

Committee Office

Output

Secretariat support and procedural advice to the Senate legislative and general purpose standing committees, select committees, and certain joint committees.

Performance information

Performance results

The degree of satisfaction of the Chair of Committees, committee members and other senators with the quality and timeliness of advice and support.

Formal and informal feedback shows that senators consider the support provided by the Committee Office to be effective. Many senators acknowledged the high workload of the Committee Office during this reporting period.

Draft reports, reports and other documents are timely, accurate and of a high standard. Tabling deadlines are met.

Accurate advice, documentation, publications and draft reports were provided to committees in accordance with their requirements. Reports were drafted and presented to the Senate in accordance with the timeframes agreed by committees and deadlines set by the Senate.

Inquiry information, evidence and reports are published promptly upon authorisation.

Information was updated promptly and accurately on committee web pages. Submissions and other documents and reports were published in line with decisions of committees.

Overview

Committee Office secretariats support legislative and general purpose standing committees, select committees and certain joint committees. The office is led by the Clerk Assistant (Committees) and the Senior Clerk of Committees, and the allocation of secretaries to committees at 30 June 2015 is shown in figure 9. The cost of the office in 2014–15 was \$8.9 million (\$7.7 million in 2013–14), with staff salaries comprising approximately 77 per cent of the budget. The remaining costs were administrative (for example, transport and accommodation for secretariat staff, advertising inquiries, venue hire).

Committee secretariats managed inquiries efficiently throughout the year, by processing submissions, publishing material to committee websites and arranging hearings in Canberra and around Australia, sometimes at short notice. Secretariats also provided advice to chairs and committee members, including in relation to matters which raised complex procedural issues. Committees routinely endorsed and adopted this advice in their proceedings. Staff also provided administrative support to committees, analysed the evidence they received, drafted reports and arranged for their tabling and publication, and assisted witnesses and others to participate in inquiries.

Figure 9 Elements and responsibilities of the Committee Office

Executive

Brien Hallett, Clerk Assistant
Jackie Morris, Senior Clerk of Committees

Procedural advice and training
 Planning and coordination
 Secretariat staffing and resources
 Statistics and records

Legislative and general purpose standing committee secretariats	Joint committee secretariats	Senate select committee secretariats
<i>Community Affairs</i> Jeanette Radcliffe	JOINT STATUTORY <i>Corporations and Financial Services</i> Toni Matulick	<i>School Funding</i> ¹ Stephen Palethorpe
<i>Economics</i> Kathleen Dermody	<i>Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity</i> Stephen Palethorpe	<i>National Broadband Network</i> David Sullivan
<i>Education and Employment</i> Julia Agostino	<i>Law Enforcement</i> Stephen Palethorpe	<i>Abbott Government's Budget Cuts</i> Lyn Beverley
<i>Environment and Communications</i> Christine McDonald	<i>National Disability Insurance Scheme</i> Mark Fitt	<i>Health</i> Stephen Palethorpe
<i>Finance and Public Administration</i> Lyn Beverley	JOINT SELECT <i>Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples</i> Toni Matulick	<i>Certain Aspects of Queensland Government Administration related to Commonwealth Government Affairs</i> ² Julia Agostino
<i>Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade</i> David Sullivan	<i>Australia Fund Establishment</i> Mark Fitt	<i>Wind Turbines</i> Jeanette Radcliffe
<i>Legal and Constitutional Affairs</i> Sophie Dunstone		<i>Recent Allegations relating to Conditions and Circumstances at the Regional Processing Centre in Nauru</i> Toni Matulick
<i>Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport</i> Tim Watling		<i>Murray Darling Basin Plan</i> Mark Fitt

1 Ceased on 9 July 2014
 2 Ceased on 27 March 2015

During the year committees experienced a sustained period of very high workload, with large numbers of inquiries and hearings, and the establishment of eight new select committees supported by the office. The full-time equivalent staffing level in 2014–15 was 58 (53 in 2013–14), reflecting the need to support this high level of activity.

Comments made in the Senate when a committee report is tabled or debated is one means of evaluating the performance of the office. As was the case in previous reporting periods, senators regularly highlighted the contribution of committee staff when tabling reports. Informal feedback from senators and witnesses also continued to indicate high levels of satisfaction with the advice and support provided by secretariats.

Management and leadership

Under standing order 25(10) a Chairs' Committee, comprising the chairs of standing committees and Senate select committees, may be convened by the Deputy President to discuss any matter relating to their operations. The Clerk Assistant (Committees) is the secretary. During 2014–15, this committee met twice and considered procedural issues related to the orders of the Senate governing estimates hearings and the treatment of witnesses at public hearings.

Committee secretaries met regularly throughout the year to discuss administrative issues and procedural matters.

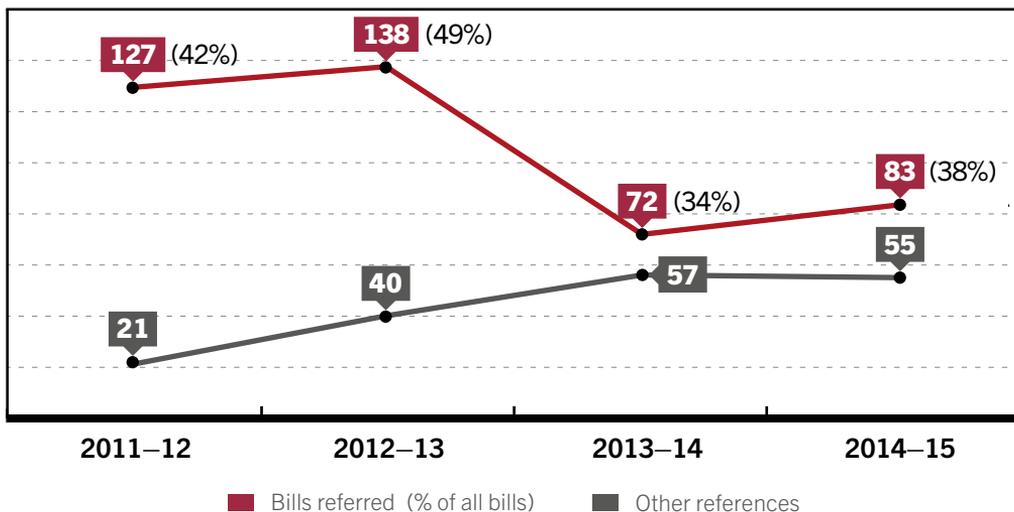
Activity levels and workload

The workload of committee staff is determined by the level of activity of the committees they support, which is in turn determined by decisions of the Senate and of the committees themselves. During this financial year, the Committee Office faced a heavy and demanding workload in terms of the number of committees and inquiries supported.

References and reports

Figure 10 indicates the number of references to committees over recent years.

Figure 10 Number of references to committees



Bill inquiries continue to account for the largest number of references, although there were fewer than in the comparable year of the 43rd Parliament. The noticeable increase reported last year in the number of other matters referred to committees supported by the Committee Office was sustained this year. The number of active inquiries during the year included many matters referred, but not reported on, during 2013–14. Secretariats managed up to 83 inquiries at once and prepared 210 reports for presentation to the Senate. Tables 3 and 4 compare the number of reports produced over the past 4 years.

Table 3 Reports presented by legislative and general purpose standing committee

Reports presented	2011–12	2012–13	2013–14	2014–15
Bills	73	94	48	95
Interim reports (bills)	2	6	5	9
References	26	32	28	38
Interim reports (references)	14	16	27	15
Reports on annual reports	16	16	16	16
Estimates	17	16	16	16
Total	148	180	140	189

Table 4 Reports presented by select and joint committees

Reports presented	2011–12	2012–13	2013–14	2014–15
Senate select	2	2	6	8
Joint select	5	6	0	4
Joint statutory	19	23	3	9
Total	26	31	9	21

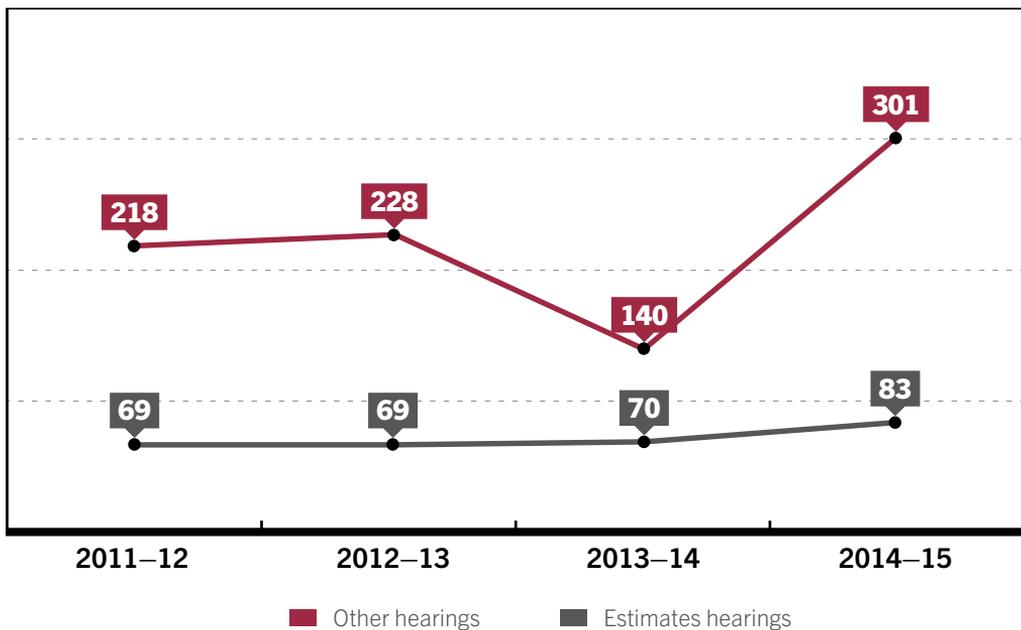
Another indicator of workload lies in the scope and complexity of some references. For example, this year Senate committees conducted inquiries into legislation regarding higher education reforms, affordable housing, residential care arrangements for young disabled people, the Commonwealth's treaty making process, the performance of Australia Post, an incident at the Manus Island Detention Centre and arrangements for the marketing of Australian sugar. Joint committees examined and reported on issues including constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and professional standards in the financial services industry.

The Committee Office consistently met deadlines for providing briefing material and draft reports to committees during the year, often with tight timeframes. The volume of work during this period meant that, in some cases, secretariats were unable to support the drafting of dissenting reports or additional comments which is undertaken when resources permit.

Submissions, public hearings and witnesses

Other telling indicators of workload are the numbers of submissions received, hearings organised and witnesses heard. In 2014–15, the Committee Office processed 9,305 submissions – the majority of which were also published online – and an additional 1,874 form letters. As shown in figure 11, the office also organised 384 public hearings: 83 estimates hearings, up from 69 or 70 held annually in recent years; and 301 hearings connected to other inquiries – twice the number held in the previous year and 30 percent more than in any year in the previous parliament. Figure 11 shows the number of hearings held over the past 4 financial years.

Figure 11 Number of committee hearings



Secretariats arranged for 8,494 witnesses to provide evidence, including 4,095 appearing at estimates hearings. They also arranged approximately 635 private meetings and 19 site inspections.

Legislative and general purpose standing committees

The Senate has eight pairs of legislative and general purpose standing committees established pursuant to standing order 25. Each pair of committees comprises a legislation committee and references committee, which continue for the life of a parliament. While legislation committees consider bills, budget estimates and the annual reports and performance of government agencies, matters referred to references committees typically relate to broader policy issues with longer timeframes in which to conduct inquiries.

A full cycle of estimates hearings was conducted and reported on by legislation committees during the year, commencing in October 2014 with a week of supplementary hearings for the 2014–15 Budget. A week of additional estimates hearings was held in February 2015. The main estimates hearings for the 2015–16 Budget took place between 25 May and 5 June 2015. The use of spill over days was more frequent than the previous year with several committees holding additional hearings in each estimates round to consider the estimates for particular departmental outcomes or agencies.

Senate select committees

During 2014–15, the Committee Office supported eight Senate select committees, which is an increase on previous years. Two of those, the Select Committee on School Funding and the Select Committee on Certain Aspects of Queensland Government Administration related to Commonwealth Government Affairs presented final reports. In addition, the Senate select committees on the National Broadband Network, the Abbott Government's Budget Cuts, Health and Wind Turbines all presented interim reports.

Joint committees

During 2014–15, the Committee Office continued to support three joint statutory committees: Corporations and Financial Services, the Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity, and Law Enforcement.

The office also supported two joint select committees: the Joint Select Committee on the Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and the Joint Select Committee on the Australia Fund Establishment. Both joint select committees tabled their final reports in June 2015.

Specialist advice

One request for specialist advice was made during 2014–15. This was advice from a consultant requested by the Economics References Committee in relation to some of the highly technical issues raised in its inquiry into Australia's Innovation System. This contract was not concluded during the reporting period so the final cost will be reported on in 2015–16 but it is estimated the cost will be approximately \$26,000.

Information management

The provision of information to the public about the work of Senate committees continues to be an area of focus for the Committee Office, which continued to work closely with SPIO to provide information about committee activities through the Senate website and social media. In particular, the office worked with SPIO on a project to improve systems for the receipt and publication of answers to questions taken on notice during estimates hearings. This project will improve the capacity to search evidence received through the estimates process. The first stage of the project will be delivered during 2015–16.

International engagement

In 2014–15, Committee Office staff served as secretaries to outgoing parliamentary delegations and also acted as presenters for international delegations visiting Australia. This included the Clerk Assistant (Committees) acting as the secretary to the Australian parliamentary delegation to the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Principal Research Officer to the Economics committees supporting a delegation by that committee to Canada and Singapore.

Performance outlook

During 2014–15, the Committee Office supported committees managing a very large number of inquiries, many with tight deadlines. The office maintained the high quality of its support to committees by recruiting additional staff and through the willingness of all employees to work flexibly across different committees and to undertake significant additional hours in periods of peak demand. Additional one-off funding to the Committee Office in the 2015–16 financial year will assist the office to manage what is clearly a sustained period of elevated activity. If these levels of activity continue in the next Parliament, a permanent increase in resourcing will be necessary if support to committees is to be maintained at the same high standard.