

LANGUAGE SERVICES — COMMON-USE ARRANGEMENTS

Statement

HON SIMON O'BRIEN (South Metropolitan — Minister for Finance) [3.27 pm]: I rise in response to a matter raised by Hon Ljiljana Ravlich during member statements on Tuesday this week. She raised some concerns about a common-use arrangement for language services. She reported some concerns that had been raised with her or that she had formed about what might be happening. I will take the opportunity now to respond to the main points that she raised so that the house will know what is going on.

This potential common-use arrangement came about as a result of agencies requesting a whole-of-government arrangement rather than each individually continuing to call tenders or purchase services on an ad hoc basis. About 30 key agencies use these services, with an annual spend of around \$5 million. It is proposed that the CUA would be non-mandatory in its first term to allow flexibility and to see how it works and whether it could be improved. The honourable member claimed that the Department of Finance is unilaterally fast-tracking this CUA with a lack of consultation. I reassure the member that Finance has not acted unilaterally as claimed, nor is the CUA being fast-tracked in that sense. The development of the CUA commenced in July with a potential start date of February 2012. The Office of Multicultural Interests has been heavily involved and is represented on the client reference group. The member will be glad to know that claims regarding alleged lack of consultation are not correct. There has been considerable consultation with the industry and agencies, including the Department of Education, Department of Health, Department of the Attorney General and the Office of Multicultural Interests. Further opportunity for feedback will occur over the next month; industry will be able to comment on the draft request document. That document was released over the last day or two for public comment. We will also hold further talks with the key industry associations and at the conclusion of the process a decision will be made on whether to proceed with the proposed common-use agreement.

In relation to whether the CUA is simply about saving dollars, it is not about achieving cost savings in the sense that was claimed by Hon Ljiljana Ravlich. It is designed to establish a much more efficient procurement process and to attempt to engender a higher standard of quality control in this area. This is emerging as a significant concern for agencies, as many of the interpretation and translation services are related to legal matters.

In relation to the competence of service providers, at this stage we have chosen an industry-based national standard to accredit individuals—the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters. This is the body responsible for setting and monitoring the standards for this industry. NAATI accreditation is currently the only credential officially accepted by employers for the profession. My department will further investigate Hon Ljiljana Ravlich's claims that this authority has been found to be seriously wanting as a measure of occupational competence, and I will provide feedback on that when we have completed that examination. The fundamental purpose of the CUA is to ensure that government has access to competent and trained people.

In relation to the suggestion that the government fails to recognise the importance of interpreter and translator services, I reassure members that this is not correct. Agencies will continue to engage these services whether or not a common-use arrangement is in place. The CUA is being considered to raise the overall quality of the translator services available to agencies, in recognition of the importance of these services, both internally for government and also for delivering better services to the community.

Finally, in relation to the suggestion that the CUA should be put on hold, the Department of Education in particular has requested that the CUA be established in time for the new school year, if possible. That is why the February 2012 commencement date is being considered. I am advised that the department sees this as a good opportunity to provide better and more consistent quality of services to the diverse school population. A decision on when or if to proceed will be made once the consultation process has concluded at the end of November. As I have previously stated, these services will continue to be purchased by agencies in the absence of a CUA, but I fear that if that were to continue indefinitely, it might be in a less efficient and robust way. We will consider our position on establishing this CUA once the consultation process has concluded, and advise interested parties, including my friend opposite, when that is done.

Finally, Hon Alison Xamon asked a question relating to matters that touch upon the Building Commission, its predecessor, and the activities of that and related offices. I indicate that I have already had people looking at that since last night, and I will be giving some feedback to the member in due course about the matters she raised.

This is, I think, what members' statements are designed for—for members to raise matters directly and in a very timely way so that government can respond. I hope that my response to those two matters was satisfactory for now.