

2005 Meeting Summary

On 27 July 2005, the Small Business Ministerial Council held its seventh meeting in Brisbane to discuss a range of issues affecting small business, including:

National Occupational Health and Safety

The National Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Strategy recognises the needs of small to medium enterprises. One of the priorities of the National OHS Strategy relates to the capacity of business operators and workers to effectively manage OHS.

The Council recognised the importance of raising the awareness of small operators in order for them to comply with legislation, as well as protect the health and safety of everyone involved in their business.

The Council noted the initiatives and strategies in place across jurisdictions to raise small business awareness of OHS issues and will refer this issue to the National Executive of Small Business Agencies for further discussion and monitoring.

Government Information and Services for Small Business

In 2004 the Council endorsed a *Framework for Cooperation*, which contained commonsense and broad principles for jurisdictions to consider in developing and delivering small business programs and services.

While acknowledging the work being undertaken by jurisdictions, the Council recommended the development of a strategic plan to identify current State, Territory and Australian Government programs and to provide clear guidelines for the development and implementation of new services.

In addition, the Council will explore how to more effectively deliver information and support services across all levels of government.

Home-based business

In 2004, the Council endorsed *Home-Based Business: Local Opportunities* to highlight the benefits that a strong home-based business sector can bring to the Australian economy.

A key issue for home-based business operators is that they are better able to interact with local government authorities and operate in a more consistent and less onerous regulatory environment.

The Council noted the activities undertaken by jurisdictions to improve the regulatory environment for home-based businesses and actively encourages all levels of government to develop targeted initiatives to grow home-based business.

Further investigation of ways to reduce the regulatory burden on home-based businesses and establish best-practice regulation will be undertaken.

Continuity Planning

The Council noted the increasing relevance of continuity or succession planning for small business operators, in particular, for the long-term sustainability of their businesses.

The Council will review and share information on initiatives currently provided across jurisdictions that raise the importance of continuity planning and assist in the development and implementation of continuity plans.

Trade Practices Act

In 2003, the Australian Government commissioned a review of the *Trade Practices Act 1974* (the Act). The following year the Senate Economics References Committee considered the effectiveness of the Act in protecting small business.

The Council will examine and report on the provisions of the Act that could provide appropriate mechanisms to address issues of market concentration. The report will also examine comparable overseas economies.

Small Business Banking

While there has been increasing recognition by the banks of the significance of the small business market over recent years, the Council considered that there are still areas that could be enhanced, especially in relation to fees and services and the application of regulatory standards.

The Council encourages financial institutions to recognise and consider the specific needs of small business when formulating policy responses and to increase their efforts to provide quality financial services at reasonable cost.

The Council is interested in the research and work undertaken by the Australian Bankers' Association Small Business Forum, specifically in relation to access to capital and on-line banking services.

Cross-border skills recognition

The absence of a uniform process for cross-border skills recognition impacts on small business limiting the mobility and flexibility of labour movement, thereby contributing to industry skills shortages.

The Council is aware that greater consistency between vocational education and training and industry licensing requirements will ease compliance and training costs for small businesses.

The Council will encourage the Government's Skills Working Group to seek input from small business, including regional small businesses.

Skills Shortages

Skills shortages affect employment throughout Australia and small business, in particular, finds it harder to attract and retain quality staff.

The Council noted the broad range of initiatives across jurisdictions to address this issue and will continue to monitor these initiatives, noting successful measures and identifying any gaps.

The Council seeks to improve the processes associated with skilled migration and reduce the application processing times for skilled migrants, especially in relation to trade skills recognition.

Other Small Business Issues

Other important small business issues on the agenda included regulation reform, Indigenous economic development and public liability and professional indemnity insurance.