

Committee Office

Output Group 4

Provision of secretariat support to the Senate legislative and general purpose standing committees, select committees and certain joint committees.

	Performance indicators	Performance results
Quality	<p>The degree of satisfaction of the President, Deputy President, committee members and senators, as expressed through formal and informal feedback mechanisms, with the quality and timeliness of advice and support and the achievement of key tasks.</p> <p>Advice, documentation, publications and draft reports are accurate and of a high standard.</p>	<p>The senators' survey revealed uniformly high levels of satisfaction with all aspects of the support provided to Senate committees. The level of satisfaction ranged from 95% for procedural advice to 91% for the preparation of briefing papers and research.</p> <p>In addition, formal and informal feedback mechanisms continued to show that senators consider the support provided by the Committee Office to be effective.</p> <p>When debating committee reports, committee chairs and senators recognised the high quality of services provided by secretariats in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • drafting reports • dealing effectively with witnesses and clients • organising committee meetings and hearings • producing quality committee briefings • providing sound procedural advice • liaising closely with senators' offices. <p>The senators' survey revealed that the overwhelming majority of senators (92%) were satisfied with the provision of briefing papers, background research and draft reports.</p>
Timeliness	<p>Meetings held, documentation provided and reports produced within timeframes set by the Senate or the committee, as relevant.</p> <p>Tabling deadlines met in all but extraordinary circumstances.</p>	<p>Committee secretariats organised meetings, hearings, briefings and inspections in accordance with committee requirements, within constraints arising from the availability of members.</p> <p>New secretariats were established in time to support the first meetings of new select committees.</p> <p>Reports were drafted and presented to the Senate in accordance with the timelines set by committees and deadlines set by the Senate.</p>
Quantity	<p>Documentation is sufficient for committee purposes and material available to the public is available promptly, electronically or in hard copy.</p>	<p>Committee staff provided committee members, witnesses and others with documents in accordance with secretariat procedures, orders of the Senate and committee requirements.</p> <p>Upon tabling, reports were promptly made available to senators and others in both printed and electronic formats.</p>

REPORT ON PERFORMANCE – OUTPUT GROUP 4

Analysis

The Committee Office administers legislative and general purpose standing committee secretariats, select committee secretariats and certain joint statutory committee secretariats. The staffing and administrative structure of the Office is outlined in Figure 15. It is led by the Clerk Assistant (Committees) who performs duties as a clerk at the table in the Senate chamber and as a committee secretary.

Figure 15 Elements and responsibilities of the Committee Office

Executive		
<p>Cleaver Elliott, Clerk Assistant Roxane Le Guen, Senior Clerk Procedural advice and training Planning and coordination Secretariat staffing and resources Statistics and records</p>		
Legislative and general purpose standing committee secretariats	Joint statutory committee secretariats	Select committee secretariats
Community Affairs <i>Elton Humphery</i> Economics <i>John Hawkins</i> Education, Employment and Workplace Relations <i>John Carter</i> Environment, Communications and the Arts <i>Ian Holland</i> Finance and Public Administration <i>Stephen Palethorpe/Christine McDonald (acting)</i> Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade <i>Kathleen Dermody</i> Legal and Constitutional <i>Peter Hallahan</i> Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport <i>Jeanette Radcliffe</i>	Australian Crime Commission <i>Jacqui Dewar</i> Corporations and Financial Services <i>Geoff Dawson (acting), Cleaver Elliott, Shona Batge</i> Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity <i>Jacqui Dewar</i>	Agricultural and Related Industries <i>Jeanette Radcliffe</i> State Government Financial Management <i>Stephen Palethorpe</i> Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities <i>Toni Matulick</i> Fuel and Energy <i>Roxane Le Guen, Naomi Bleaser</i> National Broadband Network <i>Maureen Weeks, Alison Kelly</i> Men's Health <i>Chris Reid</i> Climate Policy <i>John Hawkins</i>

During 2008–09, the Committee Office provided secretariat support to Senate and certain joint committees by:

- giving accurate and timely procedural advice and administrative support to facilitate and expedite the work of committees

- arranging responsive and timely meetings and hearings in accordance with committee decisions
- providing comprehensive and timely briefings and research papers
- drafting quality reports which accurately canvassed and analysed the evidence from submissions and hearings and reflected the requirements of committees (and assisting, as necessary, in the drafting of minority reports)
- communicating effectively with witnesses and members of the general public
- being proactive in anticipating requirements of committees and chairs.

Procedural changes and advice

Secretaries continued to provide procedural and administrative advice to committee chairs and members as well as to members of the public. This included people inquiring about the activities of committees and people proposing to make or making submissions to committees, as well as witnesses appearing before committees. Higher-level advice was also provided by the Clerk, Deputy Clerk, Clerk Assistant (Committees) and Senior Clerk of Committees.

The advice, both oral and written, covered a wide variety of procedural issues, such as the establishment of inquiries, the drafting of terms of reference for inquiries, the membership of committees, and the interpretation of a wide range of standing orders relating to the operations of committees. As in previous years, issues relating to parliamentary privilege, such as the unauthorised disclosure of committee proceedings, the power of committees to call for both witnesses and documents, and the protection of witnesses, were prominent. Dealing with adverse reflections on persons made in evidence to committees also continued to be an issue on which advice was sought. Advice was also provided on a number of matters arising from estimates hearings.

Of particular note was the Senate's adoption of a new order for dealing with claims made by witnesses for the non-provision of information to a committee on the grounds of public interest immunity. The department made significant efforts to ensure that all prospective witnesses at estimates hearings were made aware of the new order. In addition to the usual publication of the order in the *Journals of the Senate* and the *Senate Notice Paper*, all departmental secretaries and estimates liaison staff in all departments were notified of the new order in writing before the budget estimates hearings in May 2009. Copies of the order were made available at all hearings and the order was read into the Hansard record of the proceedings of all committees. The order was the subject of numerous advices to committees and their members during the May 2009 hearings.

The Senate made a significant change to the legislative and general purpose standing committee standing order late in the reporting period, abolishing the single standing committees and replacing them with pairs of legislation and references committees. This re-established a committee structure which had been in place prior to 2006. The change occurred in May 2009, in time for the budget round of estimates hearings. The new pairs of legislation and references committees are each supported by a single secretariat using the administrative procedures used prior to 2006.

In addition to procedural advice, the office provided extensive training on committee operations and procedures to new senators, new staff of senators and new departmental staff.

Legislative and general purpose standing committees

Since the amendments to the standing orders, the Senate has had eight pairs of legislation and references committees established pursuant to Standing Order 25 as permanent committees.

REPORT ON PERFORMANCE – OUTPUT GROUP 4

Permanent committees continue for the life of a parliament. They are re-established at the commencement of each new parliament, with their membership determined by the Senate.

During 2008–09, the Senate referred 135 matters to standing committees, 90 of which were bills or packages of bills. As shown in Table 2, those committees tabled 160 reports, excluding reports on estimates. In 2007–08 the committees tabled 101 reports.

Table 2 Activities of standing committees

	2006–07	2007–08	2008–09
Meetings (number)			
Public	150	90	307
Private	267	207	313
Inspections/other	11	3	7
Meetings (hours)			
Public	660	445	1,671
Private	130	70	109
Matters referred			
Bills/provisions of bills	79	50	90
Other ^a	27	39	45
Reports presented^b	109	101	160
Submissions received	3,028	3,905	6,296
Witnesses	1,860	1,165	2,556
Extensions of time granted	33	25	79

a Includes 16 annual reports.

b Excludes estimates; includes reports on annual reports.

As shown in Table 3, the usual cycle of estimates hearings was conducted during the year, commencing with a week of supplementary hearings for the 2008–09 Budget, held in October and November 2008. A week of additional estimates hearings were held in February 2009. The initial estimates hearings for the 2009–10 Budget took place between 25 May and 4 June 2009.

A significant variation in estimates hearings was caused by a resolution of the Senate, on 26 August 2008, requiring the holding of an additional day of hearings into Indigenous matters that would include all the portfolios with budget expenditure or responsibility for Indigenous issues. The first such meeting was held on 24 October 2008, the second on 27 February 2009 and the third on 5 June 2009.

Table 3 Activities of committees considering estimates, 2007–08 to 2009–10 budget cycles

Budget cycle	Hours of budget estimates hearings		Hours of additional estimates hearings	Total hours	Witnesses	Pages of evidence
	May–June ^a	October–November ^b				
2009–10	332	–	–	332	1,974	3,884
2008–09	322	176	166	664	5,758	10,191
2007–08	333	Not held	183	516	1,832	4,004
2006–07	334	187	194	715	4,329	9,335

a Main hearings.

b Supplementary hearings.

Overall, the 2008–09 budget cycle estimates involved 664 hours of hearings, an increase on the 2007–08 budget cycle. Sixteen reports on estimates were prepared by committees and tabled, eight after the budget estimates and eight following the additional estimates.

The activity of committees considering estimates generates considerable administrative effort for committee secretariats. Timetabling and coordination of the hearings is complex, involving all departments and statutory bodies of the Commonwealth. Extensive coordination with ministers is required to ensure that ministers are in attendance to take responsibility for questioning. The standing orders provide for only four of the eight committees to meet at one time, to facilitate senators being able to participate in the activities of more than one committee. Because of the requirement for senators to attend more than one estimates hearing, secretariats spend time coordinating and adjusting programs and timetables to enable senators to participate in hearings.

In the course of the estimates hearings, senators place many questions on notice. Secretariats devote a great deal of time to following up and publishing the answers to questions placed on notice. Typical numbers of questions placed on notice in the last budget hearings range from 213 before the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee to 732 before the Community Affairs Committee.

Select committees

A select committee is an ad hoc committee established by the Senate to inquire into and report on a specific matter or matters. In most cases, a select committee ceases to exist when it presents its final report. Often, select committees also present interim reports.

The Senate had eight select committees operating during 2008–09. Two of these committees, the Select Committee on Men’s Health (which operated for three months) and the Select Committee on Climate Policy (which operated for six months), presented their reports to the Senate during the reporting period and no longer exist.

The Committee Office continues to provide secretariat support for:

- one select committee established by the Senate on 14 February 2008, the Select Committee on Agricultural and Related Industries—due to report on 27 November 2009
- one select committee established on 19 March 2008, the Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities—due to report every six months and to present its final report on 30 September 2010
- two select committees established on 25 June 2008
 - the Select Committee on Fuel and Energy—due to report on 21 October 2009
 - the Select Committee on the National Broadband Network—due to report on 23 November 2009 (its terms of reference were revised by the Senate on 14 May 2009 and the reporting date was extended).

During 2008–09, select committees held 139 meetings (public and private), for a total of 390 hours. They received 8,620 submissions and heard 789 witnesses. The corresponding figures for 2007–08 were 43 meetings (public and private), for a total of 142 hours, 211 submissions and 207 witnesses.

Joint committees

Joint committees comprise senators and members of the House of Representatives. They are established by resolution of each House and, in the case of statutory committees, in accordance with the provisions of an Act.

REPORT ON PERFORMANCE – OUTPUT GROUP 4

During 2008–09, the Committee Office supported three statutory joint committees: Corporations and Financial Services, the Australian Crime Commission, and the Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity.

The committees held 96 meetings (public, private and inspections) for a total of 148 hours. They received 392 submissions and heard 188 witnesses. The corresponding figures for 2007–08 were 56 meetings, 61 hours, 72 submissions and 105 witnesses.

Meetings

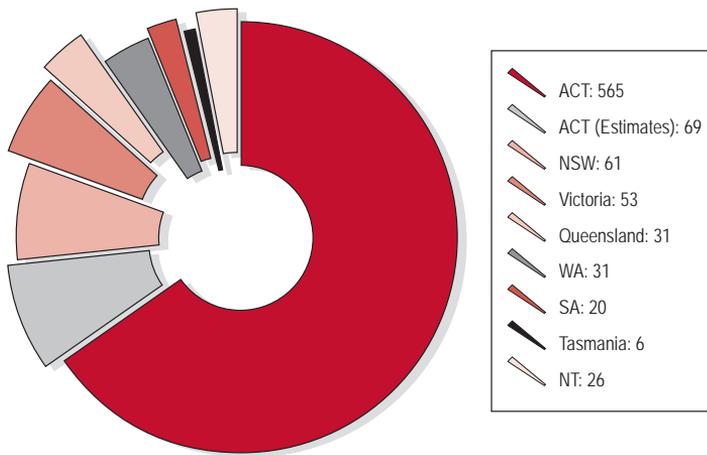
Senate committee secretariats supported 862 meetings, hearings and site inspections during the year, an increase compared with 451 in 2007–08. Those statistics include estimates hearings held by the committees.



Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities meeting at Balgo, August 2008

Committee members place considerable value on engaging a broad range of people as they conduct each committee inquiry. This is achieved through a variety of strategies: advertising of all inquiries in the national media and on the internet; direct correspondence with parties known to be interested in an inquiry; travelling interstate, including to regional centres and remote areas, to confer with witnesses and to visit the sites of matters under investigation; and conducting telephone and video conferences, including with witnesses overseas. The office has commenced discussions with stakeholder representatives regarding accessing material on the department's website. A breakdown of meetings by location appears in Figure 16.

Figure 16 Committee meetings by location, 2008–09



Development of a committee support database

Work continued on the development of the Senate Centralised Information Database. The purpose of this database is to assist committee secretariats in the speedy and accurate handling of the large volume of information used to support committee inquiries. Features of the database include the capacity for the public to enter submissions directly; for secretariats to rapidly collate data, such as addresses for mail-outs; and for information to be transferred electronically from witnesses to committee members. Early technical complications have been resolved and the system is now in place in seven out of a possible 15 secretariats. It is beginning to produce results by saving staff time and improving the office’s capacity to manage the very large numbers of submissions received by committees.

Contributions to the work of other offices

During 2008–09, Committee Office staff continued to assist other offices. Secretaries were supplied to two parliamentary delegations and committee secretaries regularly acted as presenters in the department’s training and seminar programs. In addition, secretaries provided briefings about Senate committee work for parliamentary delegations coming from overseas to learn about the operations of the Australian Parliament. Briefings about estimates hearings continued to be of particular interest to international visitors.

As in previous years, the department offered the Working in the Senate program, a program in which officers from other parts of the public service come to the Senate department to gain experience in the workings of the legislative arm of the Commonwealth. This program is run on a calendar year basis. In 2009 the department had two participants in the program. They were stationed in the Committee Office and provided administrative and research support to Senate committee inquiries.

Factors, events and trends influencing performance

Workload

The significant feature of 2008–09 was the change in workload for committee secretariats, with a marked increase in the number of referrals of inquiries to committees by the Senate and the significant increase in the activities and workloads of all committees. This increase is indicated in Table 4.

REPORT ON PERFORMANCE – OUTPUT GROUP 4

Table 4 **Committee workloads and resources, 2006–07 to 2008–09**

	2006–07	2007–08	2008–09
Number of references	96	89	125
Number of hearings held	237	171	326
Number of select committees operating	0	7	8
Number of staff	52	53	62

In 2007–08, it was noted that the reporting times for bills inquiries were shorter than ever before, with an average reporting deadline of 14.7 days. However, this average was taken over an unusually short period owing to an election being called. In 2008–09, bills referred to committees had a 35-day average reporting deadline. These statistics do not include weekends, which often have to be worked if a report is to be presented in time for tabling in the Senate.

This figure conceals the continuing trend of a requirement for very rapid inquiries into bills, with many bills being referred and reported on within either a week or a fortnight to meet the requirement to have the bill available for debate in the Senate. As an example of the significant time constraints which can be imposed, during the year two committees had matters referred to them with three working days within which to complete their work. Other committees had inquiries with reporting deadlines of four, five and eight days.

Short reporting deadlines make it difficult to complete the administrative work needed and require rapid support from Hansard and broadcasting. They also limit the amount of time that can be spent on analysing evidence and drafting reports. Another problem with short deadlines is that there is not enough time for interested members of the public to make submissions. Table 5 provides details of bills inquiries.

Table 5 **Referral of bills inquiries, 2006–07 to 2008–09**

	2006–07	2007–08	2008–09
Number of bills introduced into parliament	243	197	235
Number of individual bills referred	107	65	129
Proportion of total individual bills referred (%)	44	33	55
Packages of bills referred	79	50	90
Proportion of total packages of bills referred (%)	33	25	38

The statistics indicate a significant difference in the workload of Senate committees in the previous parliament (when the government held a majority in the Senate) and in the current parliament (when the government does not hold a majority in the Senate). Some of the department's service providers and suppliers believe that the high level of committee activity in the current parliament is atypical, when it is not—it is in fact typical of parliaments in which the government does not hold a majority in the Senate. Therefore, to gain a better understanding of the normal trends and fluctuations in workload across parliaments and election cycles, it is necessary to look at statistical material over the longer term. The following long-term tables should assist those who work with Senate committees to better prepare themselves for likely committee workloads in the next financial year.

Figure 17 Number of Senate committee references, 1995 to 2009 (calendar years)

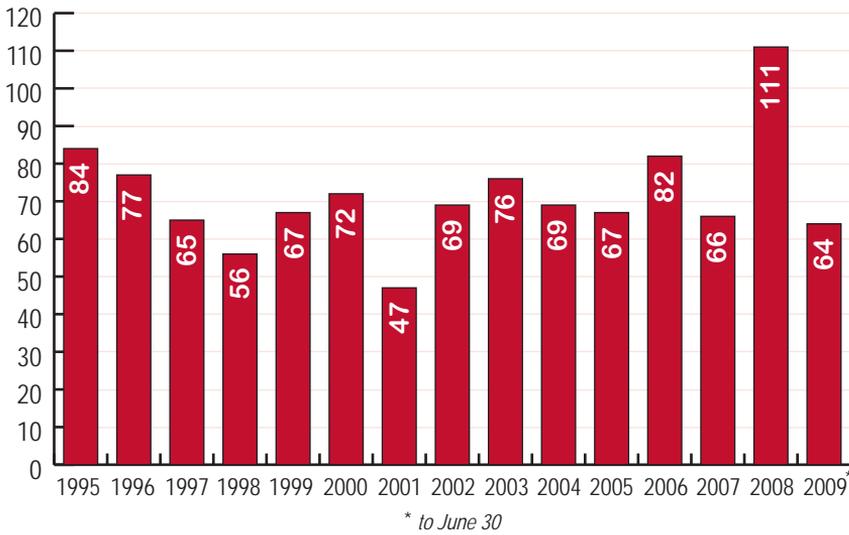
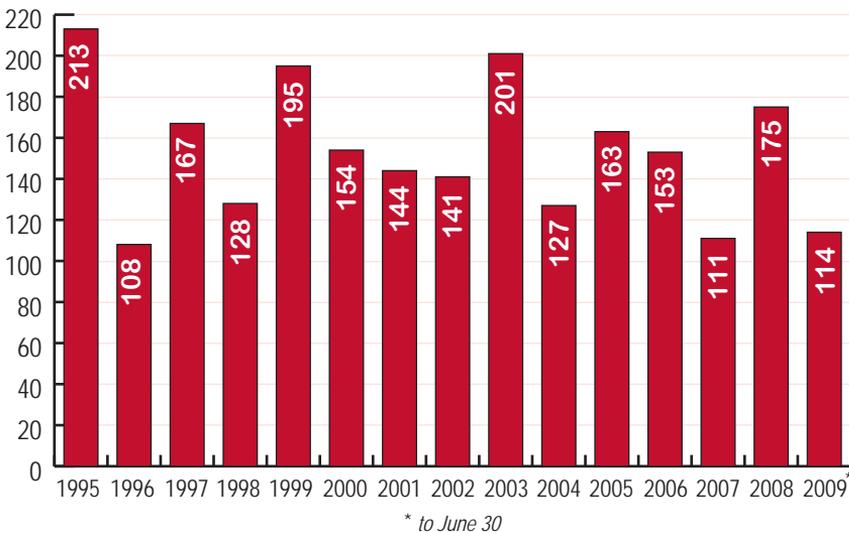


Figure 18 Number of Senate committee hearings, 1995 to 2009 (calendar years)



Resources

The resources available to the committee office to support the operation of Senate committees comprise a budget of \$9.0 million (\$6.8 million in 2007–08) and a team of support staff. The Committee Office’s full-time equivalent staff figure for 2008–09 was 62, an increase of nine from 2007–08. This increase was a direct response to the increasing pace of activity by all committees.

A series of strategies were deployed to manage the increased workload. They included:

- providing an increase from 2007–08 of 16 per cent in the staffing resources available for committee secretariat operations
- continuing the practice, reported in 2007–08, whereby staff from the committee secretariats experiencing lighter workloads were deployed to assist busier committee secretariats

REPORT ON PERFORMANCE – OUTPUT GROUP 4

- securing secondments from other departments to assist with specific committee tasks, including serving as a committee secretary or assisting with research
- deploying officers from other areas of the department to assist committee secretariats in addition to carrying on their normal duties
- requesting committee staff to work additional hours (in some cases, a significant number of hours).

The last two strategies cannot be continued in the long term.

Senators have indicated—in estimates and other committee hearings, as well as to senior managers and in the senators' satisfaction survey—their concerns about the heavy workloads of some committee secretariats. One senator noted in the survey:

I appreciate that the committee secretaries have put in extraordinary hours in recent months. I believe we need to provide additional support when the pressure is on.

The typical staff structure of a committee secretariat supporting a legislative and general purpose standing committee comprises a committee secretary, a principal research officer, a senior research officer or a research officer and an estimates officer, and an executive assistant. Depending on the workload allocated to a committee, additional resources are often provided to assist with administration or with research, analysis and report writing.

The prime cost in operating a committee is for staffing, with a typical secretariat costing about \$308,000 a year. The other costs relate to administration and include items such as advertising, venue hire, refreshments at hearings, transport, including flights, charter flights and taxis, accommodation for staff at interstate hearings and report printing. The administrative costs for a typical secretariat over a year are about \$60,000.

The standing orders provide that committees are empowered to appoint persons with specialist knowledge for the purposes of the committee with the approval of the President of the Senate. While the most common source of information for Senate committees is free public evidence, access to specialist advice was made on two occasions during 2008–09:

- Rural and Regional Affairs—testing of fertiliser samples (\$1,204)
- Select Committee on Fuel and Energy—economic modelling (\$10,000).

The costs of senators' salaries are not included in the costs of committees, as it is not possible to establish what proportion of a senator's salary should be attributed to committee work. The flight and accommodation costs of senators attending hearings are paid by the Department of Finance and Deregulation.

Another major cost related to the work of committees is the cost of providing Hansard and broadcasting services for public hearings. Such expenses are borne by the Department of Parliamentary Services. Coordination and liaison in the provision of those services and in planning for the improvement and enhancement of those services is a major administrative task undertaken by officers of the Senate Committee Office and the Department of Parliamentary Services.

Evaluation

The principal means of evaluating the performance of the Committee Office in supporting Senate committees and certain joint committees is the biennial senators' survey. The latest survey, conducted in 2009, showed high levels of satisfaction with the work of secretariats. Some survey comments are set out in Figure 19.

Comments made in the chamber when a committee’s report is tabled or debated are another source of evaluation. As in 2007–08, senators were highly positive in their comments, some of which are listed in Figure 19.

Informal feedback from witnesses also indicated satisfaction with their dealings with secretariat staff.

Figure 19 **Senators’ comments on Committee Office secretariats**

‘The committee staff have continually impressed with their dedication and talent, and ability to pull off high-quality work despite the sometimes contradictory political demands placed on them.’

‘Over the years I’ve found the committees on which I’ve been fortunate enough to work to be well supported. When there have been problems, they have been ones that have been possible to work out. Again, we’re dealing with staff with a high level of expertise and skill and professionalism who, knowing the workload that many of them encounter, really do go above and beyond.’

‘Oh, they are all brilliant ... nothing’s a hassle for these people. Crises arise and they just deal with it. I think that sort of thing makes it much easier for us to do our jobs.’

‘The workload for Senate committees has increased dramatically over the past two years. Secretariat staff are to be commended for the hours they put in and support they give when attending Senate inquiries outside Canberra.’

‘I commend the staff ... for the hard work that they put into this entire exercise ... It is an extremely busy committee of the Senate, but it manages to produce high-quality reports on each occasion.’

‘I want to thank the staff of the committee, who do a tremendous job, year in, year out, in making sure that we, the senators who serve on that committee, look good by having high-quality reports available for the public to see.’

‘The sensitivity, the commitment and the professionalism of the people in the secretariat are what makes ... an effective committee.’

‘Professional, enthusiastic ... nothing is too much trouble ... briefing materials provided were outstanding ...’

The senators’ survey provided very useful information to assist the office in finetuning its provision of service to senators. For example, there was commentary about the lack of consistency in administrative procedures and documentation between committees. Although this was tempered with the remark that standardisation could only be used as a starting point and that each committee is best placed to decide its own practices, the office will examine the matter during the next reporting period.

Another factor raised, within the context of a 91 per cent satisfaction rating, was that ‘papers should be posted 24 hours ahead of the scheduled meeting time’. While meetings are often scheduled with much shorter lead times, the office will also examine this matter during the next reporting period.

REPORT ON PERFORMANCE – OUTPUT GROUP 4

Performance outlook

The level of Senate committee activity is likely to remain high during the next 12 months. The pattern of referring many bills with very short reporting deadlines is likely to continue. Now that references committees have been re-established, it is likely that there will be an increase in the number of general policy references.

The Procedure Committee report in April 2009 which recommended the re-establishment of the legislation and references committee system also forecast a general reduction in the number of select committees and the likely transfer of workload from select committees to references committees. This trend was becoming evident towards the end of the 2008–09, with two select committees completing their tasks. It remains to be seen whether the remaining select committees will complete their tasks during 2009–10 or whether they will be granted extensions of time. If, contrary to the forecast, the Senate decides to establish further select committees, the Committee Office will respond in the usual way by providing timely and effective secretariat support.

The Committee Office responded to the increased pace of committee activity throughout 2008–09 by increasing its staff numbers, and it will continue to monitor its resource levels in 2009–10. The key resource which the office provides to committees is its people. Several experienced officers are expected to retire in 2009–10, and the office will need to begin recruitment processes to find their replacements.

The office will continue to recruit and seek to retain staff with strong research, administrative, writing and procedural skills. It will also make use of secondments to assist with short-term increases in workload, making it easier to release officers if the workload diminishes. Officers from other departments coming to the Senate to participate in the Working in the Senate program will continue to be based in the Senate Committee Office.

The uneven spread of work among committees continues to be a challenge. The office will continue to respond with its flexible approach of allocating staff where the greatest need exists, to ensure that draft reports are prepared to the highest quality possible within the timeframes set by the committees and the Senate.

Several factors arising from the senators' survey will be followed up, including streamlining the formats for providing supporting documentation, and increasing the speed of its production where timetables and committee preferences permit.

The office is adopting innovative ways to meet the needs of Senate committees by using information technology to reduce routine processing and improve productivity. To this end, the office will continue implementing the committee support database to assist secretariats to efficiently manage their inquiry processes. It is hoped that the secretariats not yet using the database will be using it by the end of 2009–10.

Two other innovations will be pursued by the Committee Office during the forthcoming year. As video footage taken from Senate hearings is increasingly being used for broadcast on television, a committee comprising the various chairs of Senate committees has initiated ways of identifying Senate footage, enabling the public to recognise it by means of a watermark. The office also hopes to continue exploring the feasibility of telecasting public hearings that are held interstate, in the same way that public hearings held in Parliament House are telecast.