



Inquiry into Annual and Financial Reports 2023–2024

Answer to question on notice

Asked by: Mr Peter Cain MLA

Addressed to: Minister for Human Rights

Redirected to: Human Rights Commission

Reference: Victims of Crime Commissioner, ACT Human Rights Commission, JACS

Hearing: 19 February 2025

In relation to: Financial Assistance Scheme

Question received: 25 February 2025

Answer Due: 7 March 2025

[\[Insert details of question on notice\]](#)

(1) With a 167% increase in applications to the Financial Assistance Scheme since 2018–19, what measures are in place to ensure the timely processing of applications and to prevent backlogs?

Margie Rowe: The answer to the Member's question is as follows:

Context

As the Legislative Assembly has noted, there has been a dramatic and sustained increase in demand for the Financial Assistance Scheme (FAS) in the last five years. Last financial year, FAS received a record 1211 applications for financial assistance and upward trend is continuing in the 2024-5 financial year. In addition, there is an increasing proportion of applications containing a claim for an immediate needs payments. Immediate needs applications have risen from comprising roughly 30% of applications, to now comprising around half of all applications FAS receives. These dual factors have placed considerable strain on FAS resources.

Staffing

With this rise in demand, FAS has implemented a number of strategies seeking to ensure the timely processing of applications. Ultimately, assessing applications in a timely manner requires personnel.

FAS has an allocation of 9 FTEs funded through multiple business cases. To address the significant backlog of applications identified in 2021, a temporary consultant was engaged in 2022-23, and part-time contractors were brought on to aid with assessment of long-standing undecided applications. With these additional staff, FAS was able to process a higher number of applications, and the increased workforce was a major contributing factor in the significant increase in the number of payments processed in the 2022-23 financial year compared with the previous year. The increased workforce also enabled FAS to finalise outstanding applications lodged between 2016 to 2022. Those temporary positions are no longer in place.

Noting the dramatic increase in incoming applications, in 2023-24, the VOCC utilised resources from other parts of VSACT to increase the FAS team and to restructure the team to create an additional assessor role – recognising the impact that increasing application numbers were having on staff and on applicants and the additional pressure concomitant with immediate needs applications lodged by victims in crisis and with immediate concerns for their safety.

The workload pressures have impacted staff and FAS have implemented some work flow protocols to mitigate the detrimental impact of high workloads and insufficient staff resources. In the absence of ongoing funding for additional staff, FAS has sought to find ways to balance the need for timely assessment against its duty of care to its current staff.

Making Processes More Efficient

FAS has also extensively reviewed its processes to ensure that they are efficient and support timely decision-making whilst still fully complying with legislative and administrative requirements.

Streamlining documentation

Since 2023, FAS has reviewed both its external correspondence and its internal documentation and record keeping and simplified a number of documents. Simplifying external correspondence has made letters to applicants less time consuming to complete, and results in fewer queries from applicants who are better placed to understand the simpler language and format. In addition, internal documents such as decision reports have been simplified to minimise the duplication of information multiple times in an application's database entry, while still complying with the principles of administrative decision making. This has reduced the time spent on administration.

Standardising evidentiary requirements as far as possible

FAS have also implemented changes that facilitate clearer, consistent interpretation of legislative provisions, aligned with the beneficial nature of the Scheme. For example, evidentiary requirements under the Scheme have been reviewed to ensure that they do not impose higher requirements than the civil standard prescribed under the legislation. Changes to assessment of s 203 applications (for offences committed before 1 July 2016), namely, the presumption of harm for sexual offences committed against children (consistent with the position of the ACT Supreme Court), have resulted in the finalisation of many outstanding matters.

Streamlining assessment processes for applicants with ongoing payments

Some FAS applicants have ongoing expenses that are claimable under the Scheme, such as ongoing physiotherapy or psychological therapy. A recent innovation has been the development of 'batch decisions' for economic loss. A batch decision requires an applicant to present a treatment plan – that outlines treatment needs for a period of time. A decision can be made to cover expenses for all treatments in that category for the agreed period of time. By doing this, the FAS team no longer need to assess and formalise a decision to make each economic loss reimbursement.

Triaging applications

To manage the significant caseload in FAS, the Scheme has adopted an active triaging system for both immediate needs and non-immediate needs applications. Senior assessors regularly review the application list to determine how to appropriately triage applications. This helps to ensure that urgent matters and immediate threats to safety are prioritised for assessment. The triaging and coordinating role has become critical to the operation of FAS in an environment where there is higher demand than staff resources can keep up with, even with the efficiencies that have been found in FAS processes.

Collaboration with other teams

FAS recognises the importance of open and clear communication with applicants about their applications. FAS receives a very high volume of enquiries, at times asking questions about the Scheme and its requirements, but very often applicants are simply seeking updates on their applications. The volume of contact FAS receives from applicants often overwhelms the resources available to respond. In this context, FAS have provided training on FAS processes and rules to other teams within VSACT, most notably the Client Services Team (CST). FAS now receives a higher degree of assistance from CST, which has implications for workload in the Client Services Team. FAS has developed written resources for CST and other teams within VSACT to refer to for easy reference to better understand eligibility requirements, the scope of payments available through FAS, and the kinds of supporting evidence that are required for assessors to make a determination.

Collaboration with other DFV service providers

FAS have also sought to work more effectively with DFV service providers to support DFV victims and process their applications more quickly. First, FAS have developed training modules that have been provided in the community sector to explain eligibility criteria and FAS processes. This allows support workers from other agencies to assist their clients to make applications that contain complete information, and obtain supporting evidence such as health information, all of which speeds up the assessment process. FAS is currently working on developing written resources similar to the ones provided internally for use by its partners in the community sector.

Secondly, FAS is working on making applications simpler for special reporting class victims. The Victims of Crime (Financial Assistance) Act 2016 (FAS Act) allows special reporting class victims to rely on reports from certain agencies and providers in place of a report to police. FAS has identified that the current list of Appropriately Qualified Non-Government Agencies does not include some key organisations who provide DFV services, including YWCA, Toora and Doris. This means that DFV victims who are referred to FAS through one of these agencies have to seek additional reports which is time consuming, burdensome for victims, and traumatic. FAS has been collaborating with key

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organisations with a view to including them in the instrument listing appropriately qualified non-government agencies.

Approved for circulation to the Standing Committee on Legal Affairs

Signature:

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Margie Rowe', is positioned above the printed name.

Date: **7/03/2025**

Margie Rowe - A/g Victims of Crime Commissioner