

Senate Community Affairs References Committee

DESIGN, SCOPE, COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS, CONTRACTS AWARDED AND IMPLEMENTATION ASSOCIATED WITH THE BETTER MANAGEMENT OF THE SOCIAL WELFARE SYSTEM INITIATIVE

PUBLIC HEARING 19 APRIL 2017

ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Human Services

Topic: Role of Service Centres

Question reference number: QoN 122

Member: Senator Watt

Type of question: Hansard page 2

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 8 May 2017

Number of pages: 2

Question:

Senator WATT: What you were told by central office was that the role of service centres—how many are there in New South Wales?

Mr Chant: I would have to take that on notice. I am responsible for 26, and there are three other zones that make up New South Wales.

Senator WATT: So there are 26 within your zone?

Mr Chant: Yes.

Senator WATT: And there are four zones in total in New South Wales?

Mr Chant: With similar numbers, but not exactly the same, so I would have to take the exact number on notice.

Answer: There are four Zones within New South Wales; Sydney; Central NSW; Southern NSW; and Northern NSW. There are a total of 114 sites within these Zones.

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ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Human Services

Topic: Initial Notice – Breakdown for NSW

Question reference number: QoN 125

Member: Senator Watt

Type of question: Hansard page 3–4

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 8 May 2017

Number of pages: 2

Question:

Senator WATT: When you were notified by the department centrally that this system was going to be rolled out in June or July last year—and I am aware that Centrelink is a pretty stretched agency—were you advised of any additional resourcing that would be provided, whether it be staff or other kinds of resourcing, to handle these inquiries?

Mr Chant: You are talking about in service centres?

Senator WATT: Yes.

Mr Chant: I would have to take that on notice to look at our allocation, but my understanding is no, because they were general inquiries and the detailed conversation was to be held elsewhere. Our role, as I said, is just to facilitate the person through to the right officer rather than deal with the work.

Senator WATT: So, to the best of your recollection, there was no additional resourcing provided, at least to your zone, which covered Sydney, in anticipation of the inquiries that might come from this new system?

Mr Chant: As I said, I will take it on notice. There may have been some incidental contact forecast, but not that I am aware of.

Answer: There were no additional service centre resources required to manage these inquiries.

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ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Human Services

Topic: Resourcing at Service Centres

Question reference number: QoN 129

Member: Senator Watt

Type of question: Hansard page 5

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 8 May 2017

Number of pages: 2

Question:

Senator WATT: Do we have any information about the other zones in New South Wales—whether there was any need to move people to deal with these kind of inquiries?

Mr Chant: I would have to take that on notice, but I have not heard from my colleagues that that happened.

Answer: There was no need to move resources to manage these inquires within service centres.

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ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Human Services

Topic: Engagement with CPSU

Question reference number: QoN 130

Member: Senator Rhiannon

Type of question: Hansard page 5

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 8 May 2017

Number of pages: 2

Question:

Senator RHIANNON: I am starting to gain more understanding of how it is playing out. Considering that there has been controversy, staff have obviously been under pressure. I want to gain an understanding of how you handle that. Maybe just start with how you have handled the pressure the staff have been under as the issue has become more controversial and the people who you are trying to collect the debt from—some people get agitated. We have heard the problems that people have run into in trying to sort out what their personal situation is. I was interested in understanding to what degree you have engaged with the union, the CPSU, about this and how you have gone about that.

Mr Chant: I will have to take that on notice. I believe there was a national—

Answer:

The Department met with the CPSU on 10 February 2017 at the Fair Work Commission where the Online Compliance Initiative was discussed in the context of proposed industrial action. As a result of this meeting, the CPSU decided to terminate the proposed industrial action and agreed to recommence bargaining meetings on a new Enterprise Agreement for the Department. Engagement with the CPSU is managed nationally by the Workplace Relations Branch.

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ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Human Services

Topic: Customer Aggression

Question reference number: QoN 131

Member: Senator Rhiannon

Type of question: Hansard page 7

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 8 May 2017

Number of pages: 2

Question:

Senator RHIANNON: But, in terms of the reports that are coming to you, there must be reports about how it has been received when people come in to the offices. I am just trying to get that summary so we have got a picture of how you are seeing things.

Mr Mowbray-d'Arbela: It may be better if I take this on notice so I can give you a comprehensive reply to these issues, but I wanted to give an initial comment: we do not have evidence of there being some marked significant increase in customer aggression or staff stress.

Answer: There is no evidence of there being an increase in staff stress or customer aggression within service centres as a result of the online compliance initiative.

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ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Human Services

Topic: Inquiries at Service Centres

Question reference number: QoN 134

Member: Chair

Type of question: Hansard page 7

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 8 May 2017

Number of pages: 2

Question:

CHAIR: So, if you could provide that for all, that would be appreciated. I want to go back to the point that we were talking about earlier, on the people coming into the actual offices to ask for particular information. We asked about this the other day—I cannot remember, quite frankly, if it was Adelaide or Melbourne. We have had a response back already—thank you—that you do not have any data available on recipients attending services to inquire about the online compliance intervention. Quite frankly, I am not surprised, because I am not going to walk into your office and say, 'I want to complain about this OCI.' What I am going to come in to you about is the letter I have had about the debt. With all due respect, when you say 'about OCI', I presume you mean about that particularly, rather than the debt letters they have received. We had a conversation, if you recall, about iPad use and things like that. I understand what you have said about the reduction in people coming in; it does not mean that they are not coming in about different issues. So things could go up in a particular area. So can you go back and look at that to see if they have come in about the initial debt letters or once they have received a letter about their debt notice.

Mr Mowbray-d'Arbela: We certainly will do that. Just on the process aspect, we had a range of questions on notice in the appearances that the department has had with the committee to date. I do not think we have a transcript from Wednesday last week.

CHAIR: This would be one that was asked earlier; it has just crossed over.

Mr Mowbray-d'Arbela: I think there is an aspect of this that is already being looked at, and we are doing our level best to get back to the committee as quickly as we can. As soon as we have the transcript for today, I will check the extent to which this question is consistent with what we are already putting together.

CHAIR: Yes, okay. This one specifically talks about OCI, so could we have it more generally, because that is what people are going to ask about. Thank you.

Answer:

There is no data available on recipients attending service centres to enquire about debts or debt notices that they may have received.

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ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Human Services

Topic: FOI Requests – Resources

Question reference number: QoN 145

Member: Chair

Type of question: Hansard page 12

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 8 May 2017

Number of pages: 1

Question:

CHAIR: I would like to add to that one. You have responded to one of the questions on notice by saying you can only respond to questions from the department over FOI. The last sentence says: 'The department maintains an appropriate level of resources to meet its obligation under the FOI Act.' Can you tell us what that appropriate level is, given the increase that we have been told about the number of FOI requests? So, along with answers to the other questions, could you add: what is the level of resources that you are now committing compared to what it was this time last year?

Mr Mowbray-d'Arbela: Certainly.

Answer:

The Department has a centralised Freedom of information (FOI) Team within the FOI and Litigation Branch of the Legal Services Division.

All staff in the Department have responsibilities with regard to FOI requests, for example, responsibilities for searching for and retrieving documents to enable the dedicated FOI Team to process FOI requests.

As at 2 May 2017 there were 40 staff in the FOI team assigned solely to processing FOI requests.

As at 2 May 2016 there were 31 staff in the FOI team assigned solely to processing FOI requests.

This is an appropriate level of resourcing noting that for the 2015- 16 financial year the Department processed 99 per cent of FOI requests within the statutory timeframe.