

## Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee

### SUPPLEMENTARY BUDGET ESTIMATES – 22 OCTOBER 2015 ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

#### Department of Human Services

**Topic:** Ombudsman's Report

**Question reference number:** HS 40

**Senator:** Cameron

**Type of question:** Written

**Date set by the committee for the return of answer:** 11 December 2015

**Number of pages:** 2

#### **Question:**

- a) The September 2015 Ombudsman's Follow up Report on Centrelink Performance stated that Centrelink's telephone services have deteriorated further since the original Ombudsman's report of April 2014 and that they receive regular complaints about call wait times and incomplete calls. When will DHS fully implement the recommendations of the Ombudsman's report?
- b) What resources has DHS allocated to implementing the recommendations of the Ombudsman?
- c) The Commonwealth Ombudsman said 'the WPIT project is a necessary step...in the meantime DHS needs to consider how it can alleviate the adverse impact on the people who need to access the services of its Centrelink programme'. Please provide details of what has DHS done since August to alleviate impacts on Centrelink clients.
- d) When will the implementation of WPIT begin to bring down call waiting times?
- e) Fairfax reports that Centrelink workers are 'feeling ill and depressed when awaiting the next call to arrive... unable to give an adequate level of service' because of problems with MyGov. Is DHS aware of any workers feeling ill and depressed due to the inability to give customers an adequate level of services because of deficiencies in MyGov?
- f) Referring to 2015 Estimates QoN HS 54, successful calls to Centrelink were 43 million last year and are at 37 million as at 31 May 2015. How many successful calls were there this year, 2014-2015, to June 31? If less than 43 million, why?

#### **Answer:**

- a) In terms of the recommendations specifically related to telephony, as noted in the *Report on the Department of Human Services' implementation of the Ombudsman's recommendations* released on 2 September 2015, two sub-recommendations have been implemented. These relate to investigating the possibility of extending 'place in queue' to all enquiry lines and reviewing the automated triage arrangements for incoming calls to provide priority assistance to vulnerable callers.

The remaining two sub-recommendations have been partially implemented; these relate to developing performance indicators for speed to answer for each line and publicising these standards. The Department undertook to consider these sub-recommendations in the context of longer term changes underway with the Welfare Payment Infrastructure Transformation Programme (WPIT).

- b) The Department is not able to quantify the number of resources/staff who were allocated to implementing the recommendations in the Ombudsman report as the work crosses a number of divisions and much of the work forms part of business-as-usual activities.
- c) In relation to telephony services, since August 2015 the Department has undertaken a number of initiatives to maximise customer access. These include:
  - i. maximising shift offers for Intermittent and Irregular Employees and advertising permanent ongoing APS3/4 positions;
  - ii. continuing to move work across the Service Delivery Operations Group to free up staff to focus on telephony;
  - iii. employing overtime for high priority work; and
  - iv. updating Interactive Voice Response messaging to provide information to customers about current issues.
- d) By the completion of the WPIT Programme, the new system will be focused on the customer and take full advantage of real-time data monitoring and analysis to deliver significant benefits to government, taxpayers and welfare recipients. It will save customers time and effort by offering smarter and easier online end-to-end services, will streamline processes and make it easier for customers to interact with the Department online.
- e) While the Department has not received any reports of staff “feeling ill and depressed when awaiting the next call to arrive ... unable to give an adequate level of service because of problems with MyGov”, the Department has in place a well-structured training program and support services for our telephony staff that includes regular coaching, strong leadership support and access to Employee Assistance Program services.
- f) The number of successful calls to Centrelink in 2014-15 was approximately 40.0 million. A contributing factor to the reduction in successful calls in 2014-15 was the diversion of staff to events such as emergencies. When compared to 2013-14, there was a significant increase in the number of emergency calls and also the time to handle these calls. In addition, there has been an increase in the complexity of calls with the average handle time on four of the five main business lines increasing.