

**Question on Notice
No. 1622
Asked on 30 October 2008**

MS VAN LITSENBURG asked the Minister for Tourism, Regional Development and Industry (MS BOYLE) —

QUESTION:

What can the State Government do to support small business and local economies?

ANSWER:

I thank the Member for Redcliffe for her question.

The Bligh Government wants to create a strong economy powered by bright ideas to secure the economic future of the regions in tomorrow's Queensland. A big part of securing our economic future involves ensuring the growth and prosperity of our small business sector.

Queensland's small businesses are incredibly diverse and are represented in a wide range of industries, across all of our State's regions. Most importantly, our small businesses generate a large proportion of jobs in Queensland's communities.

Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicate that there are in excess of 386,000 small businesses in Queensland, representing 95.5% of all Queensland businesses. Furthermore, small businesses provide employment for around 50% of all private sector workers across the state.

Given all of this, it is clear that small businesses are not only the lifeblood of Queensland's economy as a whole, but also a major driver of regional development from the tip of Cape York to the Gold Coast.

The current global financial crisis has added to the pressure that record fuel prices, climate change and mortgage stress have placed on Queensland families and businesses. The small business sector is feeling this impact harder than the major players and as Minister for Regional Development and Industry I am committed to ensuring that Queensland's small businesses continue to thrive through these globally challenging times. I have already appealed to the major banks to ensure that the interest rates on business overdrafts reflect the recent interest rate cuts announced by the Reserve Bank of Australia.

The assistance available through my department can help small business with the challenges they face by helping business operators assess their current performance and identify what they need to do to get ahead and stay ahead. I am very pleased to be able to say that the range of small business assistance offered by the Department of Tourism, Regional Development and

Industry (DTRDI) is one of the most outstanding and comprehensive of any jurisdiction in Australia.

My department provides advice to businesses on improving their viability and resilience by continually looking for ways to expand their competitive strengths, improving business efficiencies and productivity, and building strong supply chain relationships. The expert staff in DTRDI's state-wide Regional Centres can help to pinpoint the steps that a business needs to undertake to enhance their operations. These may include developing and refining business skills, strengthening business relationships, identifying new business opportunities and making the most of the skills and experience of staff.

The products and services for small business provided by the department are available through a range of channels to ensure that business operators can access the assistance they need at their convenience.

The Business Website (www.business.qld.gov.au) provides a wealth of information that is easy to access and navigate. In addition to information about the many aspects of starting, operating, growing and improving a business, the website provides 10 minute interactive self assessments covering a range of regulatory and business management topics enabling business operators to gauge their knowledge on key topics. Business management skills can also be improved by utilising Smart Skills Online, which provides online short courses on a range of business management subjects.

The Bligh Government recognises that time is a scarce resource for small business operators and that some people simply prefer one on one communication, so we have an established Business Hotline (1300 363 711) which provides businesses with one central telephone number to access information and assistance for their small business. I am pleased to report that during 2007-08 alone, 12,000 callers used this service.

The department's network of Regional Centres play a key role in providing information and assistance to local small businesses. The Centres deliver a core range of business management skills development workshops and seminars for small businesses. In 2007-08, DTRDI's Regional Centres delivered 222 business information and skills development workshops and seminars to 3,579 business people.

Businesses can also access tailored information on their licensing requirements, government services, and market research to support their business planning. Over 142,000 people utilised these three services online, face-to-face and via the telephone during 2007-08.

My Department is now piloting a Maximising Enterprise Performance initiative in Cairns, Townsville and Toowoomba. This program targets high growth businesses that operate in a priority industry sector in the regions. Maximising

Enterprise Performance aims to improve the performance of those businesses and help them become globally competitive.

Risk management planning is important for any business. However, it is absolutely vital for the small business operators as the potential impacts of sudden changes in the environmental and economic climate can have devastating effects on their business. The Bligh Government wants to ensure that no Queensland business finds itself unprepared in the event of unforeseen circumstances so my Department has developed the Disaster Resilience Plan.

This is an online resource providing business owners with a step-by-step process to document a plan to make their business more resilient. This tool is being enhanced to enable businesses to proactively identify and assess risks to their business continuity and prepare strategies to minimise them or avoid them altogether. Information will be formulated around a 'Prevent, Prepare, Respond, Recover' framework to enable small businesses to take a comprehensive approach to all aspects of business resilience. Topics covered will include: Disasters, Pandemics and Epidemics, Climate Change, Financial Disruptions, Security, Terrorism, Occupational Health and Safety, and Supply Chain Management. These topics will be continuously reviewed and new topics will be added over time as additional areas of risk are identified.

As the Minister responsible for both regional development and small business, I am committed to ensuring small businesses in regional and remote parts of Queensland have their voices heard.

The Queensland Small Business Advisory Council attached to my department provides advice and feedback to Government on issues that are important to small business. The Council is chaired on my behalf by my parliamentary colleague, Mr Michael Choi MP. The membership of the Council includes individual business owners and representatives from a range of business and industry associations. The Members bring diverse experiences to the Council and come from across Queensland's regions.

The Council travels throughout regional Queensland to investigate first-hand the issues facing small business across the State. The Council met 4 times during 2007-08 – at the Sunshine Coast, in Longreach, Kingaroy and Brisbane. Regional Council meetings are complemented by visits to local small businesses and networking functions which give local business people the opportunity to speak directly with Council members about their challenges, concerns and successes.

The Bligh Government recognises that our small business sector is the backbone of our economy and in order to build on our current economic strengths we will continue to work hard in supporting Queensland's small businesses and ensuring that the economy in tomorrow's Queensland continues to thrive.