

SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS
ATTORNEY-GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT

Group 3

Question No. 5

Senator Xenophon asked the following question at the hearing on 24 February 2014:

Senator XENOPHON: I want to go to the issue of a waiting period for people wanting documents. Can you give a sense of how long that waiting period is?

Mr Fricker: At the moment, it is a major issue for the National Archives that we have accumulated a backlog of some 20,000 applications for access.

Senator XENOPHON: Did you say 20,000?

Mr Fricker: I did. There are 20,000 records awaiting examination so that they can be opened under the Archives Act. Within the broader context of several million applications or requests for access that we receive each year—and five million of those dealt with our material which is already online and digitised, delivered very efficiently through online channels as it should be—over and above that we receive annually about 43,000 applications for files which have not yet been examined for access under the Archives Act. I think that last year, out of those 43,000, we were able to open about 40,000. So the maths is quite simple here: there were 3,000 which were over and above our capacity to respond.

Senator XENOPHON: Okay. I may want to ask you to take that on notice again. I have terrible time constraints on this and want to get through to some other pertinent issues. Under the act you have a 90-day period to process applications for access to government files. Can you indicate on how many occasions that 90-day benchmark was met or not met? You may want to take that on notice.

Mr Fricker: I will take it on notice to give you a percentage, but perhaps I will return to the heart of the question. The overall statistic looks quite good; 90-plus per cent of our applications are responded to within that 90-day period. But, given the immense volumes of requests that we get, the quantum of applications that do go beyond the 90-day period is quite significant. We have devoted an area of our website now to provide public scrutiny of how we are doing eroding that backlog. We are making progress. I have diverted for the Archives significant resources in the last several months to set up a task force to focus on that backlog. We are entering into refreshed agreements with all the government agencies we work with to clear that backlog. It is an area of intense activity within the Archive.

The answer to the honourable senator's question is as follows:

In 2012-13, the Archives received 43,840 applications for access from the public.

40,360 applications were completed within 90 days (92%) and 3,442 completed over 90 days.