

Finance and Public Administration References Committee Inquiry into Digital Delivery of Government Services

CPSU responses to Questions on Notice

Question No.	Asked by	Question
1.	Senator McALLISTER (CHAIR) Hansard, p. 13.	<p>CHAIR (Senator McALLISTER): Thanks very much, Mr Chiu. Your opening remarks go to many of the issues that are dealt with in the written submission, but I wanted to ask you about the comment you make in the written submission that ICT is a major problem for APS staff. You go to questions around the functionality of older systems in agencies like Human Services and you also go to the inadequate access to IT support. I just wondered if you could elaborate on those things, because many of the ICT systems are not themselves citizen-facing; they're used by humans, who then provide services to Australian citizens.</p> <p>Mr Chiu: ...I want to cite the new child support payment system, Pluto. There have been a range of issues with that, which occurred last year. It's a new system that was introduced, and many people who rely on child support payments couldn't actually use the system. This is a new system, and they had to drag child support staff from their usual work to answer the phones because the system didn't work. I'm happy to provide some more details on notice for the committee. This is just an example of how there are problems not only with older systems but also with current, newer systems, often designed without engagement with frontline staff.</p>

Online systems are unreliable for customers, and the ICT systems that staff use often make their work more difficult. Consistent feedback from CPSU members over a number of years is that when a new system is introduced, it often needs to operate in tandem with the older system. This results in multiple handling of a single transaction in multiple systems. In addition to this, web based systems often have lag times which affect the efficient processing of claims or the handling of customer inquiries.

In relation to Centrelink services in particular, system outages are regular occurrences that create a great deal of customer frustration, particularly if they are combined with long wait times in queues or on the phone. Managing the customer aggression that results from these system outages has now become a standard part of the work for many staff in client servicing roles. Processing delays are now so normalised that staff no longer feel they have any ability to affect an outcome for a customer.

Successive governments and departmental executives have failed to design process which recognise the complexity of issues impacting on people seeking assistance or the most

appropriate channel for different stages of the claim making and updating. In relation to Centrelink payments, business processes for each payment type should be reviewed and their effectiveness and efficiency tested against a range of real-life scenarios.

A more recent example of problems with ICT systems that both the citizen facing and the 'back end' or staff facing systems failing is what has been experienced by staff and clients of the Child Support Agency. The Child Support Agency computer systems were inoperative for 4 days in the week prior to the Easter Public Holidays. More detail on this outage can be found on the attached CPSU media release.

MEDIA RELEASE



Computer outage strands Child Support clients and staff

Wednesday, 28 March 2018

The CPSU is concerned a major computer outage in the Child Support agency means some vulnerable families may not receive assistance payments before Easter, while putting staff at increased risk of customer aggression.

Computer systems used by Child Support staff in the Department of Human Services were completely inoperative for four business days from Thursday last week until yesterday. Limited systems came back online this morning but CPSU members report they remain unstable and sluggish.

The major outage comes despite the more than \$100 million that DHS has spent so far on its new Pluto Child Support computer system, relying heavily on external contractors to do the work.

CPSU Deputy National President Lisa Newman said: "This major system failure is an absolute disaster for people who rely on Child Support payments or other services and assistance. What's worse is that the Department appears to be leaving staff largely unsupported as they've dealt with frustrated customers and rising levels of aggression."

"For four long days our members have had their hands tied, unable to do anything to help clients other than take their numbers and promise to call back when the system is working again. Even now staff are facing a massive backlog and a sluggish and unstable system that's a long way from working as it should."

"We've written to DHS management about this system failure but have so far received no response. It appears it's Child Support clients and staff who'll continue to bear the brunt of this rather than those who made the decisions that led us to this point. Staff are preparing to work additional hours to try to get things back on track."

"The system development process for Pluto has been heavily reliant on external contractors rather than in-house expertise. The outcome has been a system that's taken years, is over budget and still not stable nor fit for purpose. This process needs to be brought back in house urgently to ensure there's the integrity and accountability that's needed to get things running properly."

"Once again this system failure indicates a lack of investment by the Turnbull Government in the basic infrastructure that's so important in providing quality and reliable public services, and an overreliance on contractors. Child Support clients and the staff who help them are the ones paying the price here for the Government's mistakes."

MEDIA CONTACT: SIMON FRAZER 0409 493 290

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2.	Senator SINGH Hansard, p. 14.	<p>Senator SINGH: For example, you talk about high attrition rates amongst ICT staff. Why do you think that's the case?</p> <p>Mr Chiu: Going back to some of the other factors I highlighted, there is a lack of a digital profession within the APS and often also a misunderstanding of digital, I think. People who work for the public service see it as an opportunity to do something in the public good. Often when they are in the public service, because of its nature—I'm trying to think of the best way to put this—they find themselves very constrained in what they can do. Going back to those factors I addressed, when we look at upgrades to government software there is often little appreciation for timing frequency and changes, so it can seem very constrained. I think quite a bit of it is cultural—that lack of understanding about ICT. I'm happy to provide more information on notice.</p>

CPSU members who work in ICT have provided the following examples of why they believe there are high attrition rates:

- *They often feel that the skills and expertise has been bled from the department and they are being set up to fail.*
- *Experienced Senior EL staff have been replaced by contractors. APS 6 staff are now being told to learn what the contractors are doing in order to retain organisational knowledge once the contractors move on.*
- *ICT often feel the changes they are asked to make do not improve systems for users. This contributes to a sense of “change fatigue” where it feels that change is occurring for its own sake with little prospect of an improved outcome for staff or customers.*
- *Access to ‘Help Desk’ support has been removed for all staff except the senior executive. This removal of ICT support for frontline staff has resulted in significant delays in resolving issues for frontline staff.*
- *Staff logging of faults are often removed with the tag “resolved unsuccessful”, which our members say “basically sums up the staff morale”.*

In addition to these comments, feedback from CPSU members on the high attrition rates in ICT, indicate that the work of ICT staff needs to feel valued more. The attrition rates are often linked to lower employee engagement coming from a perceived absence of future career opportunities, little organisational interest in the input they could provide on improving the system and low remuneration relative to the private sector.

This feedback is supported by the comments of Paul Shelter¹ in December 2016, who has said that the work ICT staff do often feels like a waste of their talent and initiative. He gave the example of “*too many public servants working in back offices are often reduced to human APIs — retyping information from one system to another, and stuck processing the repetitive common cases that shouldn’t need any human intervention at all. This is a waste of their talent and initiative.*” These staff often have first hand experience of the service delivery requirements of the work they are doing but this is ignored.

¹The Mandarin. Paul Shetler: my 16 months of digital transformation in Australia. By Paul Shetler
03 December 2016 <https://www.themandarin.com.au/73275-paul-shetler-16-months-digital-transformation-australia/>

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3.	Senator SIGH Hansard, p. 15.	<p>Senator SINGH: In your submission, Mr Chiu, you talk about the fact that there are still in Australia low levels of digital literacy from those who need to access government services... What are you proposing in terms of digital service delivery for government? ... Are you suggesting that there should be that type of face-to-face delivery? Obviously everything is shifting to some sort of digital platform, and I acknowledge that there is a generation that do have low levels of digital literacy and/or just do not have access to the internet. What is the solution for that group of people who you say are most reliant on government services?</p> <p>Mr Chiu: I think the important thing is that there is a maintenance of different channels to access government services. Much of the population will use digital services, but we will also need to maintain those face-to-face services and telephone services. One of the things that we are concerned about is that digital transformation is used to reduce those other services, such as those face-to-face services that people rely on in the Department of Human Services and telephone services.</p> <p>Senator SINGH: I was more interested in the type of access to face-to-face services that you would suggest be part of this digital transformation space.</p> <p>Mr Chiu: I am happy to provide something on notice.</p> <p>Senator SINGH: Thank you.</p>

Online Services are the most effective for simple transactional work. Many of the issues that people need DHS assistance with are complex. Applying for a carer's payment, while on Newstart is not like buying insurance online.

The most useful function of the web based apps is the clients ability to send documents which are immediately attached to their records, which means they no longer need to be scanned. However, the functionality of the apps is significantly decreased for more complex situations.

The online forms that clients are required to complete and submit are long, confusing and many clients need to have the information requirements explained to them in order to complete the application successfully. This need to have the requirements explained is even more important for those clients who are not technologically literate or have special needs.

Government business processes have been designed to push all customers on to online services, which has resulted in an increased level of difficulty for eligible citizens to access the Government assistance they are entitled to, particularly those who are most vulnerable and with the least access to technology.

The role of DHS staff has been changing from helping the most vulnerable and disadvantaged Australians, to implementing business processes that many in the community perceive are designed to make access to financial support from the government as difficult as possible. We often get feedback from CPSU members about people coming into a Centrelink office for help with a reporting or application issue that they couldn't resolve on line or on the phone, and rather than being able to help that person, are now required to direct them to a phone or a computer in the office. In many cases our members say it would be quicker and much less traumatic for the client to work with them to fix the problem when they are in the office.
