parliamentarians.
- None of these costing requests were withdrawn.
- Between 1 February and 16 May 2014, the PBO completed 71 costing requests for parliamentary parties and one for individual parliamentarians.
- As at 16 May 2014, 74 requests were yet to be completed for parliamentary parties and eight for individual parliamentarians. These costings had not been completed due to one or more of the following reasons:
 - some requests had been received only recently,
 - waiting for information from Government departments,
 - requiring detailed assessment because of the complexity of the request, or
 - incorporating the latest parameters following the 2014-15 Budget, as agreed between the PBO and the requesting parliamentarian.
- Between 1 February 2014 and 16 May 2014, the average response time for completed requests (including both costing and information requests) was 16.4 business days.
 - The average response time improved from 21.7 business days as reported in the PBO's activity statement of 31 January 2014 which was provided to the Committee for its additional estimates hearing in February 2014.
 - The objective of completing costings within five business days as set out in the *Charter of Budget Honesty Policy Costing Guidelines* (the Guidelines) applies specifically to caretaker period costings. The PBO completed 85 caretaker period costings in the lead up to the 2013 election in an average time of 2.2 business days. However, this reflected the fact that most of these costings were updates of costings previously prepared by the PBO prior to the caretaker period. When preparing a new costing the PBO is heavily reliant on obtaining information from Government departments. Since the 2013 election, the average time for Government departments to respond to requests for information from the PBO is 9.2 business days. Under the MOU on access to information, Heads of Commonwealth bodies

have agreed to endeavour to provide responses to requests for information from the PBO in five days for urgent requests and 10 days for routine requests.

- c Between 1 February 2014 and 16 May 2014, the average response time for completing all requests from parliamentary parties was 16.6 business days.
- d Between 1 February 2014 and 16 May 2014, the average response time for completing all requests from individual parliamentarians was 12 business days.

6 The longest response time related to a costing request received on 9 November 2012 and responded to on 10 July 2013 (161 business days). The time to respond related to the following reasons:

- the complexity of the policy underlying the request
- the requirement to build models in consultation with the relevant Government departments
- agreement with the requestor that completion of the costing be deferred until after the 2013-14 Budget when updated Budget parameters were available
- the request was received during a period subject to very high workloads and competing priorities in the PBO
- the request was one of many requests from the parliamentary party who indicated that the request was not their highest priority at that time, and
- the analysis required four information request to multiple Government departments.

7 Yes, the PBO undertakes information requests.

- a The types of information requests received by the PBO are for budget related information, consistent with section 64E(1)(c) of the *Parliamentary Service Act 1999* (the Act). Parliamentarians may direct these information requests to be treated as confidential under section 64M of the Act. To date, all information requests sent to the PBO have been confidential.
- b Between 1 February and 16 May 2014, the PBO received 19 information requests from parliamentary parties.
- c Between 1 February and 16 May 2014, the PBO received four information requests from individual parliamentarians.
- d Between 1 February 2014 and 16 May 2014, the average response times for completing information requests from parliamentary parties and individual parliamentarians was 5.2 and 17.5 business days, respectively.

8 Immediately after the 2013 election the demand from parliamentarians for the PBO's services fell away with demand resurging strongly from February onwards to levels broadly comparable with the same period 12 months ago. During the brief period of downturn in demand from parliamentarians, the PBO allocated more resources to its self-initiated program of published research. Important capacity building work also continued, including the ongoing task of building the PBO's repository of data and financial and economic models.