



5 February 2024

Parliamentary Budget Office Activity Report

Contents

At a glance.....	1
Parliamentarian requests.....	3
Self-initiated program.....	8
Election preparedness	9
External engagement.....	9
People and systems	10
Concluding summary	11
Attachment A: 2023-24 Self-Initiated Program	12

At a glance

This report provides an update on Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) activities since the last activity report published on 16 October 2023. Key highlights include:

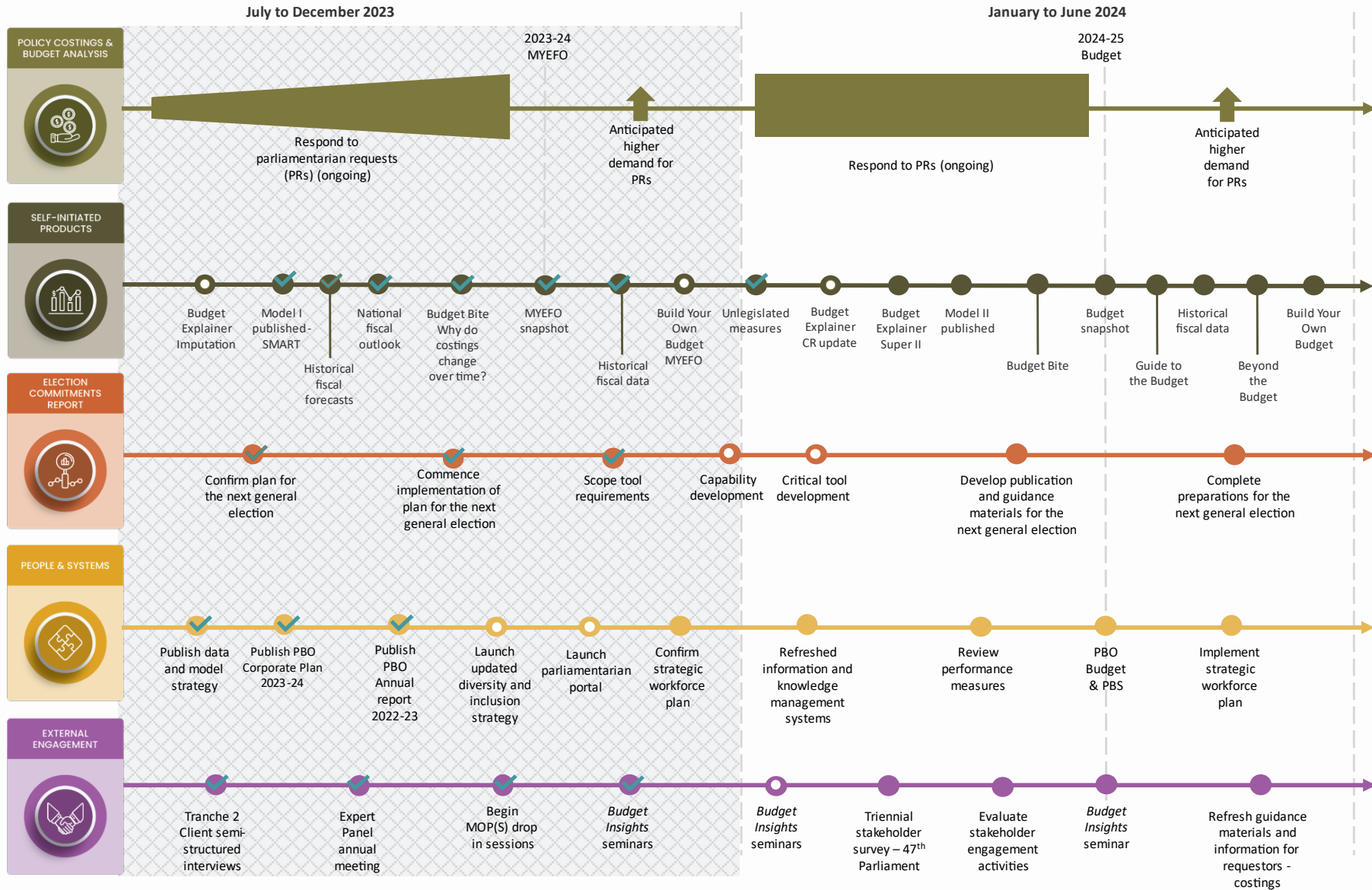
- Costing demand remains strong. In the 3 months to 31 December 2023, we received 702 request options and completed 347. Median time to completion increased from 14 days (target 15 days) to 16 days from the first quarter to the second quarter.
- We released 6 self-initiated publications, including a consultation draft of an experimental tool called *Small model of Australian representative taxpayers (SMART)* that allows users to adjust various personal income tax policy settings using a simple interface.
- We also continue to explore new ways to improve users' ability to explore budget issues visually on our website. In particular, we developed a completely new set of interactive charts for the *2023-24 National Fiscal Outlook* and *2023-24 Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO) Snapshot*. This replaced what had previously only been static graphs.
- We completed 14 roadshows with Commonwealth agencies which were attended by over 600 staff to improve their understanding of the work of the PBO and how to respond to PBO requests for information.

PLANNED ACTIVITIES BY FUNCTION

JULY 2023 TO JUNE 2024

LEGEND

- ✔ Activity complete
- Activity commenced



Our activities in detail

This report provides an update on our key activities since our previous activity report, published on 16 October 2023. Reporting is generally on a quarterly basis to 31 December 2023 with detail up to 2 February 2024 where relevant. This supports transparency about how we are delivering against the priorities in our [corporate plan](#). More information is in our [annual report](#) and previous [activity reports](#).

- The PBO’s purpose is to inform the Parliament by providing independent and non-partisan analysis of the budget cycle, fiscal policy and the financial implications of proposals.

Parliamentarian requests

We continue to experience strong demand for costing and budget analysis services. In the 3 months to 31 December 2023, we received a total of 702 request options from parliamentarians and completed 347 (Table 1). This is considerably higher than the previous quarter, and nearly the same amount as for all of 2022-23. Demand is also stronger than we would usually expect at this point in the parliamentary cycle, as shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Preliminary analysis of January activity shows we received 36 request options and completed 161.

Table 1: Costing and budget analysis request performance to 31 December 2023

	19-20 total	20-21 total	21-22 total	22-23 total	23-24 Q1	23-24 Q2
Request options outstanding at the start of period	20	40	343	35	86	100
Request options received in period	332	1,253	3,241 ^(a)	786	259	702
Request options completed in period	279	813	2,550 ^(a)	721	240	347
Average time to completion (business days)	27	31	29	15	14	18
Median time to completion (business days)	25	35	18	14	14	16
Request options withdrawn in period	33	137	999 ^(b)	14	5	16
Request options outstanding at the end of period	40	343	35	86	100	439

Note, the table identifies the number of ‘options’ received by the PBO, noting that a single request can contain multiple options. The number of options for a request is assessed as part of confirming the exact specification of the request while it is being worked on. This can mean that the option counts for requests received and on hand can vary between quarterly reports. The number of completed options should not change between quarterly reports.

a) This includes 316 costings prepared for the 2022 Election commitments report. 314 costings were for commitments by parties and 2 additional costings were for interactions between policies.

b) Most of these requests were automatically withdrawn due to the expiration of the 46th Parliament in accordance with the PBO’s legislative mandate which does not allow for requests to carry over between parliaments.

Figure 1: Number of completed request options from parliamentarians

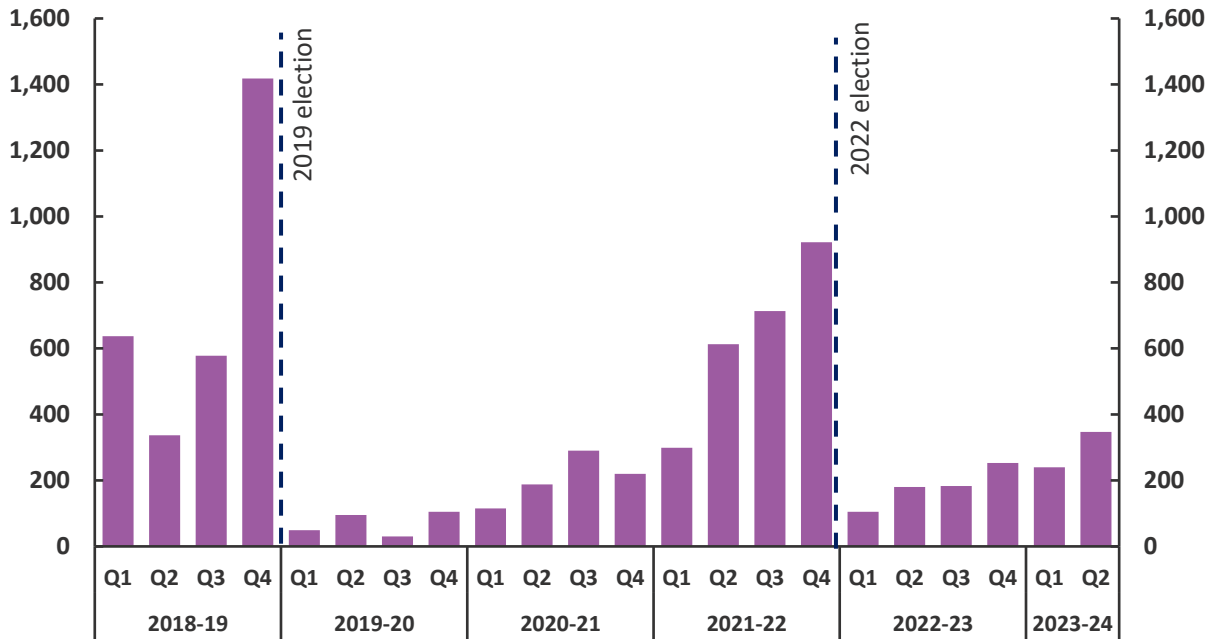
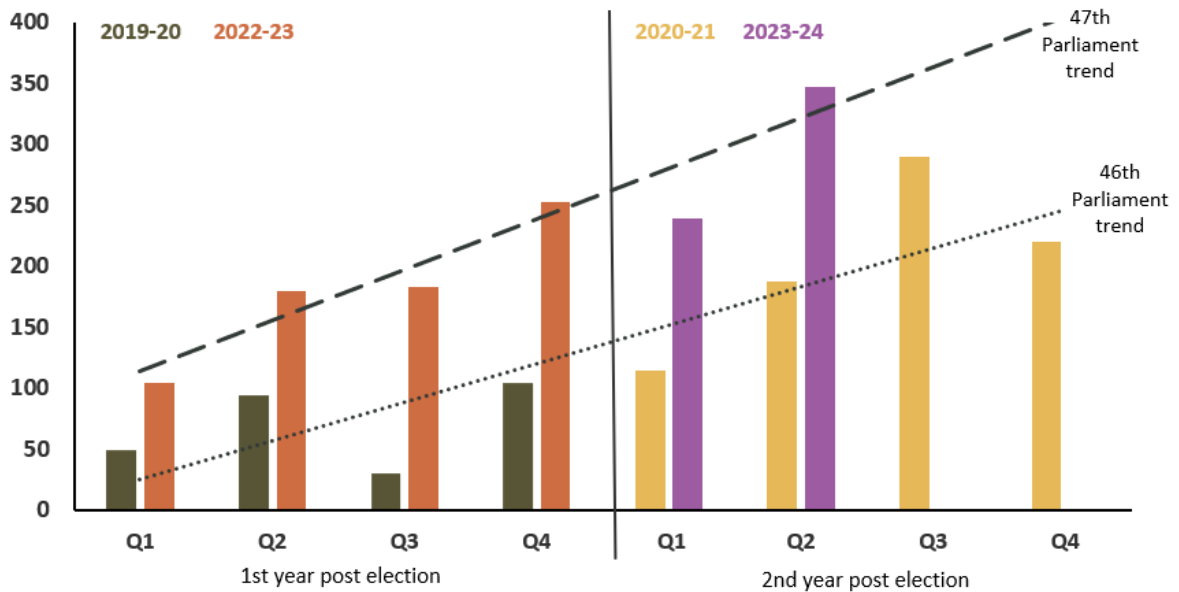
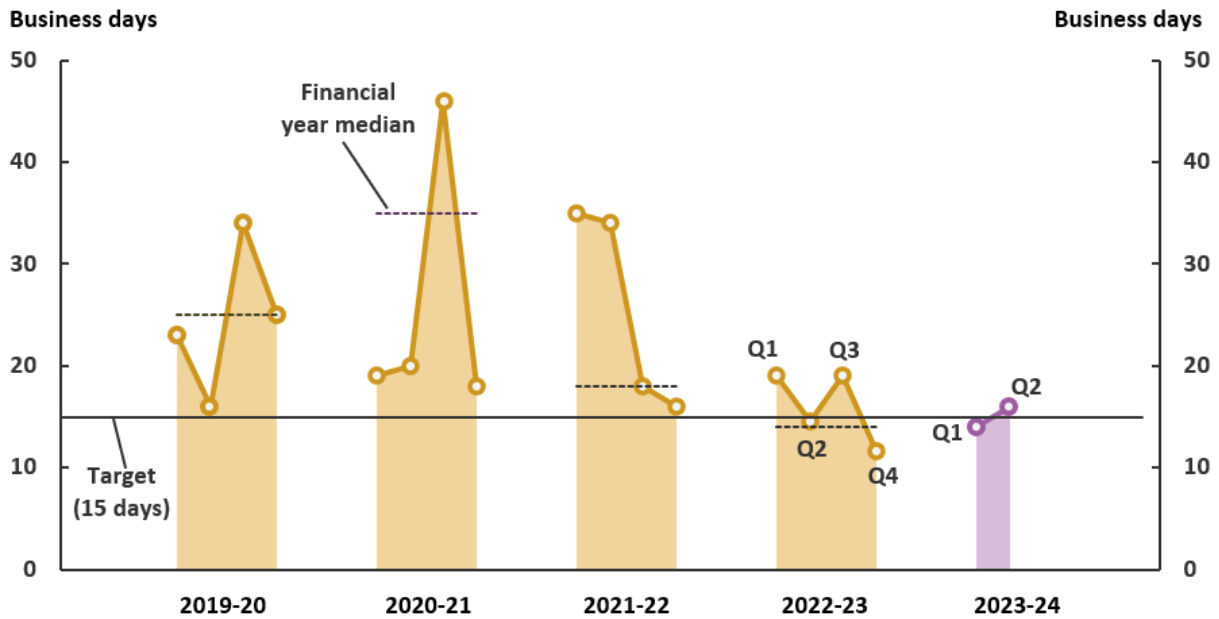


Figure 2: Number of completed request options from parliamentarians for the same period of the parliamentary cycle, 2020-21 against 2023-24



Reflecting these higher volumes, our time to completion has increased this quarter. After 2 consecutive quarters of delivering below our 15-business day target, our median delivery time in the 3 months to 31 December 2023 increased to 16-business days (Figure 3, Table 1). The time taken to complete request options reflects a variety of factors including the volume of requests we have on hand, their priority and complexity, as well as the availability of staff.

Figure 3: Median response time for policy costing and budget analysis requests



A key driver of the time to completion is whether the PBO needs to source information from agencies to complete the request. Agencies usually have 10 days to provide information to the PBO. Average and median time to completion statistics are significantly shorter where an information request is not required (Table 2).

Table 2: Completed costing and budget analysis requests, disaggregated by whether the request required an associated information request

	22-23 Q1	22-23 Q2	22-23 Q3	22-23 Q4	22-23 total	23-24 Q1	23-24 Q2
Request options completed	105	180	183	253	721	240	347
<i>With information requests</i>	42	63	70	45	220	102	84
<i>Without information requests</i>	63	117	113	208	501	138	263
Percentage with information requests	40%	35%	38%	18%	31%	43%	24%
Average time to completion (business days)	20	14	19	12	15	14	18
<i>With information requests</i>	19	21	27	17	22	19	27
<i>Without information requests</i>	20	11	14	11	13	11	15
Median time to completion (business days)	19	15	19	10	14	14	16
<i>With information requests</i>	15	22	23	17	22	19	23
<i>Without information requests</i>	20	9	14	10	10	9	13

Note: the table identifies the number of 'options' received by the PBO, noting that a single request can contain multiple options.

Requests by the PBO for information from agencies

Information requests are usually answered in 10 days, with complex requests sometimes taking longer (Table 3).

Table 3: Responses to PBO information requests

	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	Q1 2023-24	Q2 2023-24
Responses received in period	549	175	523	538	354	54	88
Percentage received on time (%)	98	99	99	99	99	96	97
Avg response time (business days)	7	12	11	6	10	10	8

Note: Avg response time excludes agency standing information requests without due dates.

In preparing this report we re-examined metadata for the first quarter of 2023-24 and recalculated the number of responses received to ensure consistency with the metadata used for the second quarter of 2022-23. This has led to an upwards revision of 4 requests received and a downward revision of 1 day in average response time.

In the second quarter, the PBO undertook 14 Commonwealth agency roadshows to inform staff on responding to PBO requests for information and on our use of agency information. The roadshows were attended by over 600 staff, strengthening PBO's relationships with agencies and improving the provision of information and models to the PBO to support costing and budget analysis.

Table 4 provides the breakdown of responsiveness for individual agencies for the period 1 October 2023 to 31 December 2023. While there were 3 late responses, they were not significantly delayed. The PBO negotiates extensions to agencies to complete requests where relevant.

Table 4: Information request responsiveness by agencies: 1 October 2023 to 31 December 2023

Commonwealth entity	Responses received in period	Average of time taken to respond (business days)	Responses received after due date	% late
Attorney-General's Department	5	8	0	0%
Australian Taxation Office	10	3	0	0%
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry	1	15	0	0%
Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water	2	9	0	0%
Department of Defence	2	12	0	0%
Department of Education	11	7	0	0%
Department of Employment and Workplace Relations	5	5	0	0%
Department of Finance	11	6	0	0%
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade	1	10	0	0%
Department of Health and Aged Care	4	8	0	0%
Department of Home Affairs	5	15	2	40%
Department of Industry, Science and Resources	3	13	1	33%
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications and the Arts	3	13	0	0%
Department of Social Services	7	7	0	0%
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet	2	13	0	0%
Department of the Treasury	3	10	0	0%

Table 4 (continued): Information request responsiveness by agencies: 1 October 2023 to 31 December 2023

Department of Veterans Affairs	1	10	0	0%
Hearing Australia	1	5	0	0%
National Disability Insurance Agency	1	5	0	0%
National Indigenous Australians Agency	2	12	0	0%
Services Australia	8	6	0	0%
Total	88	8	3	3%

Publicly referenced parliamentary requests and parliamentary/party announcements

Table 5 shows parliamentary requests that were publicly referenced in the period from 1 October 2023 to 31 December 2023¹. The items listed include references to costings or analysis announced by a parliamentarian or party, whether or not the associated request minute has been publicly released. Of the 4 costings that were publicly referenced, 3 (75%) related to costings that were either public at the time or subsequently released.

Table 5: Costings or budget analysis publicly referenced and the method of release between 1 October 2023 and 31 December 2023

Description of policy	Party or parliamentarian*	Method	Date of public reference	Date response completed	Date of PBO release
Accelerating Household Electrification	Ms Allegra Spender MP	Print, online, radio	4 Oct 2023	18 Aug 2023	4 Oct 2023
Official Development Assistance	The Hon Peter Dutton MP	Online, interview	26 Oct 2023	21 Jul 2023	26 Oct 2023
Legalisation of Vaping Products	Senator the Hon Matt Canavan	Print, online	31 Oct 2023	29 Jun 2023	29 Jun 2023
Cost of recovery 750 gegalitres of water	Senator Perin Davey	Print, online	27 Nov 2023	n/a	Not released

Note: While the PBO endeavours to capture all policy announcements that reference PBO costings, there may be announcements missing from the table above, for example, because the announcement was not reflected in any media monitored by the PBO.

*Party or parliamentarian who made the public statement, the party or parliamentarian who requested the costing or analysis.

PBO responses to parliamentary requests are usually confidential, except for those prepared for parliamentary committees. If a requestor asks the PBO to publicly release their request, it is subsequently published on the PBO website.

The following request response was publicly released, but not referenced by the media:

- *Various policy options for reforming Commonwealth subsidies of dental services* (advised provided to Select Committee into the Provision of and Access to Dental, released on 30 November 2023).

¹ Note that previous versions of this table reported costings referenced for the first time only. The methodology has been updated to now include all references in the quarter, irrespective of when the costing or analysis was first mentioned.

Over January 2024, a further 3 costings were publicly released by Mr Adam Bandt MP related to Stage 3 tax cuts. All were referenced in the media.

Correcting the record

We routinely monitor references to the PBO in media articles to ensure we, and the information or advice we prepared, are referenced correctly. Our policy for correcting the record is on our [website](#).

Since 1 July 2023, we have requested a correction on less than 10 occasions. In a very small number of cases, corrections were not made but we determined they were not of sufficient materiality to warrant further public action by the PBO.

We report this information at an aggregate level for transparency while maintaining confidentiality.

Self-initiated program

We retain flexibility within our self-initiated work program and periodically re-evaluate our priorities, given available resources. Our projects explore the following themes:

- fiscal sustainability
- medium- and long-term fiscal risks
- improving understanding of the budget
- distributional analysis.

The following self-initiated publications have been released since the last activity report:

- *Budget Bite: Why do costings change?* (26 October 2023)
- *2023-24 National Fiscal Outlook* (31 October 2023)
- *2023-24 Mid-year economic and fiscal outlook (MYEFO) snapshot* (13 December 2023)
- Historical fiscal data – MYEFO update (15 December 2023)
- *Small model of Australian representative taxpayers (SMART)* (18 December 2023).
- Unlegislated measures tracker (1 February 2024)

A list of publications in the year to date, and planned publications for 2023-24 is at Attachment A.

A focus for publications this year has been on data visualisation, leveraging the functionality of our website to make key fiscal updates more accessible and engaging. The *National Fiscal Outlook* and *MYEFO snapshot* each included a suite of interactive charts, enabling the reader to freely explore different aspects of the data.

We have also sought to publish tools to enable users to interrogate the impacts of changes in key fiscal settings. *Build Your Own Budget* enables the user to change economic parameters, revenue and expenditure program levels by using a downloadable excel spreadsheet.

In December 2023, we launched the consultation draft of a tool that enables users to change income tax rates and thresholds, to enable finer analysis than can be achieved with BYOB. The SMART tool is built using the *R* programming language, which is well-suited for user-interface tools. SMART is an innovative approach to modelling with large datasets which finds a balance between usability and analytical rigour.

The Budget Bite, *Why do costings change?* is an accessible introduction to the sometimes confusing way in which budget numbers evolve with the economic and fiscal context.

Election preparedness

Planning continues in anticipation of the next general election. Since the last Activity Report, the focus has been on scoping ICT requirements and developing the workforce strategy to ensure we have staff with the right skills and experience to support an effective election process.

External engagement

A key priority for the PBO is to enhance our interactions with parliamentarians, their staff, and committees. We are committed to continual improvement in our service delivery and to making our work accessible to our audience.

As the year drew to a close, we commenced our *Budget Insights* 'drop-in' sessions, giving parliamentarians and their staff an opportunity to drop past with any questions about our services. We held the sessions in the final week of sitting, and a number of staff used the sessions to explore questions about our services as well as about specific tools and documents. We will be holding more drop-in sessions in 2024 although parliamentarians and staff are welcome to call, email or come past our office at any time.

On Friday 8 December 2023, we held our annual Commonwealth Agency meeting with partners attending in person at Australian Parliament House and virtually via GovTEAMS. PBO staff presented highlights from the past year and spoke about our forward work program for 2024 before opening the session for questions and roundtable discussion. A key area of interest was PBO operations during the next Federal Election. We plan to hold another meeting around mid-year ensure all agencies understand expectations during the caretaker period and for the delivery of the Election Commitments Report.

Triennial Stakeholder Survey

To ensure we remain relevant to our stakeholders, we conduct a stakeholder survey once in each term of Parliament. The responses from this survey provides a measure of how the PBO is performing and provides insight to areas for improvement.

Work has commenced on the survey for the 47th Parliament which will occur in the first half of 2024. Due to this survey being in the field, we will pause our program of semi-structured stakeholder interviews during this time.

Digital engagement statistics

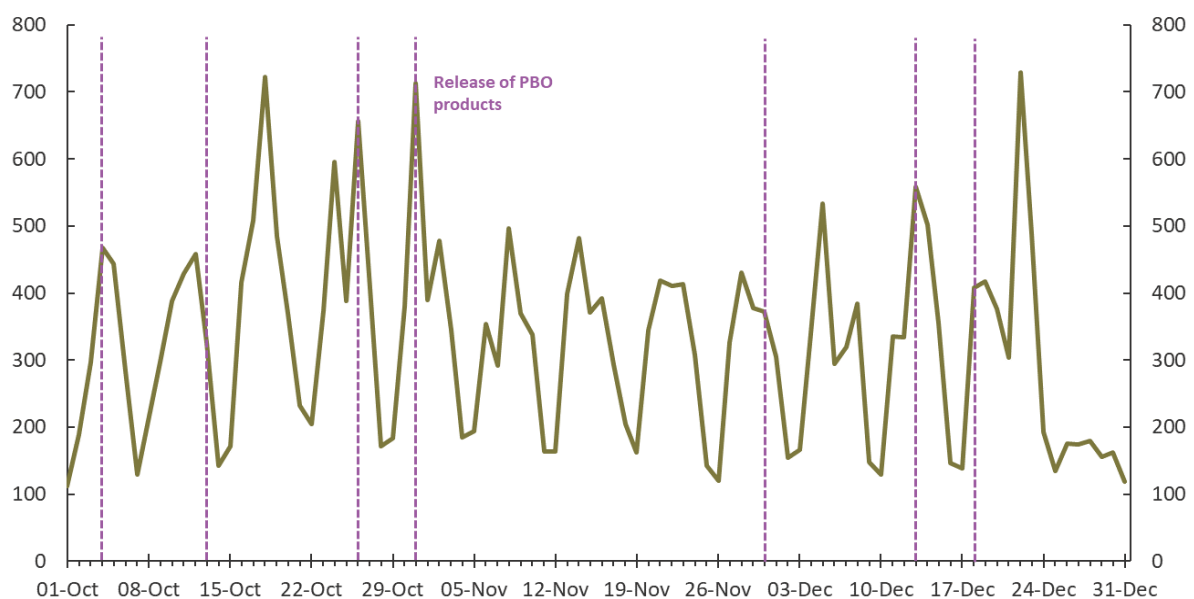
Interest in our products can be seen through webpage view statistics. These figures, together with relevant dates, are shown in Figure 4. The largest peak in the period since the last Activity Report coincided with the release of the *SMART* online tool. *SMART* was released on 18 December 2023. A media article mentioning the tool was published across Australian Metro Mastheads on 22 December 2023 and likely contributed to the peak. The release of *2023-24 National Fiscal Outlook* also generated a significant number of webpage views (Table 6).

Table 6: Website analytics - Top performing web pages (November 2023 – January 2024)

Web page title	Views	Average time*
1. Stage 3 tax cuts distributional analysis (parliamentarian request)	11,496	2:04
2. Fuel taxation in Australia	2,352	4:38
3. Small Model of Australian Representative Taxpayers (SMART)	1,678	4:32
4. 2023-24 National fiscal outlook	1,325	3:38
5. 2023-24 Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO) Snapshot	1,216	4:34
6. Online budget glossary	1,154	3:56
7. Build you own budget	1,067	4:14

* Adjusted for bounce rate

Figure 4: Overview of webpage views and release of PBO products



People and systems

We continue to invest in our people and systems to build depth, drive efficiency and improve resilience. A key focus is to maintain a high-performing team culture and to embed an agile arrangement where all technical teams are involved in completing parliamentarian requests, engagement and self-initiated activity, promoting cross-team collaboration and operational flexibility.

Since the last report we have developed and published our action plan to respond to feedback from the 2023 APS Census. We have also completed our review of our Diversity Policy.

Staffing

At 1 February 2024, we had 43 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff and a headcount of 46. In 2023–24, we estimate an average staffing level (ASL) of 44.

We are continuing to participate in the Parliament of Australia graduate program. During the 2022-23 round the PBO had 6 successful graduate placements. The PBO will engage 9 graduates through the 2023-24 round working across all areas of the agency.

The PBO is finalising a new Workforce Strategy to ensure its people capability over the next 5 years. The Strategy's objectives will be aligned with other PBO goals and forward budgets for maximum benefit. The Strategy will guide work on areas such as leadership and staff engagement. In the short-term, planning is underway to ensure people capability needs are met for the next Election Commitments Report.

Review into Parliamentary culture

We continued to participate in Implementation Group activity to respond to the recommendations of the Jenkins Review. The focus has been on completing the final annual report for the Group.

Information and communication technology (ICT) capability

The PBO operates in a modern, collaborative, and integrated cloud-based ICT environment. We continue to work with the Department of Parliamentary Services (DPS) – our ICT provider – to ensure technology meets our business needs.

We are working with DPS on a parliamentarian portal that allows authorised users to submit, manage, and download costings and budget analysis requests. This will be supported by real-time management of status and prioritisation of requests. Further refinement following user testing is required and will continue through the first half of 2024.

Concluding summary

The PBO continues to experience strong demand for its services compared to the same period after the previous election. We will continue to update our systems, and technology, with the aim of enhancing our relationships with parliamentarians, while building our interactive tools and refreshing our staffing and capability plans.

Attachment A: 2023-24 Self-initiated Program – published and planned

Title of publication	Publication		Fiscal update or other
	Planned	Actual	
Quarter 4			
<i>Beyond the budget 2024-25: Fiscal outlook and scenarios</i>	End June 2024		Fiscal
<i>Build Your own budget: 2024-25 Budget</i>	End June 2024		Fiscal
<i>Budget Explainer: How is super taxed? Part 2</i>	Q4		Other
<i>Guide to the 2024-25 Budget</i>	May 2024		Fiscal
<i>2024-25 Budget snapshot</i>	May 2024		Fiscal
<i>Historical fiscal data</i>	May 2024		Fiscal
Quarter 3			
<i>Build your own budget – MYEFO Update</i>	Q3		Fiscal
<i>Budget Explainer: Dividend Imputation</i>	Q3		Other
<i>Budget Explainer – Contingency Reserve 2024 Update</i>	Q3		Other
<i>Unlegislated measures tracker</i>	Q3	1 February 2024	Other
Quarter 2			
<i>Historical fiscal data – MYEFO Update</i>	December 2023	15 December 2023	Fiscal
<i>2023-24 MYEFO snapshot</i>	December 2023	13 December 2023	Fiscal
<i>SMART Model – Consultation Draft</i>	Q2	18 December 2023	Other
<i>National Fiscal Outlook 2023-24</i>	October 2023	31 October 2023	Fiscal
<i>Budget Bite: Why do costings change?</i>	Q2	26 October 2023	Other
Quarter 1			
<i>Historical Fiscal Forecasts</i>	-	13 September 2023	Other