

# Senate Standing Committee on Economics

## ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

### Treasury Portfolio

### Budget Estimates

31 May – 2 June 2011

**Question No:** BET 44  
**Topic:** Call centres  
**Hansard Pages:** 87-88

#### Senator Cormann asked:

**Senator CORMANN:** Have you experienced significant increases in the number of calls over the past one, two or three months?

**Mr Butler:** We have had an increase in calls over the last year. This calendar year, particularly with the various natural disasters—for instance we gave extensions of time for people to file business activity statements and we did see quite an increase in calls with people ringing to check when they had to file their business activity statement and that type of thing. There has been a general increase in calls across the board as well, so we have found it difficult at times to answer calls as quickly as we would like. Overall our position is that we are meeting our service standards but more people would get a busy signal than we would like on certain days of the week and at certain times of the day.

**Senator CORMANN:** Are you able to give us some numbers around all of this? Do not do that now; take it on notice. Essentially you say there has been significant increase over last year. Maybe for the last 12 months we could have a month by month breakdown as to how the numbers have been tracking. I am sure you collect that internally in any event. But then the aggregate figure for the year—if you could compare that with what has been happening over the last two or three years. The context is that a lot of my colleagues and I have been getting feedback that people are struggling to get through. As people ring the 13 28 66 number and select an option to speak to an operator, the message is 'Our service is currently experiencing peak demand' at whatever time of the day, whether it is morning, midday or afternoon hours. Whatever day of the week, that seems to be the message. You really have to persist in order to get through.

#### Answer:

The ATO experienced an increase in the volume and complexity of calls this financial year, with overall ATO call volumes increasing by 8.5% when compared to last financial year.

**Table 1: ATO annual call volumes**

ATO calls	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	*Comparison between 2010-11 & 2009-10
Tax practitioner	1,574,396	1,520,219	1,546,241	1.7%
General	10,969,130	8,599,190	9,436,211	9.7%
Total calls	12,543,526	10,119,409	10,982,452	8.5%

Note: 2008-09: call volumes increased due to the tax bonus initiative  
2009-10: overall decrease in call volumes due to the end of the tax bonus initiative

**Table 2: ATO monthly call volumes 2010-11**

ATO calls received	Jul-10	Aug-10	Sep-10	Oct-10	Nov-10	Dec-10	Jan-11	Feb-11	Mar-11	Apr-11	May-11	Jun-11	YTD
<b>Tax practitioner</b>	145,260	160,181	147,166	138,557	132,085	101,782	86,644	111,658	126,421	112,634	151,932	131,921	1,546,241
<b>General</b>	1,213,775	1,175,202	900,553	910,106	765,351	517,705	541,158	619,931	711,539	603,213	744,246	733,432	9,436,211
<b>Total calls</b>	1,359,035	1,335,383	1,047,719	1,048,663	897,436	619,487	627,802	731,589	837,960	715,847	896,178	865,353	10,982,452

In 2010-11, overall calls to the ATO's 13 28 66 business tax enquiry line increased by 12.6% compared to last financial year.

**Table 3: Business calls to 13 28 66 line - annual call volumes**

ATO business calls	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	*Comparison between 2010-11 & 2009-10
<b>Tax practitioner</b>	622,197	620,451	631,475	1.8%
<b>General</b>	2,611,933	2,199,646	2,544,413	15.7%
<b>Total calls</b>	3,234,130	2,820,097	3,175,888	12.6%

The 2010-11, the increase in calls compared to 2009-10 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 people checked revised due dates, additional debt calls and high volumes of AUSkey calls.

**Table 4: Business calls to 13 28 66 line - monthly call volumes 2010-11**

Business calls received	Jul-10	Aug-10	Sep-10	Oct-10	Nov-10	Dec-10	Jan-11	Feb-11	Mar-11	Apr-11	May-11	Jun-11	YTD
<b>Tax practitioner</b>	59,578	56,427	54,340	58,110	55,856	42,887	38,952	52,946	54,222	47,688	58,945	51,524	631,475
<b>General</b>	296,082	265,282	223,900	262,114	205,509	142,791	157,988	194,336	199,316	172,690	212,496	211,909	2,544,413
<b>Total calls</b>	355,660	321,709	278,240	320,224	261,365	185,678	196,940	247,282	253,538	220,378	271,441	263,433	3,175,888

The ATO's service standards for telephony performance are 90% of calls answered within two minutes for tax practitioners, and 80% of calls answered within five minutes for general calls. This financial year the ATO met service standards for both tax practitioner and general calls with results of 90.5% and 81.3% respectively.

However, service results for some call types were under target and the ATO put in place a number of improvement strategies including: flexible working arrangements such as part-time and casual employment; the use of an outsourced call centre; staggered recruitment and training programmes for call centre staff; the use of auto call back; self help services and online services.

In line with industry practice a last option strategy in use is the high demand message. This is used when either the number of calls in the queue exceeds a serviceable number, or the estimated wait time is greater than 30 minutes. The message explains to the taxpayer that the ATO is currently experiencing a peak in demand and refers them to the ATO's website or advises them to try again later.

In response to performance issues the ATO's contact centre has recruited 350 permanent Australian Public Service level 3 staff to replace staff lost through attrition, recruitment and staff mobility. Just over 220 of these new recruits have been or will be trained to answer business tax enquiries. In addition, as part of the normal staff increase in preparation for the Tax Time peak period, approximately 550 labour hire and 350 casual staff have also been recruited.

During June 2011, as a result of the ATO's overall recruitment strategies, there were improvements to wait times. So far in July 2011, the busiest time of the year for the ATO, service standards for the business tax enquiry line have also been exceeded (94.8% for tax practitioner calls and 91.4% for general calls) and wait times are well under target (26 seconds for tax practitioner calls and 1 minute 23 seconds for general calls).