

Senate Economics Legislation Committee

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Treasury Portfolio

Budget Estimates

2017 - 2018

Division/Agency: Australian Bureau of Statistics

Question No: 302

Topic: Requesting Census Data - Cost

Reference: Hansard page 75 (31 May 2017)

Senator: Macdonald, Ian

Question:

Senator JACINTA COLLINS: Yes, but Senator Macdonald raises the correct point. I have the Parliamentary Library saying to me, 'You can only get access to this if you purchase it'. And I am saying: 'That sounds a bit odd. I think I will visit that question at estimates.' So now I am trying to understand what we need to do to overcome that issue, because I would have thought—as an independent public agency—there is a significant public interest that information that arises from the census is available for our consideration of legislation with or without fee arrangements. If there has to be a fee between the ABS and the Department of the Senate at the end of the day, so be it, but how do we overcome that conundrum?

Mr Kalisch: Well, I do not think we have actually got to the first step yet of establishing that there needs to be a fee. So we will look at that aspect. We do have the opportunity to waive fees in exceptional circumstances.

Senator IAN MACDONALD: Perhaps on notice you could tell us just what your rules are around the areas that Senator Collins raises.

Mr Kalisch: Yes. We can certainly provide that to you on notice. The other dimension I would note as well is that some of that income is important for us to continue our business. We do get a certain amount of an appropriation from government that enables us to do a certain amount of work. If there is anything beyond that—and some of these customised requests, if it is in that nature, can be quite detailed. This one—

Answer:

Most statistics are available on the ABS website for free. Simple inquiries for ABS data are handled free of charge. These free products and services comprise what is called the “Basic Information Set” and generally include ABS publications in both HTML and PDF formats and detailed data in spreadsheets and data cubes.

For some collections, including the Census of Population and Housing, data is also available through interactive online applications such as TableBuilder. These applications allow data users to customise tabular data unique to their needs. Basic tabular outputs are available for free using Census TableBuilder Basic.

The ABS offers an additional service where customers can request an ABS analyst to create customised outputs specific to their needs. This service is designed to support the release of data not considered to be part of the Basic Information Set. The service is a charged service and follows the latest government guidelines on cost recovery by information agencies, currently contained in Commonwealth Cost Recovery Guidelines, July 2014. Users are required to pay the additional costs associated with creating the customised output.

The ABS can consider waiving the costs of customising data for client's needs where:

- There is a strong public interest need.
- For equity of access to customers who have a disability which precludes the use of the ABS' free products.
- Projects are of a pilot or exploratory nature.

To facilitate access to data for better public policy, all ABS microdata products, including TableBuilder Pro, are available free to Federal and State Parliamentary Libraries, as well as the Parliamentary Budget Office.