

Question on notice no. 9

Portfolio question number: SQ23-000295

2023-24 Budget estimates

Education and Employment Committee, Education Portfolio

Senator the Hon Sarah Henderson: asked the Department of Education on 1 June 2023—

Senator HENDERSON: Thank you for that. I want to move to the issue of negative vetting. We've asked questions at each estimates about the appropriate security clearances in place for ministers' offices. We have received on a number of occasions a response that not all staff have negative vetting 2 security clearance, as is required. Could I have an update on whether all staff in Minister Clare's office and the offices of other assistant ministers-including your office, Assistant Minister Chisholm-have negative vetting 2 security clearance.

Mr Markovic: My understanding is that, as at today's date, not all advisers have an NV2. The clearance process for the NV2 is initiated by the Department of Finance, when people are appointed, as their employer. The department has an interest to make sure that individuals only get access to the information that they need. We do monitor the progress of getting NV2s but, at this stage, not everyone in all the offices has a current NV2, which is the response that I have provided.

Senator HENDERSON: I am concerned about that because the Department of Finance sponsors ministerial security clearances, but the responsibility sits with the minister and the assistant minister. Assistant Minister, can I ask, in the case of your office, how many of your staff do not have negative vetting clearances, please?

Senator Chisholm: I'll take that on notice and come back to you.

Senator HENDERSON: You don't know? Senator Chisholm: I've got some new staff who have only started recently, so I'd have to check where that progress is at.

Senator HENDERSON: Without naming those staff, are you able to provide us with a list of staff in your office, the start date of each of those staff members and whether they have the appropriate clearance-which obviously is mandatory? I appreciate that, if they're a new staff member, it takes some time to get the negative vetting clearances in place. Could I also ask that this information is provided in relation to Minister Clare?

Mr Cook: I am happy to take that on notice,

Senator. Senator HENDERSON: Do you have any information to hand as to how many staff do not have the required negative vetting?

Mr Cook: No, I don't think we have an update from the office as to the progressing of the negative vetting processes. We will have to take that on notice for you.

Senator HENDERSON: Secretary, can I remind you that it is not sufficient to say in your answer, 'Not all staff have negative vetting.' We would like to know how many staff do not have negative vetting in each office and why. If they have recently started their employment, that's obviously well understood; it does take some time to get the clearance in place. Given staff are handling highly secure material, including potentially cabinet classified material, this is a very important issue. And it is

mandatory. Do you have any information now as to how many staff in any minister's or assistant minister's office do not have the required clearances?

Mr Cook: As I said, I have no information with me in relation to that. I don't know whether there have been any approvals given in the last week, for example, around the process. As I have committed to do, we will take that on notice and provide the further detail.

Answer —

Please see PDF attachment.

Standing Committees on Education and Employment

QUESTION ON NOTICE Budget Estimates 2023 - 2024

Outcome: Cross Portfolio

Department of Education Question No. SQ23-000295

Senator Sarah Henderson on 01 June 2023, Proof Hansard page 20

Negative Vetting clearances for Ministers' office staff

Question

Senator HENDERSON: Thank you for that. I want to move to the issue of negative vetting. We've asked questions at each estimates about the appropriate security clearances in place for ministers' offices. We have received on a number of occasions a response that not all staff have negative vetting 2 security clearance, as is required. Could I have an update on whether all staff in Minister Clare's office and the offices of other assistant ministers—including your office, Assistant Minister Chisholm—have negative vetting 2 security clearance.

Mr Markovic: My understanding is that, as at today's date, not all advisers have an NV2. The clearance process for the NV2 is initiated by the Department of Finance, when people are appointed, as their employer. The department has an interest to make sure that individuals only get access to the information that they need. We do monitor the progress of getting NV2s but, at this stage, not everyone in all the offices has a current NV2, which is the response that I have provided.

Senator HENDERSON: I am concerned about that because the Department of Finance sponsors ministerial security clearances, but the responsibility sits with the minister and the assistant minister. Assistant Minister, can I ask, in the case of your office, how many of your staff do not have negative vetting clearances, please?

Senator Chisholm: I'll take that on notice and come back to you.

Senator HENDERSON: You don't know?

Senator Chisholm: I've got some new staff who have only started recently, so I'd have to check where that progress is at.

Senator HENDERSON: Without naming those staff, are you able to provide us with a list of staff in your office, the start date of each of those staff members and whether they have the appropriate clearance—which obviously is mandatory? I appreciate that, if they're a new staff member, it takes some time to get the negative vetting clearances in place. Could I also ask that this information is provided in relation to Minister Clare?

Mr Cook: I am happy to take that on notice,

Senator. Senator HENDERSON: Do you have any information to hand as to how many staff do not have the required negative vetting?

Mr Cook: No, I don't think we have an update from the office as to the progressing of the negative vetting processes. We will have to take that on notice for you.

Senator HENDERSON: Secretary, can I remind you that it is not sufficient to say in your answer, 'Not all staff have negative vetting.' We would like to know how many staff do not have negative vetting in each office and why. If they have recently started their employment, that's obviously well understood; it does take some time to get the clearance in place. Given staff are handling highly secure material, including potentially cabinet classified material, this is a very important issue. And it is mandatory. Do you have any information now as to how many staff in any minister's or assistant minister's office do not have the required clearances?

Mr Cook: As I said, I have no information with me in relation to that. I don't know whether there have been any approvals given in the last week, for example, around the process. As I have committed to do, we will take that on notice and provide the further detail.

Answer

As at 15 August 2023, five staff in Minister Clare's office, nine staff in Minister Aly's office and one staff member in Assistant Minister Chisholm's office are at various stages of the security assessment process which is undertaken by the Australian Government Security Vetting Agency.

The department does not hold information about ministerial staff start dates.