

Chapter 4

Human Services Portfolio

Department of Human Services

4.1 This chapter contains key issues discussed during the 2014–2015 budget estimates hearings for the Human Services portfolio.

4.2 The committee heard evidence from the department on Thursday 5 June 2014. Areas of the portfolio and agencies were called in the following order:

- Australian Hearing
- Whole of Department—Corporate Matters

4.3 The committee held an additional estimates hearing on Friday 6 June 2014 and heard evidence from the department on:

- Services to the Community—Social Security and Welfare

*Australian Hearing*¹

4.4 Senator Cameron commenced the questions by raising the recent Audit Office Report on Australian Hearing noting the largely positive feedback for the organisation.²

4.5 The committee asked a range of questions about the proposed privatisation scoping study for the organisation. These discussions focused on advice to the Minister, terms of reference for the scoping study and timeframes for completion.³

4.6 Senator Cameron discussed Australian Hearing's community service obligations, specifically in remote and regional communities. The agency noted this role, in addition to the importance of holistic healthcare, particularly in regard to remote communities and hearing loss. Australian Hearing Managing Director Mr Bill Davidson explained that:

There have been discussions about holistic solutions to hearing difficulties for some time. I will elaborate. There is data in the market at the present moment that indicates that, if we take a remote community newborn child who is tested at birth or close to birth, they have no issues with either hearing or health. Within three weeks they have started to get infections. Within three months they have hearing difficulties. It really is not a hearing issue at that stage; it is a hygiene issue.⁴

The agency canvassed a number of initiatives where Australian Hearing is working closely with other service providers to better integrate services. This is focused on

1 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 5 June 2014, pp 104–112.

2 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 5 June 2014, pp 104–106.

3 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 5 June 2014, pp 104–112.

4 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 5 June 2014, pp 106–107.

education and enabling prevention strategies where hearing loss is preventable rather than simply providing cures.⁵

4.7 There was a discussion about the National Acoustic Laboratories and the work that is conducted there. Recent research into central auditory processing disorder was discussed. The committee also inquired into the proportion of staff employed who hold a PhD.⁶

4.8 Senator Cameron raised the issue of on-going funding for a number of research projects in the event of privatisation. The agency took the question on notice at the time, however, noted that a number of research projects have external funding separate from Australian Hearing. Senator Cameron also asked a range of questions about staffing and entitlements in the event of privatisation.⁷

Whole of Department—Corporate Matters⁸

4.9 Corporate questions began with the committee requesting details on processes that notify customers of changes in government policy. Senator Cameron asked questions about scripted responses to standard enquiries, increased workloads for call centres, logistical arrangements for training staff after the release of new government policy and support mechanisms for distressed callers.⁹

4.10 Senator Siewert asked questions about the new aged care payment system and a number of technical difficulties encountered in the roll-out. The department explained the complexity of the task and discussed the testing protocols implemented to prevent payment discrepancies. The department noted that many of the issues have been resolved and the new system will be fully operational in the coming weeks.¹⁰

4.11 The committee discussed the myGov website and subsequent improvements to government service delivery and accessibility. Senator Smith raised the issue of privacy and security concerns with websites. The department spoke about a number of the risks inherent with these types of websites and a number of preventive measures that the department undertakes. The department noted that current security protocols were comparable with those used in the banking sector.¹¹ Senator Cameron raised a recent ANAO report on departmental security arrangements across all IT platforms noting that some areas were non-compliant from a risk perspective. The department explained its response to the findings and how it is managing these risks.¹²

5 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 5 June 2014, p. 109.

6 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 5 June 2014, p. 107.

7 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 5 June 2014, pp 110–111.

8 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 5 June 2014, pp 112–137.

9 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 5 June 2014, pp 112–120.

10 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 5 June 2014, pp 120–124.

11 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 5 June 2014, pp 126–127.

12 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 5 June 2014, pp 128–129.

4.12 The committee also inquired into the ISIS mainframe. Specifically, questions were asked about the complexity of services it delivers, current support contracts and budget funding to formulate a business case to replace this system. Senator Cameron raised questions about the capacity of ISIS to continue reliable delivery of services until a replacement is obtained.¹³

4.13 Senator Cameron asked a range of questions about staffing numbers, the new framework for enterprise bargaining, and the impact of the efficiency dividend on budgets and staffing.¹⁴

*Services to the Community—Social Security and Welfare*¹⁵

4.14 Following on from several requests made by the committee during the previous day's hearing, the department provided redundancy numbers and tabled a document on call-centre scripts.¹⁶

4.15 The committee discussed recent media articles on the single parent benefit. Senator Cameron questioned the basis of these stories and if the department could verify that this example was feasible under current arrangements. Senator Moore questioned whether the department engages with media to verify or correct media reports that canvass departmental responsibilities incorrectly. The department noted that concerns of this nature rest with the policy department—Social Services.¹⁷

4.16 The committee discussed changes to the Newstart allowance and the proposed Work for the Dole scheme. Senator Siewert asked specific questions around how the scheme would work and how it might impact on those offered flexible working arrangements.¹⁸ The issue of concession cards¹⁹ and rent assistance was also discussed as they relate to this new scheme.²⁰

4.17 Senator Cameron asked a number of questions related to the proposed review of Disability Support Pension recipients aged less than 35 years. The department discussed the additional staff required to implement this policy, and the number of recipients eligible for review. Requirements for rural or regional customers to travel for re-assessment were also canvassed. The on-going process for those customers found to be work suitable was also explained.²¹

4.18 The committee also discussed the following items:

13 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 5 June 2014, pp 129–132.

14 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 5 June 2014, pp 133–137.

15 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 6 June 2013, pp 2–38.

16 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 6 June 2014, p. 2.

17 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 6 June 2014, pp 2–5.

18 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 6 June 2014, pp 6–9.

19 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 6 June 2014, p. 25.

20 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 6 June 2014, p. 33.

21 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 6 June 2014, pp 8–13.

- (a) Pensioner education supplement;²²
- (b) Implementation of new budget measures;²³
- (c) Australian Victims of Terrorism Overseas Payments;²⁴ and
- (d) Staffing numbers.²⁵

Senator Sue Boyce

Chair

22 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 6 June 2014, p. 24.

23 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 6 June 2014, p. 27.

24 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 6 June 2014, pp 28–29.

25 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 6 June 2014, p. 30.