

Division 17: Small Business Development Corporation, \$15 817 000 —

Mr S.J. Price, Chair.

Mr D.T. Punch, Minister for Regional Development representing the Minister for Small Business.

Mr D. Eaton, Commissioner; Chief Executive Officer.

Mr A. Watt, Director, Corporate Resources; Chief Financial Officer.

Mr T. Palmer, Chief of Staff, Minister for Regional Development.

Mr M. Kavanaugh, Senior Policy Adviser.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIR: The estimates committees will be reported by Hansard and the daily proof will be available online as soon as possible within two business days. The chair will allow as many questions as possible. Questions and answers should be short and to the point. Consideration is restricted to items for which a vote of money is proposed in the consolidated account. Questions must relate to a page number, item or amount related to the current division, and members should preface their questions with those details. Some divisions are the responsibility of more than one minister. Ministers shall be examined only in relation to their portfolio responsibilities.

A minister may agree to provide supplementary information to the committee. I will ask the minister to clearly indicate what information they agree to provide and will then allocate a reference number. Supplementary information should be provided to the principal clerk by noon on Friday, 2 June 2023. If a minister suggests that a matter be put on notice, members should use the online questions on notice system to submit their questions.

I give the call to the member for North West Central.

[7.50 pm]

Ms M. BEARD: My question relates to page 257 and the fourth significant issue impacting the agency, which relates to the ServiceWA app. Can the minister advise the expected time frame for the delivery of the program, and how many business owners are currently using the ServiceWA app for any aspect of their business operations?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: I thank the member. It would be very difficult to find an answer to the question of how many businesses are using the ServiceWA app because it is a very generic app and it has a very large number of registered users. To define which is a small business and which is not would be very difficult, so I do not think we can answer that question. The development of the app specifically for small business will be completed over the next two years.

Ms M. BEARD: Will the e-applications still be available to be completed through other means or will users be required to use the ServiceWA app? Will there be other options for them?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: If it is digital, it will be through the ServiceWA app. Non-digital options will be available for accessing information, of course. Was there a first part to the question?

Ms M. BEARD: No, that was my main query.

I wonder who is leading the project. The budget papers say that it is across government agencies. Who is leading the project, and how is it structured? Is there a steering committee; is there a group driving it?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Small Business Development Corporation is the lead agency, and it is in collaboration with the Departments of the Premier and Cabinet; Treasury; Mines, Industry Regulation and Safety; and other government agencies that engage in small and medium–enterprise approvals.

Ms M. BEARD: How many staff are working directly on the project, and how will it be funded?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: It commences on 1 July. There will be 2.5 FTEs directly engaged in development. Other SBDC staff will assist as required. From a budgetary point of view, there is \$0.523 million in 2023–24 and \$0.531 million in 2024–25.

Ms M. BEARD: I refer to page 260 of budget paper No 2 and access to justice for small to medium enterprises. Referring to note (b), how many businesses have accessed the dispute resolution services, and how many disputes in the last 12 months have been against government agencies or government trading enterprises as opposed to business to business?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Demand has reverted to pre-COVID levels, with an estimated 1 305 inquiries and 650 cases, but that is not broken down according to the data the member has requested.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I refer to page 259 of budget paper No 2, the service and key efficiency indicators; information, guidance, referral and business development services; and footnote (c), which refers to the Business Local service

regional clients and metropolitan workshop clients. How many regional providers of Business Local have expiring contracts to 30 June this year, and how many are expected to go to tender, if any, in 2023–24?

Mr A. Watt: The current contracts for Business Local do not expire until the end of the 2023–24 financial year. Our strategic forward procurement planning with the Department of Finance is to start the tender process before the end of the year and to have that complete by March 2024. As it is a tender, it will be an open public request, and the number of participants in that will not be known until the tender is released.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Will it be an open tender or will existing providers be given some sort of lead-in to a new contract?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: It will be an open tender.

Mr R.S. LOVE: In regard to existing providers, is there a common set of measurements or performance indicators that are known, and are they all examined to make sure they are maintaining the level of service expected throughout each of the various regions?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Yes.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I refer to the provision of outreach support, particularly in areas affected by recent events such as cyclones in the midwest and the Kimberley. Was any additional support provided to any of those regions during recovery times when businesses were under stress?

Mr D. Eaton: I thank the member for the question. The contract for the providers have flexibility in some sorts of events, as the member has alluded to, such as emergency responses not only to supplement the services with the SBDC staff but also to use third-party providers. The contract can be adjusted if the demand is increased. The contract is written with that flexibility in it.

Ms M. BEARD: I refer to page 256 of budget paper No 2, and the line item “Item 47 Net amount appropriated to deliver services” under the heading “Delivery of Services”. Clearly, the figure for 2021–22 was a result of COVID, but it diminishes as we go through to 2026–27. What is the total FTE and headcount currently at SBDC? Is an increase in demand forecast or is it expected to reduce over time?

Mr D. Eaton: We have some adjustments for next year associated with the projects, but the FTEs for the core services are forecast to be reasonably stable, with scalability using technology and so forth so we can deliver more services with similar counts of FTEs.

Ms M. BEARD: Does scaling and the electronic side of things give the ability to deliver more services further into regional areas? Does that increase capacity?

Mr D. Eaton: Yes, it does. In fact, during COVID, there was a shift in the consumption of consumers and small businesses that wanted to use digital and face to face. That sort of trend is continuing and that is what we are forecasting our plans on.

Ms M. BEARD: Will that allow the SBDC to market to all those people who do not know about the fabulous service?

Mr D. Eaton: Yes, that is correct. It is our intention to reach more people, with greater visibility, using the digital channel to deliver services.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I refer to page 258 and the business migration visa process. There was a period when that was interrupted. Can the minister give me some idea whether he thinks that program will now pick up again; and, if so, what is being done to promote it?

The CHAIR: Sorry, minister, that is the end of the time that has been allocated for these divisions.

The appropriation was recommended.

[8.00 pm]