

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Green Loans Program

I am writing this submission as an ABSA accredited Home Sustainability Assessor with a current contract with DEWHA. I have had an interest in home energy efficiency and have been an exponent of passive design principles for many years. I have been a qualified Home Sustainability Assessor (21854VIC) for a number of years and am also a certified HIA GreenSmart Professional and ABSA accredited Home Energy Ratings assessor. Prior to the commencement of the Green Loans Program I was involved in a number of programs through state government, local council and trade unions and have performed more than 400 home sustainability assessments. I have only ever performed a small number of assessments under the green loans program, mainly due to my frustrations with the management, or should I more rightly say mismanagement, of the entire program.

This industry, relatively new as it is, I have always found to be thoroughly rewarding in the past. When I first heard of the Green Loans Program I believed it would allow continuance of that feeling. That I could continue to be involved in an industry that is basically helping others. Educating people as to ways to reduce their energy and water consumption, to reduce their impact on the planet, and if nothing else to reduce their costs financially. Much of this was through simple behavior change before resorting to high cost items like solar PV systems, solar HW systems and rainwater tanks. However the reality is that this program has caused me nothing but angst.

DEWHA originally promised an “online booking service” whereby assessors could simply log on to the web-site and organize their own bookings, alterations, and cancellations however this has still not eventuated. This omission alone would have caused a massive increase in the number of calls to the call centre who simply couldn’t cope. The number of times I was put on hold for 45 minutes plus, only to then be told that they couldn’t take the booking as the system was down, or to simply get cut off was farcical and cost me considerable amounts of time for which I received nothing. Whilst I am aware that the booking system has improved I feel that the implementation of the online system would make things much simpler and would allow the call centre to be what it was meant to be, a booking line for the public and an information and assistance centre. I must add too that I was quite disgusted to discover that some large companies had direct access to the booking system whilst we individual assessors had to cope with chaos.

The level of training provided to many assessors is of concern to me also. Four days is barely enough to learn the basics. There are some disturbing stories around as to the level of training some assessors received. I was involved with one training provider and I know that we included much more than we were required to and provided our students with considerable resource materials to help them on their way. We also set up a network whereby any of our past students can contact us for information or advice. However there are some out there who still don’t know the difference between kilowatts and kilojoules. I believe too that some assessors are taking just 30 minutes for an assessment. That is not

even enough time to gather the required data let alone do anything of an educational nature. As stated, I am an experienced assessor and find it hard to do a true sustainability assessment in much less than two hours. Perhaps those who were submitting five or more assessments a day should be audited to verify the quality and accuracy of the assessment provided.

Assessment reports are another issue of concern. According to DEWHA reports would be issued and mailed within 10 working days. As far as I'm aware that has never happened. On a number of occasions I have had past clients call me having waited 6 weeks for their report. I know of others who had assessments in October and didn't receive the report until February, and that was only after phoning the call centre. A few of my clients I tried to assist by making the call for them only to be told the inquiry had to come from the householder themselves. I simply don't understand why, when we can see the report online as soon as we submit the data, it takes so long to be printed and posted out. Surely in this day and age we can expect greater efficiency. This not only reflects badly on the program but tarnishes the image of the industry as a whole. The reports themselves would sometimes come up with recommendations which seemed to totally conflict with the data being entered. One classic case of this was an assessment I did on a rural property which had a stand alone photo voltaic system and was in no way connected to the grid. All the relevant information was entered and yet the report came back suggesting they subscribe to green power through their local electricity supplier.

The decision to put a stop to the "less popular loans component" of the program seemed to be a little premature. It would appear that the decision may have been made based on the number of loans processed to that date (approximately 1100) which wouldn't have included the reports still pending (some 110,000) as noted above. When the announcement was made I contacted all my clients to ensure they were aware of the situation and to prompt them into action. Again this wasn't a requirement however to me it was simply customer service and good PR. Since then I have had many, many people express their disappointment at the change. Perhaps the program should now be renamed to the 'Australian Sustainability Assessment Program or **ASAP** for short.

The discontinuation of the supply of promotional material by DEWHA is a decision I don't understand, unless they want to see the program fail. Surely this will once again be advantageous to the larger operators who, by economy of scale, can manage to bear the cost of printing etc. However as independent assessors how can we realistically be expected to cover these costs given the amount we are currently receiving per assessment, bearing in mind that amount would be reduced by \$50 should the householder's pre assessment check list become a reality and actually be done by the householder. Consider too that the payment we receive is to also cover the time spent making the bookings, checking data and submitting it online, not to mention the overheads we incur. Perhaps we should all reduce our assessment times to just 30 minutes, although given the current restrictions on the number of assessments we can perform that wouldn't resolve the problem.

The move to restrict the number of assessments that can be done each day/week in one sense I support in that it will presumably stop some of the gun-ho operators from abusing the system. I understand too that the aim was to allow a more even distribution of assessments between the over supply of assessors. However I do feel that a limit of five assessments per week is insufficient to maintain a viable business. There is no way I could remain in business if I were totally reliant on the Green Loans Program. Also, since the restrictions were put in place I've not received a single booking through the call centre even though I live in a rural community and my given availability covers a very wide area. The only work I'm now receiving in this area is through word of mouth or self promotion.

I feel that DEWHA should run an advertising campaign to let the public know that Home Sustainability Assessments are still available. Because of all the negative publicity there is a common misconception that the entire program has been cancelled. I have seen and heard press reports referring to 'the now defunct green loans program'. Again, I have spoken to numerous people in recent times that had no idea they could still get a free assessment done. All were under the impression that the program had finished and because this has all come about due to the mismanagement by DEWHA, I feel it is the least they could do to try to actually assist assessors in some way. Also I feel it would be beneficial for householders if there was a web page where they could simply enter their postcode and see a list of assessors for that area along with a contact number, and this to be publicized through the aforementioned campaign.

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