

Chapter 4

Human Services Portfolio

Department of Human Services

4.1 This chapter contains key issues discussed during the 2013-2014 additional estimates hearings for the Human Services portfolio.

4.2 The committee heard evidence from the Human Services portfolio on Thursday 27 February 2014. Areas of the portfolio were called in the following order:

- Australian Hearing Services;
- Corporate; and
- Services to the Community.

Australian Hearing Services¹

4.3 Senator Cameron inquired into the level of awareness around consultations of the National Acoustic Laboratories and Australian Hearing Services being privatised.² There was some debate about the veracity of such claims, with Minister Payne indicating she was not aware of these discussions.³

Corporate⁴

4.4 Senator Siewert requested an explanation of the role of the Customer First system. The Department explained it was a new computer system that manages the front end of interactions that staff have with customers who walk into a Centrelink office.⁵ Senator Siewert followed up with questions on whether data on the system could be shared between departments⁶ and was told this may be possible under legislative requirements.⁷ The Department was also questioned about the propensity for the system to experience technical difficulties⁸ as well as on the KPMG review of service delivery reform.⁹

4.5 The committee then discussed the newly announced Interim Farm Household Allowance in regard to drought relief for farmers. Senator Cameron asked for detail

1 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, pp 118 – 121.

2 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, p. 119.

3 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, p. 119.

4 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, pp 121 – 132.

5 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, p. 122.

6 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, p. 121.

7 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, p. 122.

8 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, pp 123 – 124.

9 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, p. 124.

around the eligibility requirements and asset test for access to this payment.¹⁰ The Department stated the assets test was higher now, allowing a farmer to own assets of up to \$2.5 million as opposed to \$1.3 million previously¹¹, however it declined to comment on the policy behind the eligibility requirements, suggesting such questions be directed towards the Department of Agriculture.¹²

4.6 Senator Cameron and Senator Seselja both inquired into staffing levels of the Department, and Ms Campbell noted a redundancy bill of some \$35 million existed, which the Department was currently discussing with the government.¹³

4.7 Senator Seselja engaged in a comprehensive discussion with Ms Campbell regarding the status of meeting savings proposals the Department had received.¹⁴

4.8 Senator Cameron inquired about correspondence between the Department of Human Services and the NSW Attorney-General's Department in regards to payments relating to the bushfires in the Blue Mountains.¹⁵

4.9 The Department informed the committee that seven of the programs within the Pharmacy Agreement 5 were no longer being provided as of 12 February 2014 and agreed to provide a list of these on notice.¹⁶

Services to the Community¹⁷

4.10 Senator Siewert inquired into disaster relief payments, specifically in relation to people of Morwell who are on some form of income support and whether a process existed to take their situations into account.¹⁸ The Department responded that Morwell posed a "difficult situation"¹⁹ and discussed arrangements it had made to maintain a smaller staff presence there and reduce the amount of contact necessary for clients to make.²⁰ The Department took a question on notice regarding how this impacted on obligations recipients had to report regularly to Job Services Australia.²¹

4.11 Senator Siewert asked questions on customer wait times, acknowledging it was a continuing challenge for the Department.²² Ms Campbell replied strong

10 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, p. 125.

11 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, p. 125.

12 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, p. 126.

13 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, p. 128.

14 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, p. 128.

15 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, p. 131.

16 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, p. 131.

17 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, pp 132 – 138.

18 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, p. 133.

19 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, p. 133.

20 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, p. 134.

21 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, p. 134.

22 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, p. 135.

encouragement was being provided to the public to access its online services, but there were situations where the problem may be more complex and require a face to face or telephone discussion.²³ Mr Rimmer spoke of the Departments attempts to address such challenges within Centrelink call centre performance through five main ways. These include the use of mobile phone apps, place-in-queue technology, reducing the need for people to call, increasing call centre efficiency and adjusting resources through the smart-centre approach.²⁴

4.12 There was a brief discussion about whether an increase in calls could be attributed to any recent government indications of reforming eligibility requirements for certain payments.²⁵

4.13 Senator Cameron asked some final questions on the process by which people moved from Newstart to the Disability Support Pension.²⁶ The Department referred to a series of checks and balances in place to ensure people had a pathway into employment and jobs.²⁷

Senator Dean Smith

Chair

23 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, p. 135.

24 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, pp 135 – 136.

25 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, p. 137.

26 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, p. 137.

27 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 27 February 2014, p. 137.