

## Senate Standing Committee on Economics

### ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

#### Treasury Portfolio

#### Budget Estimates

31 May – 2 June 2011

**Question No:** BET 93

**Topic:** ATO Business Line

**Hansard Page:** Written

#### Senator Bushby asked:

When calling the ATO Business Line (13 28 66) and you select option to speak to an operator you are often told “our service is currently experiencing peak demand”. This has happened during AM, Midday and PM hours over a number of weeks/days.

1. Has the ATO had any change in staffing numbers of their business line call centre?
2. Have they experienced increased calls over the past one, two, three months?
3. Have they experienced fewer calls over the past one, two, three months?
4. Have they had a reduction/increase in funding for the business line call centre? (i.e. could ask if it is due to the Efficiency Dividend).
5. Have they received complaints from the public regarding these issues?
6. Please explain why callers are not able to get through.
7. What will the ATO do to resolve this issue?
8. When callers do manage to get through they are told that they will have to wait in excess of one hour to talk with someone. Why is this?

#### Answer:

1. In 2011, the ATO experienced a higher than expected turnover of contact centre staff particularly in the business line call centre. The ATO conducted a number of recruitment processes to replace these staff; however, due to the complexity of some call types, a considerable period of training and skills consolidation is required before staff are ready to answer calls.
2. Calls to the ATO’s 13 28 66 business tax enquiry line increased by 12.6% in 2010-11 when compared to 2009-10. This increase was 5.1%, 22.6% and 15.0% for April, May and June 2011 respectively.

This increase can be attributed to a number of factors including the extension for filing of business activity statements which resulted in an increase in calls as taxpayers checked revised due dates; firmer debt collection measures which have resulted in additional calls requiring either an explanation of accounts or negotiation of payment arrangements; and high volumes of calls relating to AUSkey (AUSkey is the security credential to access government online services).

3. As stated in response to Question 2, the ATO has not experienced fewer calls to the 13 28 66 business tax enquiry line over the past three months.
4. There has been no reduction in funding for the business line call centre. The ATO increased funding in both the 2009-10 and 2010-11 years to support Tax Time and other initiatives.

The budget allocation to the ATO contact centre did not impact its performance during 2010-11. Instead, a higher than normal attrition during the 2010-11 year resulted in a temporary shortage of skilled staff.

5. Yes, the ATO has received complaints from taxpayers. From March to May 2011, there was an increase in complaints compared to the same period last year regarding difficulties accessing the ATO's contact centres. During this period, the ATO received almost 2.5 million calls and 2,853 complaints (0.12% of calls) relating to difficulties accessing ATO contact centres. This year the ATO has enhanced its complaint resolution process and as a result 62% of these complaints were resolved during the initial calls.
6. While the ATO plans to answer the majority of general calls within five minutes and schedules sufficient staff to meet this forecast call demand, there may be occasions when call volumes experience a 'spike' and they exceed capacity. If this occurs, some callers may experience longer wait times than usual.

In these situations, a high demand message may be used, which explains that the ATO is currently experiencing a peak in call demand and refers callers to the ATO website. This ensures a consistent level of service for those calls already waiting in the queue.

While some callers may prefer to wait regardless of the wait time, the capacity of the ATO's infrastructure must be considered. The number of calls allowed into a queue needs to be monitored to ensure that callers who are already in the queue do not drop out due to infrastructure strain.

7. The ATO has recruited approximately 350 permanent contact centre staff to replace staff lost through attrition, recruitment and staff mobility processes. Just over 220 of these new recruits have been or will be trained to answer business tax enquiries.

The ATO also deploys skilled staff from other areas of the office as required.

In addition to the permanent staff, the ATO has recruited approximately 550 labour hire and 350 casual staff to assist with telephony work throughout Tax Time as part of the normal preparation for the Tax Time peak period.

During June 2011, as a result of the ATO's overall recruitment strategies, there were improvements to wait times. The ATO also met its overall service standards for the 2010-11 year achieving a result of 81.3% for general calls and 90.5% for tax practitioner calls.

So far in July 2011, the busiest time of the year for the ATO, service standards for the business tax enquiry line have been exceeded (89.6% for general calls) and wait times are well under target (1 minute 42 seconds for general calls).

8. As a result of an increase in telephony workload and high staff attrition, some taxpayers calling the ATO experienced longer wait times than expected during some periods, particularly from March to May 2011. Complex enquiries such as those to the business tax enquiry line were impacted the most.

A range of strategies, as described in Question 7, were implemented to improve performance.