



21 May 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 .....	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 5 February 2024. Key highlights include:

- Demand for costing and analytical services continues to be strong. In the 3 months to 31 March 2024, we received 308 request options and completed 694. Median time to completion was 14 days in total (target of 15 days). Demand is expected to continue to grow as we approach the election.
- We published a budget explainer on the contingency reserve, issued a MYEFO update on the *Build your own budget* tool and released a suite of products for the 2024-25 Budget including a set of interactive charts, the *Guide to 24-25 Budget*, and a historical fiscal data series update.
- We launched the 47<sup>th</sup> Parliament triennial stakeholder survey and held webinars and drop-in sessions through our *Budget Insights* program. We have also participated in a number of engagements with international parliaments and independent fiscal institutions.
- We continue to build the capacity and capability of our workforce with a particular focus on our preparedness for the next general election.

# PLANNED ACTIVITIES BY FUNCTION

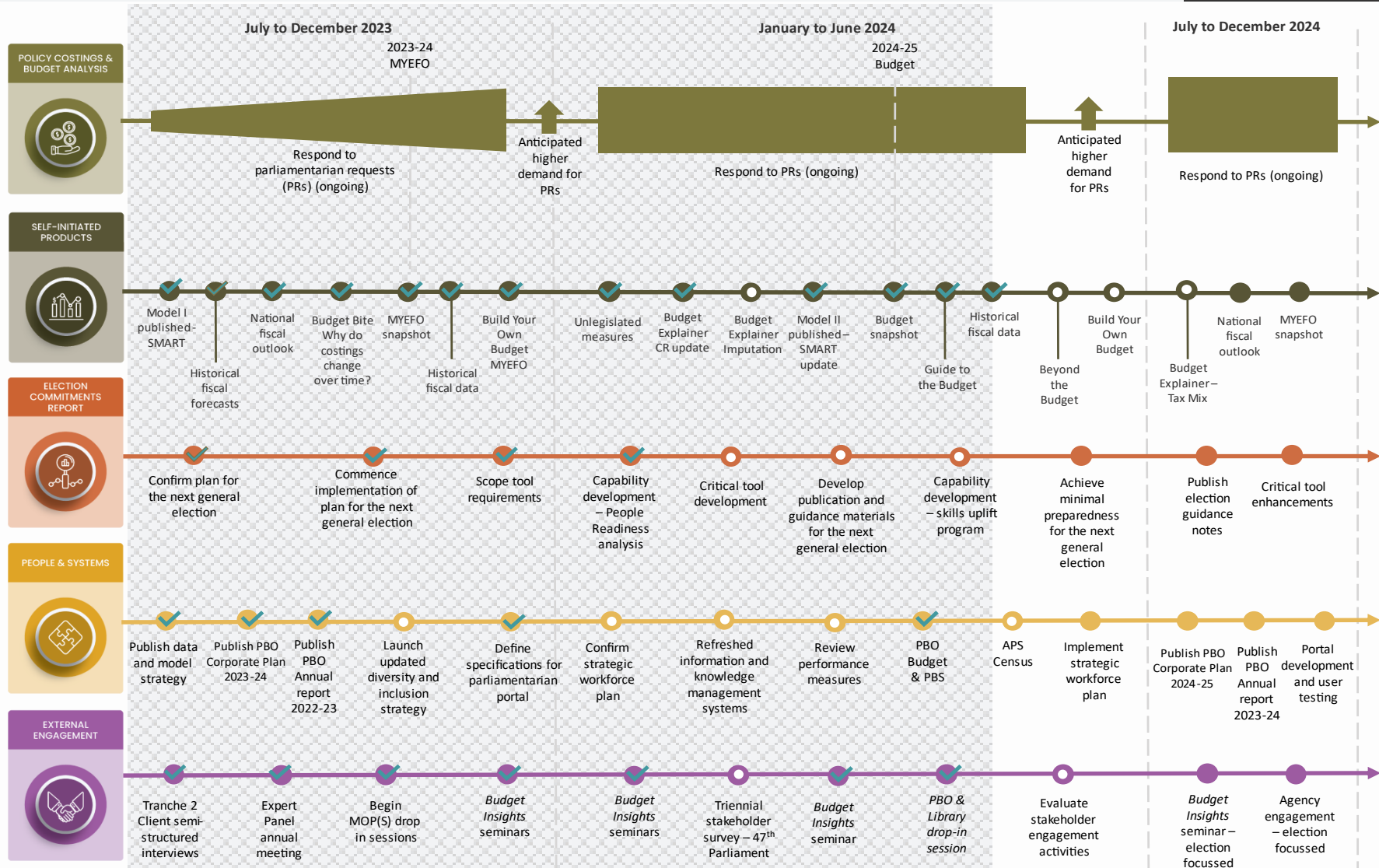
JULY 2023 TO DECEMBER 2024



Parliamentary Budget Office

**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 5 February 2024. Reporting is generally on a quarterly basis to 31 March 2024 with detail up to 17 May 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](#).

### Parliamentarian requests

We continue to experience strong demand for costing and budget analysis services (see Table 1 and Figure 1). Whilst overall new requests in quarter 3 were not as high as quarter 2, the completed request options were significantly higher, reducing the overall stock of requests on hand at the end of the quarter. This reflected a decision to prioritise responding to requests during the quarter.

Preliminary analysis of April activity shows we received 121 request options and completed 147.

**Table 1: Costing and budget analysis request performance to 31 March 2024**

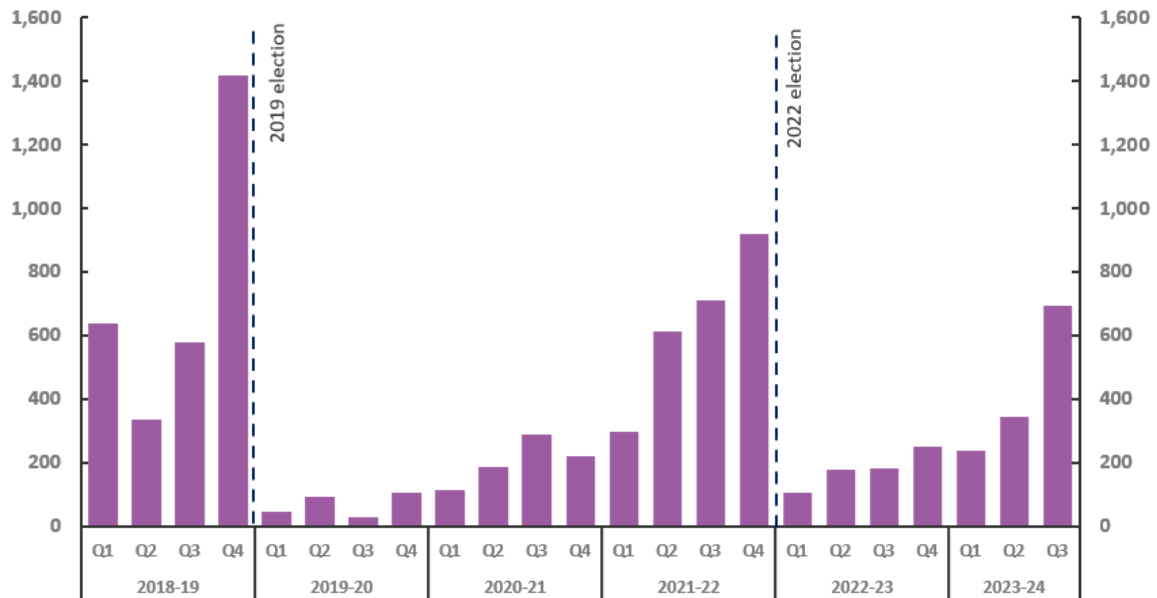
	19-20 total	20-21 total	21-22 total	22-23 total	23-24 Q1	23-24 Q2	23-24 Q3
<b>Request options outstanding at the start of period</b>	20	40	343	35	87 <sup>(c)</sup>	104 <sup>(c)</sup>	635 <sup>(d)</sup>
<b>Request options received in period</b>	332	1,253	3,241 <sup>(a)</sup>	787	262 <sup>(c)</sup>	894 <sup>(c)</sup>	308 <sup>(d)</sup>
<b>Request options completed in period</b>	279	813	2,550 <sup>(a)</sup>	721	240	347	694
<b>Average time to completion (business days)</b>	27	31	29	15	14	18	19
<b>Median time to completion (business days)</b>	25	35	18	14	14	16	14
<b>Request options withdrawn in period</b>	33	137	999 <sup>(b)</sup>	14	5	16	8
<b>Request options outstanding at the end of period</b>	40	343	35	86	104 <sup>(c)</sup>	635 <sup>(c)</sup>	241 <sup>(d)</sup>

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

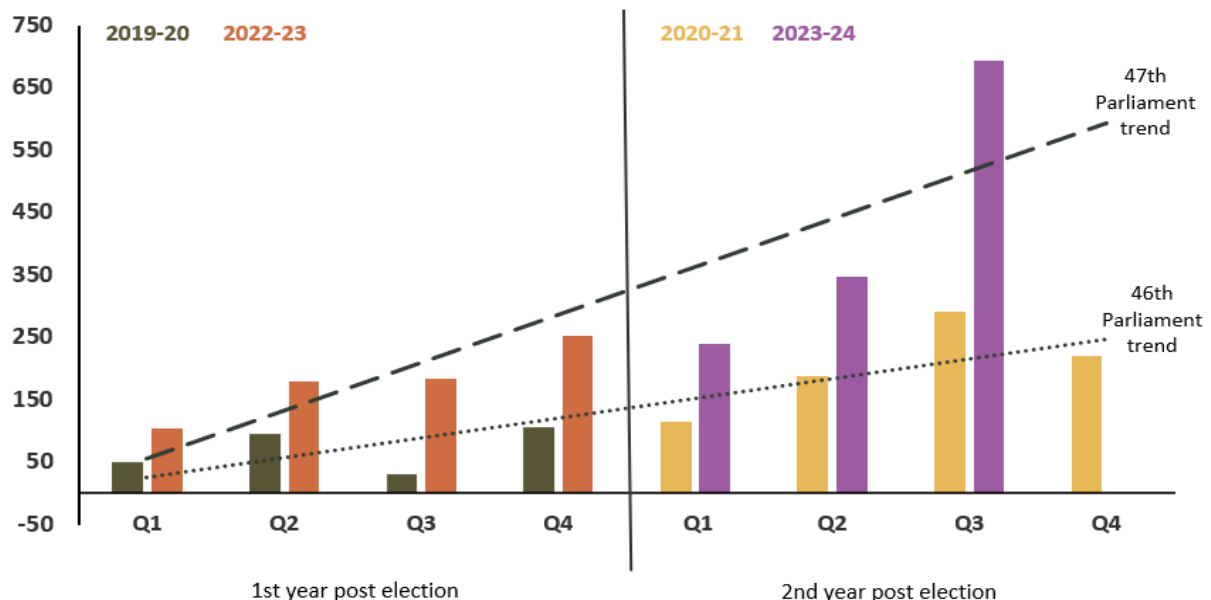
- This includes 316 costings prepared for the 2022 Election commitments report. 314 costings were for commitments by parties and 2 additional costings were for interactions between policies.
- Most of these requests were automatically withdrawn due to the expiration of the 46th Parliament in accordance with the PBO's legislative mandate which does not allow for requests to carry over between parliaments.
- Since the last report, we have re-examined metadata for the previous 2 quarters of 2023-24 and recalculated the number of options for requests that were outstanding or received and have since been completed. This has led to the following changes to (i) outstanding options at the beginning of the period for Q1 revised upward from 86 to 87 and for Q2 from 100 to 104 (ii) options received in the period for Q1 were revised upward from 259 to 262, and in Q2 from 702 to 894 and (iii) outstanding options at the end of the period for Q1 revised upward from 100 to 104 and for Q2 from 439 to 635. The significant increase in Q2 figures for (ii) and (iii) reflects the high volume of requests received late in Q2 with the default metadata on options set to 1, that has since been revised as the request was actioned.
- This is a preliminary number based on an initial assessment of the number of options involved in each parliamentarian request and is subject change on completion of the costing.

Demand continues to be stronger than we would usually expect at this point in the parliamentary cycle, as highlighted in Figure 2. We expect demand to continue to escalate in the year ahead in anticipation of the general election expected in 2024-25. With higher volumes, it will be challenging to maintain our service levels for parliamentarian requests as well as meet our publication and election related responsibilities.

**Figure 1: Number of completed request options from parliamentarians**

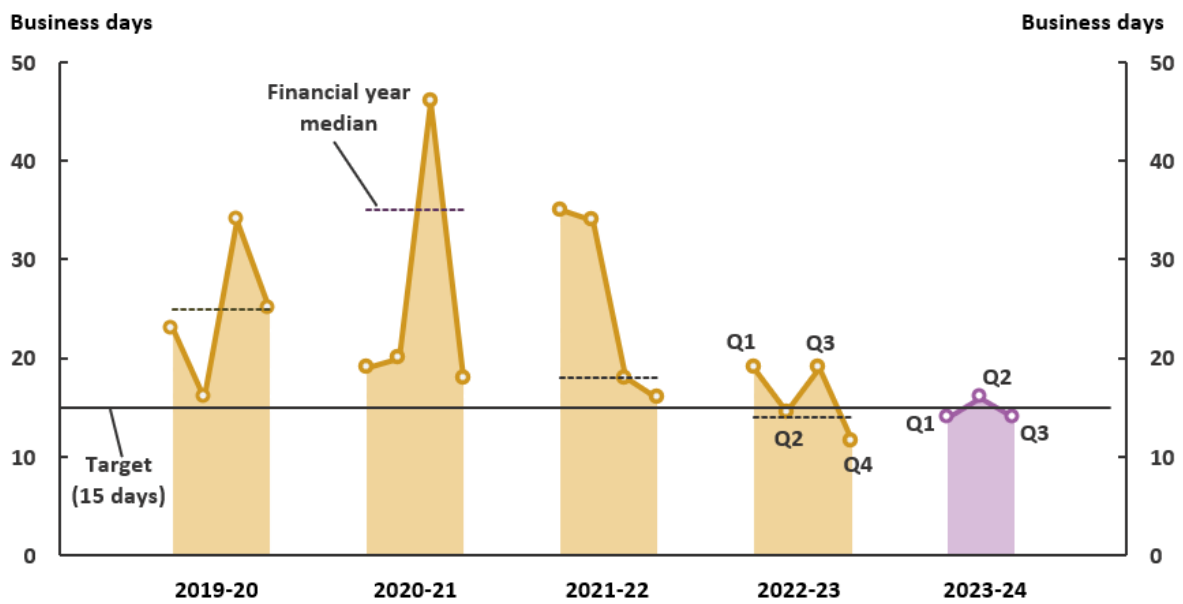


**Figure 2: Number of completed request options from parliamentarians for the same period of the parliamentary cycle, 2020-21 against 2023-24**



Despite continued strong demand, our median time for completion of parliamentarian requests in quarter 3 decreased to 14 business days, just below our performance benchmark of 15 days (Figure 3). 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).

The proportion of request responses that needed an information request during quarter 3 dropped to its lowest level since quarter 4 in 2022-23, but the time to complete those that required an information request, was the longest recorded at 36 days.

**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	23-24 Q3
<b>Request options completed</b>	105	180	183	253	721	240	347	694
<i>With information requests</i>	42	63	70	45	220	102	84	136
<i>Without information requests</i>	63	117	113	208	501	138	263	558
<b>Percentage with information requests</b>	40%	35%	38%	18%	31%	43%	24%	20%
<b>Average time to completion (business days)</b>	20	14	19	12	15	14	18	19
<i>With information requests</i>	19	21	27	17	22	19	27	36
<i>Without information requests</i>	20	11	14	11	13	11	15	15
<b>Median time to completion (business days)</b>	19	15	19	10	14	14	16	14
<i>With information requests</i>	15	22	23	17	22	19	23	36
<i>Without information requests</i>	20	9	14	10	10	9	13	7

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

Table 3 shows the time taken by agencies to respond to information requests. Requests are usually answered in 10 days, with complex requests sometimes taking longer (Table 3).

**Table 3: Agency responses to PBO information requests**

	18-19 total	19-20 total	20-21 total	21-22 total	22-23 total	23-24 Q1	23-24 Q2	23-24 Q3
Responses received in period	549	175	523	538	354	54	88	100
Percentage received on time (%)	98	99	99	99	99	96	97	99
Average response time (business days)	7	12	11	6	10	10	8	15

Note: Average 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.

Table 4 provides the breakdown of responsiveness for individual agencies for the period 1 January 2024 to 31 March 2024. While there was 1 late response, it was not significantly delayed. The PBO negotiates extensions to agencies to complete requests where it is appropriate to do so.

**Table 4: Information request responsiveness by agencies: 1 January 2024 to 31 March 2024**

Commonwealth entity	Responses received in period	Average of time taken to respond (business days)	Responses received after due date	% late
Australian Competition and Consumer Commission	1	10	0	0%
Australian Prudential Regulation Authority	1	1	0	0%
Australian Taxation Office	4	11	0	0%
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry	1	10	0	0%
Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water	2	12	0	0%
Department of Defence	4	16	0	0%
Department of Education	6	9	0	0%
Department of Employment and Workplace Relations	1	14	0	0%
Department of Finance	12	12	0	0%
Department of Health and Aged Care	14	10	0	0%
Department of Home Affairs	3	19	0	0%
Department of Industry, Science and Resources	1	19	0	0%
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications and the Arts	3	15	1	33%
Department of Social Services	22	20	0	0%
Department of the House of Representatives	1	5	0	0%
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet	1	11	0	0%
Department of the Senate	1	4	0	0%
Department of the Treasury	6	16	0	0%
Department of Veterans Affairs	12	19	0	0%
Independent Parliamentary Expenses Authority	1	14	0	0%

**Table 4: (continued) Information request responsiveness by agencies: 1 January 2024 to 31 March 2024**

Commonwealth entity	Responses received in period	Average of time taken to respond (business days)	Responses received after due date	% late
National Indigenous Australians Agency	1	15	0	0%
Services Australia	2	8	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1%</b>

### Publicly released parliamentary requests referenced in the public debate

Table 5 shows parliamentary requests that were publicly released in the period from 1 January 2024 to 17 May 2024. Of the 7 costings that were publicly released, 5 (71%) were referenced in the media or other relevant sources.

**Table 5: Costings or budget analysis publicly released and referenced between 1 January and 17 May 2024**

Description of policy	Party or parliamentarian	Date of PBO release	Number of references	Media type
Distributional analysis of the Stage 3 tax cuts	Mr Adam Bandt MP	23 January 2024	31	Parliamentary speech, print, online, radio, media release
Underlying cash balance impact of Stage 3 tax cuts	Mr Adam Bandt MP	23 January 2024	7	Print, online
Labor's revised Stage 3 tax cuts: distributional analysis	Mr Adam Bandt MP	31 January 2024	38	Parliamentary speech, print, online, radio
Public property developer	Mr Adam Bandt MP	7 March 2024	44	Print, online, radio, television, media release
Tax exemption for university foreign students information	Senator Gerard Rennick	22 March 2024	0	n/a
Policy reform options for negative gearing and capital gains tax	Senator David Pocock, Senator Jacqui Lambie	23 April 2024	39	Print, online, radio, television, media release
Increase to the rate of the major bank levy by 10 percent	Senator the Hon Matt Canavan	15 May 2024	0	n/a

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.

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.

### Correcting the record

We routinely monitor references to the PBO in media articles to ensure we, and the information or advice we prepared, are not misrepresented and referenced correctly. Our policy for correcting the record is on our [website](#).

Since 1 July 2023, we have requested a correction on around 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 themes of: fiscal sustainability, medium- and long-term fiscal risks, improving understanding of the budget, and distributional analysis.

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

- *Build your own budget: 2023-24 MYEFO update* (26 March 2024)
- *Budget Explainer: Contingency reserve update* (24 April 2024)
- *Small model of Australian representative taxpayers* (SMART) – full launch (2 May 2024)
- *2024-25 Budget snapshot* (14 May 2024) - interactive 2024-25 Budget chart highlights
- *Guide to the 2024-25 Budget* (15 May 2024)
- *Historical fiscal data – 2024-25 Budget update* (16 May 2024).

In the year to date, we have published 13 items, with a plan to publish 17 in total. A list of publications in the year to date, and planned publications for 2023-24 is at Attachment A.

We continue to focus on data visualisation, leveraging the functionality of our website to make key fiscal updates more accessible and engaging. The *2024-25 Budget snapshot* included a suite of interactive charts, enabling the reader to freely explore different aspects of the data.

We also publish tools to enable users to interrogate the impacts of changes in key fiscal settings. *Build your own budget* (updated in March for the 2023-24 MYEFO) enables the user to change economic parameters, revenue and expenditure program levels by using a downloadable excel spreadsheet. This tool will be updated for the 2024-25 Budget and is expected to be published by the end of June 2024.

In May 2024, we published a full version of the *Small model of Australian representative taxpayers* (SMART). This version benefited from feedback from the consultation draft, launched in December 2023. The tool 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 SMART tool was heavily used during the period of debate (largely in late January and February) on the Stage 3 tax cuts, and we continue to receive positive feedback from users.

In March the PBO launched a consultation draft of a proposed ongoing list of unlegislated measures, motivated in part by requests from parliamentarians to better understand the status of the government's commitments. It is planned to update this list periodically, with the next version scheduled for end May 2024.



## Election preparedness

We continue to progress preparations against the standard general election timeframe (election window August 2024 – May 2025), with the aim to be minimally prepared by 1 July 2024. Since the last report, the focus has been on preparing our suite of ICT tools, developing a workforce strategy to ensure we have staff with the right skills and experience to support an effective election process, and preparing election guidance notes to support parliamentary parties, Senators and Members of Parliament engage effectively with the PBO in an election context.

## 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.

Our *Budget Insights* program has had an excellent start to the year, we've held 2 webinars and 3 drop-in sessions. The program is designed for staff of parliamentarians. On Thursday 29 February, 12 people joined our *Introduction to PBO services* webinar. On Wednesday 17 April, 95 people joined our *Navigating the Budget papers* webinar. Our first drop-in session for the year was held during a sitting week on Tuesday 19 March, allowing parliamentarians and staffers the opportunity to drop-in with any questions about our services and products. Over the hour, 15 people from different offices visited the session.

We trialed a joint approach with the Parliamentary Library, hosting 2 drop-in sessions focusing on the Budget. The first session was held on Tuesday 7 May, a non-sitting week, and saw 5 people visit over the hour. The second was held on the Thursday 16 May, after the Budget was delivered, and had 4 people visit over the hour seeking advice on locating information in the budget papers.

Parliamentarians and staff are welcome to call, email or come past our office at any time. Occasionally parliamentarians and other stakeholders request bespoke training and education sessions. Where appropriate, the PBO partners with the Parliamentary Library to deliver these sessions either in person or via Teams.

Since the last report we have also briefed international delegations, including:

- a presentation to the Inter-Parliamentary Study Program, attended by approximately 25 participants from countries ranging from Canada, Germany, Indonesia, Palau, Singapore, Sweden and the UK
- attendance at the second NABO-OECD Annual Meeting of Asian PBOs at the end of April, which included a presentation on *Institutional strengthening for empowering fiscal understanding* as well as participating in a panel discussion following the keynote from the Chief Operating Officer of the Congressional Budget Office (United State of America)
- a presentation to a DFAT sponsored visiting delegate from the Sri Lankan Parliament in February 2024 on Insights into the Parliamentary Budget Office. Followed by a subsequent presentation in May 2024 to a larger delegation from Sri Lanka
- participating in a Brazilian project on comparative legislative budgeting in April 2024
- meeting with a delegation of New Zealand parliamentarians in May 2024.

## Triennial Stakeholder Survey and feedback

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

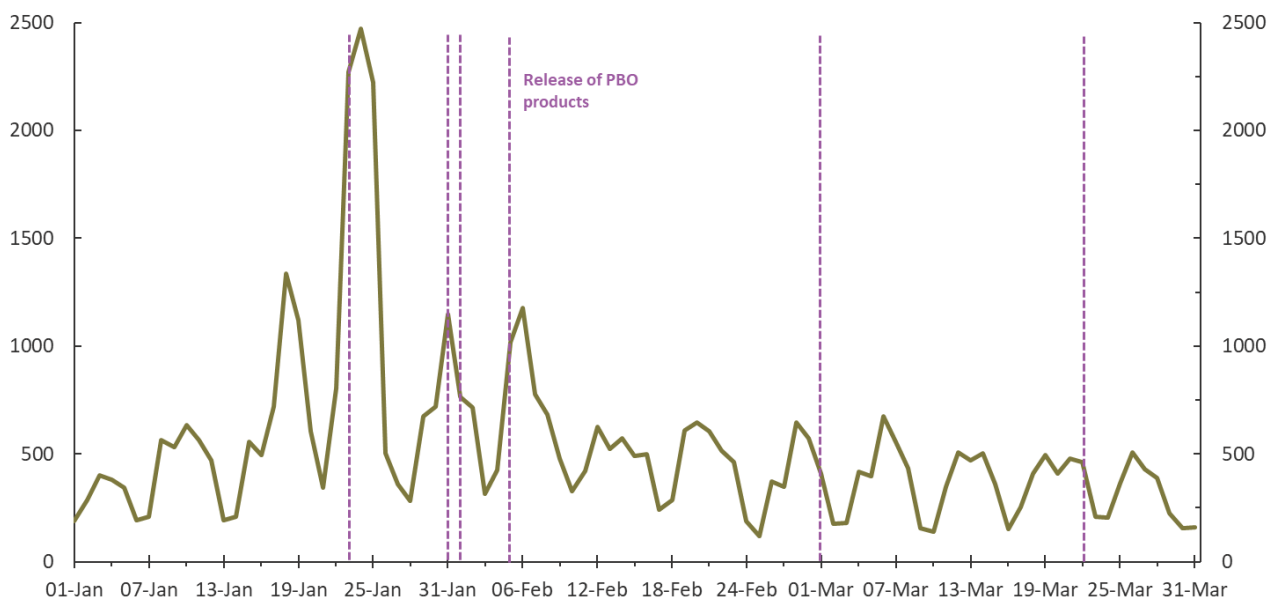
The survey for the 47th Parliament commenced in April 2024, with a series of one-on-one interviews with selected candidates. An online survey that will be accessible to all stakeholders is expected to be launched by late-May 2024. Due to this survey being in the field, we have paused our program of semi-structured stakeholder interviews during this time.

We continued to receive ad hoc unsolicited feedback from our clients on their customer service experience and the quality of our costings and publications. In particular, feedback on our interactive tools has been generally positive indicating they are ‘an excellent idea’, ‘interesting’ and ‘quite smart’. Some users have also suggested ways to improve functionality such as allowing the SMART tool to adjust tax deductions.

## 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 quarter 3 coincided with the release of the *Stage 3 tax cuts distributional analysis* parliamentary request, released on 23 January 2024. At the end of January, *Stage 3 tax cuts distributional analysis* was highly referenced in the media and used in public debate, generating the most amount of page views we’ve received on a single PBO product (Table 6).

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



**Table 6: Website analytics - Top performing web pages (1 January and 31 March 2024)**

Web page title	Views*	Average time
1. Stage 3 tax cuts distributional analysis (parliamentarian request)	10,391	01:55
2. Fuel taxation in Australia	1,899	04:20
3. 2023-24 National fiscal outlook	944	03:43
4. Online budget glossary	678	04:21
5. Build you own budget	676	03:32
6. 2023-24 Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO) Snapshot	616	3:11
7. Small Model of Australian Representative Taxpayers (SMART)	374	09:10

\* Adjusted for bounce rate

## 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 reviewed our induction program and started to develop a refreshed learning and development strategy.

### Staffing

At 16 May 2024, we had 41.2 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff and a headcount of 44. This figure reflects PBO staff only, the PBO continues to supplement our workforce with graduate and other secondees.

We are continuing to participate in the Parliament of Australia graduate program. Across 2023-24, we expect to have 8 graduates, an increase from 6 last year.

### 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.

Our current priority is to ensure our ICT systems are ready to support our election work, regardless of election timing. This involves the preparation of a suite of tools used to ensure the accurate tracking of election commitments as well as aggregation of their financial implications in order to publish them in the Election Commitments Report (ECR).

We are also 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. Reflecting the current focus on election preparedness, further development and user testing will continue across 2024.

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

Title of publication	Publication		Fiscal update or other
	Planned	Actual	
<b>Quarter 4</b>			
<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: Dividend Imputation</i>	May 2024		Other
<i>Unlegislated measures tracker - update</i>	May 2024		Other
<i>Historical fiscal data</i>	May 2024	16 May 2024	Fiscal
<i>Guide to the 2024-25 Budget</i>	May 2024	15 May 2024	Fiscal
<i>2024-25 Budget snapshot</i>	May 2024	14 May 2024	Fiscal
<i>Small model of Australian representative taxpayers (SMART) - full launch</i>	Q4	2 May 2024	Other
<b>Quarter 3</b>			
<i>Budget Explainer – Contingency Reserve 2024 Update</i>	Q3	24 April 2024	Other
<i>Build your own budget – MYEFO Update</i>	Q3	26 March 2024	Fiscal
<i>Unlegislated measures tracker</i>	Q3	1 February 2024	Other
<b>Quarter 2</b>			
<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
<b>Quarter 1</b>			
<i>Historical Fiscal Forecasts</i>	-	13 September 2023	Other