

Chapter 3

Human Services Portfolio

Department of Human Services

3.1 This chapter outlines key issues discussed during the 2013-2014 budget estimates hearings for the Human Services Portfolio.

3.2 The committee heard evidence from the department on Tuesday 4 June 2013. Areas of the portfolio were called in the following order:

- Australian Hearing
- Corporate
- Services to the Community
- Child Support

*Australian Hearing*¹

3.3 Questions began on the Agency's work with people in the justice system.² Australian Hearing noted that eligibility for clients has not changed and that there has not been further progress in this area.

3.4 The agency also clarified its role in relation to the rollout of DisabilityCare Australia, noting there will be no change in service delivery, but confirming that consultation between Australian Hearing and DisabilityCare Australia around the rollout is ongoing.³

3.5 Other items discussed by the committee included:

- The Rehab plus service;
- Statistics showing evidence of an increase in mild hearing loss and the uptake of hearing devices;⁴
- Relationship to and with the Department of Human Services; and
- General staff and corporate questions.⁵

1 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, pp 56–61.

2 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 56.

3 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 59.

4 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 57.

5 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 60.

Corporate⁶

3.6 Corporate questions began with the committee requesting outlines of the savings that the department expected to be achieved from 2013-14 budget measures and other efficiencies.⁷ Ms Campbell noted that the department has been implementing its service delivery reform program for two years, as part of the four-year program, which will produce further efficiencies which have been taken into account in the forward estimates.⁸ The department noted that there are two key areas of service delivery reform which are expected to deliver savings: simplifying and automating transactional type processing and letters; and better workforce management.⁹ The committee was interested particularly in the savings produced by moving to online letters.¹⁰

3.7 The committee also discussed the department's increase in compliance reviews, which was included in the 2013-14 budget papers.¹¹ Senator Fifield queried why the compliance review was only focused on one year. Ms Campbell explained that:

Often with these compliance measures government decides to do a year's worth and have a look at what the results are to determine whether the investment is worth while and what we actually find from undertaking these compliance reviews.¹²

3.8 Mr Popple then informed the committee that this year was chosen because the tax data from this particular year was already available to the department.¹³ The committee followed this up with questions about the methodology used by the department to calculate the savings it expected to be generated from the various reforms, including the measure to improve Medicare benefits scheme billing practices within public hospitals.¹⁴ The committee finally asked the department to look back over the previous budget to see whether DHS had met targeted savings.¹⁵ The department noted that while the financial year has not yet concluded, it is broadly on

6 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, pp 61–71.

7 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 61.

8 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 62.

9 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 63.

10 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 63.

11 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 65.

12 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 65.

13 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 66.

14 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, pp 66–67.

15 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 68.

target to achieve the planned savings under each of the measures. Under corporate the committee also discussed call centre supplement funding.¹⁶

*Services to the Community*¹⁷

3.9 Following from the corporate discussion of call centre funding, the committee had a range of questions in relation to Smart Centres, beginning with a discussion of wait times. The department outlined various statistics in relation to wait times, noting that the change in practice away from blocking calls had resulted in increased wait times. The committee also discussed right of entry notices exercised in relation to Smart Centres,¹⁸ locations, and the e-reference guide used by staff in the centres.¹⁹

3.10 The committee also inquired into the proportion of staff employed in media and communications roles.²⁰ The department noted that there has been a reduction in the number of public affairs officer roles from 253 to 70, since providing the committee with an answer to a previous question on notice. The committee also inquired into the number of staff monitoring social media, or monitoring media more broadly.²¹ The department took a question on notice to provide an organisation chart of the new public affairs arrangements.

3.11 There was a brief discussion in relation to the replacement of CUBA IT system, which currently supports the transfer of child support payments between parents.²² The Department explained that the existing legacy system is obsolete and that a review had identified a need for an improved system with capacity to be flexible, especially in response to changes in legislation. The committee then moved to discussion about the smartphone applications developed by the department, including recent awards received.²³ The department outlined the four applications that the department currently has available – one for students, one for jobseekers, one for families, and one for seniors, and also described the types of activities people are able to complete through the applications. The department also noted the prevalence of smartphones in low socioeconomic demographics and in remote Indigenous communities.²⁴ The final discussion around the IT space concerned the recently launched myGov system.²⁵

16 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 69.

17 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, pp 71–100.

18 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 75.

19 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 77.

20 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 78.

21 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 79.

22 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 80.

23 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 81.

24 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 81.

25 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 82.

3.12 The committee also discussed the discretion of the FaHCSIA Secretary in relation to payments.²⁶ The department took on notice to provide advice on how decision making occurs generally and also in exceptional cases.²⁷

3.13 There were a range of questions from the committee relating to staff in the department, including around the recruitment of staff, particularly during the time that Senator the Hon Kim Carr was minister for Human Services, and the casualisation of the DHS workforce.²⁸ The committee also discussed staff uniforms, name badges and nameplates, before moving to staff misconduct. Under this area there were questions around unauthorised staff access to sensitive information,²⁹ and complaints received against staff. The committee also discussed how complaints are registered, appeals from Centrelink decisions to the SSAT,³⁰ internal review, complaints investigated by the ombudsman, and errors and wrongful claims for Centrelink payments.³¹

3.14 Senator Edwards was interested in figures around the increase or decrease of benefits paid to people living in his electorate over the last five years.³² The department agreed to work through the payments identified by the Senator, and provide information that would allow the committee to see year by year changes that may have occurred in relation to these payments. The committee then moved to a more general discussion of youth unemployment.

3.15 The committee also discussed the following items:

- Co-location of service centres;³³
- Medicare electronic claiming options;
- Youth allowance, particularly in relation to the number of applications from regional and remote students applying;
- Job Skills expos and how these are working in areas that have been subject to natural disasters, such as in Queensland;³⁴
- Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payments;³⁵ and

26 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 82.

27 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 83.

28 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 86.

29 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 89.

30 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 90.

31 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 93.

32 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 91.

33 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 94.

34 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 98.

35 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 99.

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- The interaction of services provided by the Department of Human Services and the current aged care reforms.

Child Support³⁶

3.16 The committee's brief discussion of child support began with a question inquiring about a publication of a report some years previously by the Child Support Agency, *Child support scheme facts and figures*. The department noted that they did not have any knowledge of the report, but that information about the child support program is now included in its annual report.

3.17 The committee asked questions in relation to appeals of decisions by the Child Support Agency, and complaints about the agency that have been investigated by the ombudsman.

36 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 4 June 2013, p. 101.

