

APPENDIX 5: TIMELINESS AND QUALITY OF RESPONSES FROM DEPARTMENTS AND MINISTERS

1.1 Introduction

Over the course of budget estimates, the Committee has asked both Departments and ministers to provide a range of information to facilitate the budget estimate hearings and this report. More specifically over the course of the last seven months, the Committee has sought the following information:

- a completed response *2009-10 Budget Estimates* questionnaire; and
- answers to questions taken on notice during the public hearing.

This chapter examines the quality and timeliness of responses received during the budget estimates process.

The Committee, in undertaking budget estimates as well as producing this report has strict timeframes to meet for reporting to Parliament. Therefore, it would be respectful to the Parliament, its members and processes as well as the public that both Departments and ministers, where possible adhere with the Committee's timeframes. Adherence to the Committee's timeframes gives the Committee time to properly consider the information available and time to analyse and prepare for Budget Estimates hearings and this report.

Quality responses in both Budget Estimates questionnaires and questions taken on notice assist the Committee and its staff to understand issues and analyse information presented by Departments and ministers. The Committee considers that a quality response from a Department or minister is where a question in either the questionnaire or questions taken on notice has been fully answered and detailed information asked for has been provided.

Where this has not occurred, the Committee has sought additional information from Departments and ministers regarding answers provided to both the Budget Estimates questionnaire and the questions taken on notice.

1.2 Budget Estimates questionnaire

To facilitate the budget estimates process, the Committee asks all Departments, including Parliamentary Departments to provide information regarding their budget estimates via a response to a questionnaire. The responses to the questionnaires are provided to Committee members prior to Budget Estimates hearings and assists members in understanding major budget initiatives for each portfolio. The questionnaire also assists with the analysis and content of this report.

This year, the Committee sent out its annual Budget Estimates questionnaire to all Departments and ministers on 26 March 2009 and asked that it be completed and returned to the Committee Secretariat by 28 April 2009, one week before budget night and giving each Department one month to finalise questionnaires.

In past years, the responses have been mainly timeline, and provided to the Committee in an advanced draft format, as Departments, the Treasurer and ministers understand that the Committee embargoes the information provided and that the advanced financial information provided would be confirmed following the release of the budget.

This year, no Department submitted its questionnaire to the Committee before the budget was released. The Committee understands that while there is a need for confidentiality prior to the release of the budget, this should be balanced against the Committee Secretariat's need for information to prepare for the budget estimate hearings and the observed in-confidence protocol of advanced draft financial information provided to the Committee Secretariat.

Three Departments submitted their questionnaires to the Committee on the day of their scheduled hearings. One Department provided its questionnaire response a full week after the budget was brought down..

The Committee is disappointed with the lack of timeliness shown by Departments in submitting questionnaires. Proper regard should be given to Parliamentary processes and the need for timely scrutiny in the public interest. Late submissions do not provide Committee members with adequate time to consider the information presented by Departments thereby subverting Parliamentary and public interest as well as impacting on the Committee's secretariat, responsible for collating and distributing completed questionnaires. The Committee considers that Departments in future should make efforts in improving their internal processes adhere to the deadlines provided to the Committee.

1.3 Timeliness of clarification questions

For the *2009-10 Budget Estimates* questionnaire, the Committee sent clarification questions to Departments on 29 July 2009. The Committee asked that Departments respond to these questions by 12 August 2009, giving each Department two weeks to respond. Only the Department of Transport responded to the timeframe set by the Committee. While a number of Departments were a few days late in providing additional information, the Committee noted that four Departments were between 14 and 16 business days late in sending their responses to clarification questions.

The Committee is appreciative that most Departments provided adequate, and in some cases, detailed responses to both the budgets Estimates questionnaire and clarification questions. While in most instances responses were not received in time, the Committee is appreciative that the responses included the information as requested.

The Committee was however disappointed that nearly all Departments except for the Department of Transport provided the Committee with both the Budget Estimates questionnaire and the clarification questions late.

The Committee is of the view that all questions put to Departments in the Budget Estimates questionnaire were reasonable and appropriate. The Committee thanks most Departments for providing the Committee with the relevant information as requested.

This Committee wishes to remind Departments as well as others more generally that it has an oversight role under the *Parliamentary Committees Act 2003* to inquire into, consider and report to the Parliament on the annual estimates and Budget Papers presented to the Parliament. More broadly, the Committee has a role in undertaking on behalf of Parliament inquiries into matters of accountability of Departments and financial and performance of public bodies. It is of course not appropriate for Departments to refuse to provide the Committee with information as requested.

The Committee stresses the importance of ministers and Secretaries ensuring that their Departments and agencies address questions put to them by the Committee fully and provide information requested by the Committee. The Committee will in due course meet with the Secretaries of the Department of Premier and Cabinet and the Department of Treasury and

Finance to discuss these matters, including the development of suitable protocols for timely responses to Committee questionnaires.

1.4 Questions on notice by ministers at Budget Estimates hearings

Questions are taken on notice at public hearings when a witness is not able to provide an immediate answer to a question. At the Budget Estimates hearings, questions were taken on notice by ministers.

A letter was sent to each minister following their hearing outlining the questions that he or she had taken on notice during the Budget Estimates hearing. Each minister was given 30 days from when the letter was issued to provide the Committee with a response.

The Committee wishes to thank a number of ministers and the Presiding Officers, whose responses were received within a reasonable timeframe. The Committee acknowledges the effort in answering questions on notice.

The Committee considers that 30 days provides ministers with sufficient time to answer questions on notice. The Committee was therefore disappointed with a number of ministers who did not provide answers in a timely manner, as such delays put pressure on the Committee's reporting timeframes to Parliament.

To ensure the Committee had the information requested, a review was undertaken of the responses provided by ministers to questions on notice. On the whole, the Committee was pleased with the responses received and made only two follow-up queries of a minor nature.