

Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee

ADDITIONAL ESTIMATES – 11 FEBRUARY 2016 ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Human Services

Topic: Call Wait Times

Question reference number: HS 124

Senator: Cameron

Type of question: Written

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 4 April 2016

Number of pages: 6

Question:

- a) Please provide an update on progress in relation to recommendations from ANAO and Ombudsman reports on call wait times and Centrelink performance.
- b) Referring to June 2015 Estimates QoN HS 54, and October 2015 Estimates QON 40, successful calls to Centrelink were 43 million for 2014 and were 40 million for 2015, a drop of 11.3%. How many total and successful calls were made there this year so far? What is the projected number of successful calls for 2015-16? Please provide a monthly breakdown of successful calls, including total calls and percentages of calls unanswered and answered.
- c) Please provide details of the 'emergencies' and 'complex' nature of the calls that caused the drop in answered call rate, referred to in QON 40 from October 2015 Estimates. Provide details of the emergencies which DHS had to respond to which caused the drop in call answer rates?
- d) Minister Robert, in a media release dated 19/10/15 said "Several new features, designed to cut red tape for customers and make interactions more intuitive, will be rolled out before the end of 2016." What are these new features? How will they help bring down call wait times and processing speeds?
- e) ABC reported that there has been a 24% rise on complaints about Centrelink to the Commonwealth Ombudsman, is this accurate? Please provide the number of complaints per year for the past three years, and the categories in which they have been made, as well as the percentage increase or decrease for each category.
- f) Please provide details of any analysis done to assess the affect to DHS and Centrelink's brand and reputation arising from failure to meet KPI targets and increased call wait times.
- g) What are the issues that have contributed to an increase from 5000 to 8000 complaints to the Ombudsman in the past year, confirmed by statements made by Hank Jongen on ABC Radio 17 Feb 2016?
- h) Please provide details of steps being taken to achieve KPI outcomes in areas where they are currently not being achieved.

- i) I refer to the statement made by DHS spokesperson Mr Hank Jongen on ABC radio on February 17, 2016 that DHS is funded to deliver call wait times averages of 16 mins. Please provide details of the methodology used to calculate current funding against call wait times of 16 mins. Please provide details of any analysis being done to reduce call wait times within current funding.
- j) Please provide the average call wait times for each month across each call line, going back to June 2013.
- k) Please provide details of the analysis made in response to the ANAO call Centre report that would take \$100 million and 1000 extra staff to reduce average call wait times to 5 mins. How was this figure arrived at, who made the calculations and what were the inputs used to reach this conclusion.
- l) With regard to DHS statements that call wait times could be reduced to an average of 5mins with 1000 extra staff at a cost of \$100m per year- please provide details of what investment of staff and funds it would take to reduce average call waiting times to 13, 12, 11, 10, 9, 8, 7 and 6 mins.
- m) I refer to the statement made by DHS spokesperson Mr Hank Jongen of ABC radio on February 17, 2016 that one of his staff makes daily calls to DHS lines to test call wait times. Please provide documented results of this analysis.
- n) Were changes made in the call wait times messages given on telephone lines in January or February in response to an increase in call volumes? Were customers no longer given an estimate above 30 mins, but instead told that calls waiting times were 'more than 30mins'? When were these changes introduced and by whom was the decision made to change the procedures?
- o) Has there been any change in the work flow procedures in dealing with callers that have been waiting for more than 30 mins, for example are callers having their call answered and then transferred to another department but kept on hold for another period, in order to have the call classified as 'answered'?

Answer:

- a) The department has interpreted the question as referring to the ANAO and Ombudsman recommendations in terms of Centrelink telephony performance.

In its report *Management of Smart Centres' Centrelink Telephone Services* released in May 2015, the ANAO made three recommendations. The recommendations and their status is as follows:

- Recommendation 1 – Establish a pathway and timetable for the implementation of a coordinated channel strategy – Development of the strategy is well underway.
- Recommendation 2 – Apply the Quality Call Listening Framework to all staff answering telephone calls and review the potential impact of gaps in the implementation of QCL – This is complete.
- Recommendation 3 – Review Key Performance Indicators for the Centrelink telephony channel – This is being done in the context of the development of the channel strategy.

In its report *One year on from the Centrelink Service Delivery Report*, released in September 2015, the Commonwealth Ombudsman noted that:

- Recommendation 1(a) to investigate the possibility of extending 'place in queue' to all callers on all enquiry lines has been completed;
- Recommendation 1(b) to review the automated triage arrangements for incoming calls to identify and provide priority assistance to vulnerable callers and customers with urgent enquiries has been completed;

- Recommendation 1(c) to develop performance standards for speed to answer calls on each of the Centrelink customer enquiry lines had been partially implemented – this is being done in the context of the development of the channel strategy; and
- Recommendation 1(d) to publicise and regularly report Centrelink’s performance against the performance standards under recommendation 1(c) had been partially implemented - this is being done in the context of the development of the channel strategy.

b) As at 31 January 2016, the number of successful calls for the 2015-16 financial year to date was 23.0 million and the number of calls that received the busy signal was 16.5 million.

The projected number of successful calls for 2015-16 is around 38.3 million calls.

The following is the breakdown of successful calls and calls receiving the busy signal by month for 2015-16 year to date.

Month	Successful	Busy
July 2015	4,000,243	7,246,092
August 2015	3,069,587	2,079,725
September 2015	2,933,223	764,084
October 2015	3,110,549	1,167,740
November 2015	2,990,160	855,815
December 2015	3,425,356	795,402
January 2016	3,466,655	3,551,257
2015–16 FYTD as at 31 Jan 16	22,995,773	16,460,115

c) The 2014-15 financial year saw the department respond to a number of emergency events including the South Australian bushfires, Tropical Cyclones Marcia, Lam and Olwyn and New South Wales east coast storms and flooding. The department also continued to deliver disaster recovery financial assistance for emergency events Tropical Cyclone Ita and the Western Australian bushfires, both of which occurred in the 2013-14 financial year.

Given the department’s focus on digital services, a number of simpler activities are being completed through the digital channel. This strategy will see staff more frequently handling complex enquiries. Some of the factors contributing to the increased complexity of enquiries include end to end claim processing by telephony staff, the more complex nature of people’s income and assets and complexity in terms of the range of assistance the department provides.

d) The new features that the former Minister alluded to in his press release of 19 October 2015 related to the WPIT Programme. Tranche one of the programme includes four digital projects that will provide early benefits for the Programme and for customers. Online services will be improved through:

- a capability for customers to monitor circumstance updates online, including required follow-up actions and estimated time of finalisation;
- early trial of applying automated, real time circumstance updates to customer profiles;
- providing new functionality, content, tools and capabilities to support customers using the digital channel; and
- providing staff with access to a dedicated digital training environment and tools to increase and improve staff digital capability.

e) Questions about complaints to the Commonwealth Ombudsman would need to be referred to that office.

- f) The department achieved its key performance indicator targets in 2014-15.
- g) Questions about complaints to the Commonwealth Ombudsman would need to be referred to that office.
- h) The department regularly takes a number of steps to ensure that key performance indicators are achieved including:
- the movement of work across smart centres and also across the Service Delivery Operations Group to free staff to focus on telephony and claims processing;
 - use of overtime for high priority work;
 - upskilling of staff to allow movement of more experienced staff to focus on priorities and allow suitably skilled non-operational staff to support telephony and processing during peak periods;
 - focusing on business process improvements for payments;
 - greater use of social media to advise people with information about payments and services and issues relevant to them; and
 - recruitment of ongoing, non-ongoing and intermittent and irregular employees as required.

- i) Over the past two years the department has moved to a Smart Centre model blending the separate processing and telephony workforces. As a result, the department is unable to provide a discrete figure for call funding and resources.

In the 2012-13 Budget the department received ongoing funding of approximately \$50 million per annum to replace supplementary funding that had been provided on an annual basis since the 2006-07 Budget. This funding allowed the then Centrelink annual average call wait times to be maintained at approximately 16 minutes rather than the forecast 25 minutes that would have occurred without the funding. Following a change to the department's outcome structure, the Centrelink queues are now reported under Programme 1.1 Services to the Community - Social Security and Welfare in the Portfolio Budget Statements.

- j) The following table shows the average speed of answer across each call line between June 2013 and January 2016.

2012–13 Financial Year								
Month	Social, Security and Welfare	Disabilities, Sickness and Carers	Employment Services	Families and Parenting	Older Australians	Youth and Students	Participation Solutions Team	Other
Jun 2013	10:06	14:11	15:07	09:25	11:18	19:45	24:18	04:41
2013–14 Financial Year								
Jul 2013	14:18	20:39	23:18	11:15	17:22	27:45	25:17	09:03
Aug 2013	14:33	28:23	29:22	10:04	25:17	31:57	36:03	06:38
Sep 2013	11:43	21:06	21:09	07:53	19:16	23:38	33:09	04:40
Oct 2013	18:48	29:17	29:16	17:24	27:16	30:43	33:09	08:27
Nov 2013	24:26	35:21	38:40	25:00	34:08	40:43	33:19	11:45
Dec 2013	19:01	22:34	32:27	17:05	21:11	37:33	29:43	09:04
Jan 2014	22:32	28:20	32:40	25:39	27:33	38:14	26:12	11:22
Feb 2014	17:17	20:30	28:32	15:36	18:50	39:13	26:20	07:12
Mar 2014	16:49	19:44	29:11	14:22	18:06	36:12	32:33	06:46
Apr 2014	17:39	20:14	27:20	15:48	18:51	31:13	37:05	07:53
May 2014	15:14	15:15	24:20	14:44	14:26	27:52	31:42	06:50
Jun 2014	15:35	17:10	24:12	17:37	14:58	26:29	24:08	07:00

2014–15 Financial year								
Jul 2014	17:50	21:05	26:01	20:25	17:08	28:35	32:52	08:38
Aug 2014	14:25	20:58	24:14	15:45	17:54	27:13	16:04	06:25
Sep 2014	16:06	25:51	24:09	17:19	20:39	25:28	14:57	08:46
Oct 2014	14:32	21:05	20:13	17:33	19:02	20:19	09:32	07:59
Nov 2014	15:27	20:15	21:29	19:06	18:39	23:28	10:56	08:06
Dec 2014	14:45	20:20	21:51	17:27	20:01	23:58	08:58	07:14
Jan 2015	17:15	23:23	24:32	21:59	22:19	27:53	08:40	08:21
Feb 2015	16:31	22:33	24:09	21:42	19:47	27:46	07:27	07:04
Mar 2015	17:21	24:14	24:36	23:09	20:31	25:22	09:27	08:32
Apr 2015	14:24	22:06	20:20	20:02	18:40	20:46	10:26	06:32
May 2015	14:18	22:02	20:52	21:38	17:44	20:06	11:32	06:38
Jun 2015	14:18	21:56	20:22	21:41	17:07	20:37	09:56	06:25
2015–16 Financial year								
Jul 2015	19:52	28:13	26:44	28:34	22:46	27:26	03:41	10:27
Aug 2015	13:59	21:39	21:11	22:56	16:53	18:51	05:21	04:18
Sep 2015	10:36	18:07	17:31	17:32	13:07	14:28	06:43	02:33
Oct 2015	13:03	22:08	21:45	23:37	15:14	19:12	07:20	03:31
Nov 2015	13:22	21:55	21:49	25:28	14:58	20:43	06:44	03:02
Dec 2015	14:22	23:26	23:39	24:54	17:00	24:10	06:50	05:02
Jan 2016	21:57	34:15	35:29	36:50	24:23	33:19	08:10	09:16

- k) The figure was calculated by analysing historical calls answered and abandoned call patterns as well as average speed of answer trends to determine the number of staff historically required to handle workload at different average speed of answer parameters. These calculations were then applied to future demand projections to calculate future staffing levels required to achieve an average speed of answer of five minutes. The additional staffing requirements were applied through the normal costing model and costs were estimated at approximately \$100 million per annum for a five minute average speed of answer.
- l) To provide the level of detail required would involve an unreasonable diversion of departmental resources.
- m) The call centre wait time tracker is at Attachment A.
- n) Changes were made to the estimated wait time messaging on 15 January 2016 as the department had become aware of an error in the messaging. The changes were not made in response to an increase in call volumes. The department plays an estimated wait time message to callers in five minute increments commencing at five mins. Once the estimated wait time reaches 30 minutes the message says that the estimated wait time is more than 30 minutes. The changes were introduced on 15 January 2016 and were approved by the departmental Executive.
- o) There have been no changes to the workflow procedures for dealing with callers that have been waiting for more than 30 minutes.

ATTACHMENT A

CALL CENTRE WAIT TIME TRACKER

		Mon 18 Jan	Tue 19 Jan	Wed 20 Jan	Thu 21 Jan	Fri 22 Jan	Mon 25 Jan	Wed 27 Jan	Thu 28 Jan	Fri 29 Jan	Mon 1 Feb	Wed 3 Feb	Thu 4 Feb	Fri 5 Feb	Mon 8 Feb	Tue 9 Feb	Wed 10 Feb	Thu 11 Feb	Fri 12 Feb
Youth and Students line 132490	8-11am	>30 mins	H	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>25 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins
	11-1pm	Eng		Eng	>30 mins	Eng	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins
	1-5pm		>30 mins	Eng	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	Eng	Eng	>30 mins	>30 mins	Eng	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins
Older Australians line 132300	8-11am	H	H	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins
	11-1pm	Eng		Eng	Eng	>30 mins	>25 mins	Eng	Eng	Eng	Eng	Eng	Eng	Eng	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	Eng
	1-5pm		Eng	Eng	Eng	Eng	Eng	Eng	Eng	Eng	Eng	Eng	Eng	Eng	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	Eng	Eng
Disability, Sickness and Carers line 132717	8-11am	>25 mins	>5 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>25 mins	>20 mins	>25 mins	>30 mins
	11-1pm	Eng		Eng	Eng	Eng	>30 mins	>30 mins	Eng	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins
	1-5pm		Eng	Eng	Eng	Eng	>30 mins	Eng	>30 mins	Eng	>30 mins	Eng	>30 mins	Eng	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins
Families and Parenting line 136150	8-11am	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>25 mins	>25 mins	>25 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>10 mins	>10 mins	H	>15mins	>25 mins
	11-1pm	Eng		Eng	>30 mins	Eng	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins
	1-5pm		>30 mins	Eng	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	Eng	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	Eng	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins	>30 mins

Legend

H Hold
Eng Engaged
>XX mins High demand wait time more than XX mins

Notes

All calls made using new customer, new claim, asked to be put through to the operator. No calls made 26 Jan as public holiday. No calls made 2 Feb as staff member on leave.