

Output Group 4—Committee Office

Outputs		
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>Formal and informal feedback mechanisms continue to show that senators consider the support provided by the Committee Office to be effective.</p> <p>Both in the 2007 senators' survey and 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.
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 and within constraints arising from the availability of members.</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 forms.</p>

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Analysis

During 2006–07, 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.

Senate committees continued to focus on bills inquiries. In 2006–07, 44 per cent of bills introduced into the Parliament were referred to Senate committees, compared to 47 per cent in 2005–06. This corresponds to an increase in the number of bills introduced into the Parliament (Table 5) and reflects an increase in the number of inquiries conducted.

Table 5 **Bills referred to Senate committees, 2005–06 and 2006–07**

	2005–06	2006–07
Number of bills introduced into Parliament	165	243
Number of individual bills referred	78	107
Percentage of individual bills referred	47%	44%
Packages of bills referred	59	79
Percentage of packages of bills referred	36%	33%

The reporting timeframes for bills inquiries remained tight, with a 30-day average reporting deadline, a slight increase on the average of 27 days for 2005–06. This figure is based on a timeline commencing from the date the bill was referred and concluding with the date the committee reported (Table 6). In 2006–07, 12 bills were referred by the Senate contingent on their introduction into the Parliament. For example, the Workplace Relations Amendment (A Stronger Safety Net) Bill 2007 was referred to the Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee for inquiry on 10 May 2007, with a reporting date of 14 June 2007, but the bill was not introduced into the House of Representatives until 29 May 2007. For 19 days of its inquiry, the committee was therefore not in a position to examine the detail of the bill, presenting difficulties for the committee, staff and witnesses.

Table 6 **Bills inquiries and average reporting deadlines**

	2005–06	2006–07
Packages of bills referred	59	79
Reporting deadline (total number of days)	1,619	2,360
Average (days)	27.44	29.87

The Committee Office conducted a number of recruitment processes to ensure that staffing levels were sufficient to meet the demands made of secretariats. In October 2006, staff numbers were at their lowest level, with 49.9 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff. Unfortunately, this coincided with a period of high activity for committees (13 bills referred for eight inquiries with short reporting timeframes). Although the selection processes for most vacant positions had been finalised, there were delays in the appointed staff taking up positions. The FTE staff figure for 2006–07 was 52.1, reflecting in part the low staffing levels earlier in the year. FTE staffing numbers have hovered between 53 and 55 since January 2007.

The Community Affairs Committee and the Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee each conducted a large number of inquiries in 2006–07. The average FTE staff numbers for these committee secretariats (5.2 and 5.0, respectively, for the year) reflect this workload and compare with the average FTE staff (3.4) employed for the Finance and Public Administration Committee, which had a lighter workload.

Last year’s annual report highlighted the variability in work patterns, and this persisted during 2006–07. The Committee Office continued the system under which the busiest secretariats borrowed additional staff from those with lighter schedules.

The average cost of supporting the legislative and general purpose standing committees was \$480,000, compared to \$458,000 in 2005–06 and \$520,000 in 2004–05. The slight increase on the 2005–06 figure principally reflects increases in salary costs.

**Table 7 Legislative and general purpose standing committees
—workload trends**

	2004–05	2005–06	2006–07
References to:			
Legislation committees	45	61	5 ^a
References committees	28	12	1 ^a
Standing committees (from 11 September 2006)			84
Total	73	73	90
Reports presented	90	84	94
Meetings held	249	252	267
Hearings held	143	164	161
Witnesses heard	1,419	1,895	1,860
Extensions of time granted	35	55	33

Note: Statistics for legislation committees exclude those relating to legislation committee work on the estimates and consideration of annual reports.

a To 11 September 2006.

For the second consecutive year, no select committees operated.

During the year, the Committee Office continued to support two ongoing statutory committees—the Parliamentary Joint Committee on the Australian Crime Commission and the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Corporations and Financial Services.

The *Law Enforcement Integrity Commissioner Act 2006* commenced on 30 December 2006, heralding the establishment of a new parliamentary joint committee early in 2007—the Parliamentary Joint Committee on the Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity. The committee, which is supported by the Committee Office, held its first meeting on 10 May 2007.

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The cost of the Committee Office in 2006–07 was \$8.3 million (\$8.2 million in 2005–06). The costs included staff travel, accommodation and venue hire, and the costs of some non-government witnesses. Committees administered by the Committee Office did not use the services of any consultants during the year. The costs of senators attending hearings are paid by the Department of Finance and Administration.

Figure 15 shows the structure of the Committee Office.

Figure 15 **Elements and responsibilities of the Committee Office**

Executive	
<i>Maureen Weeks, Clerk Assistant</i> <i>Roxane Le Guen, Senior Clerk</i> Procedural advice Planning and coordination Secretariat staffing and resources Statistics and records	
Legislative and general purpose standing (legislation and references) committee secretariats	Joint statutory committee secretariats
Community Affairs <i>Elton Humphery</i>	Australian Crime Commission <i>Jacqui Dewar</i>
Economics <i>Peter Hallahan</i>	Corporations and Financial Services <i>David Sullivan</i>
Employment, Workplace Relations and Education <i>John Carter</i>	Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity <i>Jacqui Dewar</i>
Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts <i>Ian Holland</i>	
Finance and Public Administration <i>Stephen Palethorpe</i>	
Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade <i>Kathleen Dermody</i>	
Legal and Constitutional <i>Jackie Morris</i>	
Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport <i>Jeanette Radcliffe</i>	

Note: Secretaries for committees are shown as at 30 June 2007.

Procedural changes and advice

Secretaries continued to provide procedural and strategic advice to committee chairs and members. Higher level advice was provided by the Clerk, Deputy Clerk, Clerk Assistant (Committees) and Senior Clerk of Committees. The advice, both oral and written, covered many parliamentary privilege issues and matters such as the power of committees to call witnesses, adverse reflections on persons made in evidence and protection of witnesses. Advice was also provided on a number of matters arising out of estimates hearings, including the extent of questioning allowed under the orders of the Senate and the bases on which information can be refused to committees.

In 2005, standing order 74 was amended to introduce a new accountability mechanism to address the late provision of answers to questions taken or placed on notice during the estimates process. Amended standing order 74(5) enables a senator, 30 days after the date an answer is due, to ask the relevant minister in the chamber why an estimates question on notice has not been answered. It was used on three occasions: 14 August 2006, 7 September 2006 and 10 May 2007. Estimates reports and questions at hearings also continued to highlight concerns about the provision of answers long after the due date.

The Chairs' Committee, established under standing order 25(10), met on two occasions (13 and 20 June 2007) to consider the Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration's report, *Transparency and accountability of Commonwealth funding and expenditure*. Recommendation 18 of that report was that the Chairs' Committee consider the proposals made by the Auditor-General during the inquiry to provide assistance to the legislative and general purpose standing committees in their consideration of estimates. The Chairs' Committee reported to the Senate on 21 June 2007.

Legislative and general purpose standing committees

Last year's annual report foreshadowed a change to the structure of the Senate's committee system. On 11 September 2006, changes to the structure of the legislative and general purpose standing committees, agreed by the Senate on 14 August 2006, took effect. Previously, 16 committees operated: two for each portfolio grouping (one legislation and one references). The twin committees were amalgamated and membership of the new committees increased from six to eight, with a government senator as committee chair. The responsibilities of the two committees were blended so that the one committee now examines matters referred by the Senate (usually subject-oriented matters), in addition to inquiring into and reporting on bills, estimates of proposed expenditure, annual reports and the performance of government departments and agencies. Outstanding inquiries were continued by the new committees. The committees are established under amended standing order 25 as permanent committees and continue for the life of the parliament. They are re-established at the commencement of each new parliament, with their membership determined by the Senate.

Prior to the structural amendments of September 2006, legislation committees were referred four bills or packages of bills, and one other matter. The committees tabled 10 reports, excluding seven reports on annual reports.

In the other nine months of the year, the new committees had 84 matters referred, 74 of which were bills or packages of bills. As a result of all inquiries, 81 reports, excluding annual reports and estimates reports, were tabled.

In total, 78 bills inquiries were conducted by Senate committees during the year, resulting in 73 reports on legislation. Senate committees also tabled 21 reports on other matters.

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Comparisons with previous years are difficult because the committee structure has changed and work previously undertaken by two committees is now the responsibility of one. However, during 2005–06, legislation committees had 61 matters referred to them, including 59 bills or packages of bills, and tabled 65 reports, excluding the 15 reports on annual reports.

All legislative and general purpose standing committees are required by standing order 25(20) to report regularly on the annual reports of departments and agencies within their portfolio responsibilities. The new committees met this requirement in March 2007 with the tabling of reports by all eight committees. In early September 2006, under the previous committee structure, seven committees presented reports on annual reports in accordance with the standing orders. The Community Affairs Committee did not present a report, as it had no annual reports to consider. The total of 15 reports in 2006–07 is comparable with the 2005–06 figures.

Table 8 **Legislation committees—activity from 2002–03 to 11 September 2006**

	2002–03	2003–04	2004–05	2005–06	2006
Meetings (number)					
Public	57	79	41	74	9
Private	140	173	118	151	20
Inspections/other	2	0	0	0	0
Meetings (hours)					
Public	395	248	131	304	55
Private	45	43	28	45	13
Matters referred					
Bill/provisions of bills	51	53	45	61	4
Other (inc. annual reports)	17	22	9	16	8
Reports presented^a	54	77	64	65	17
Submissions received	3,019	1,545	734	8,319	163
Witnesses	583	773	412	1,093	133

^a Excludes estimates.

Table 9 **Standing committees—activity from 11 September 2006 to 30 June 2007**

2006–07	
Meetings (number)	
Public	119
Private	230
Inspections/other	9
Meetings (hours)	
Public	499
Private	113
Matters referred	
Bills/provisions of bills	74
Other (includes annual reports) ^a	18
Reports presented^a	89
Submissions received	2,594
Witnesses	1,371

a Excludes estimates.

Committees considering the estimates of proposed expenditure of Australian government departments and agencies sat for 715 hours in the budget cycle. The cycle commenced in May–June 2006 with the budget estimates, with supplementary hearings being held in October–November 2006 and additional estimates in February 2007. Under the new committee structure, 16 reports on estimates were prepared and tabled by committees. For details, see Table 10.

Table 10 **Committees considering estimates**

Budget cycle	Hours of estimates hearings held			No. of witnesses	No. of pages of evidence
	Budget estimates (hours)		Additional estimates (hours)		
	Main hearings May–June	Supplementary hearings October–November	February		
2007–08	333:00			1,832	4,004
2006–07	334:07	187:05	194:17	4,329	9,335

At the May–June 2007 budget estimates hearings for the 2007–08 budget cycle, committees sat for a total of 333 hours and senators asked an estimated 34,800 questions. The figures for the 2006–07 budget estimates hearings were similar (334 hours and about 33,700 questions).

Due to the large volume of answers received at the last moment, difficulties in processing answers to questions on notice from estimates hearings continued. Many departments and agencies provided answers just before, or during, the next scheduled round of estimates hearings, which limited the ability of senators to follow up issues. Prior to the Budget estimates hearings, the Department of Health and Ageing, Austrade, AusAID, the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research and Export Finance and Insurance

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Corporation were the only agencies to have provided all answers by 11 May 2007. On that date, the Department of Veterans' Affairs had not responded to any of the 93 questions that were on notice from the additional estimates hearings held in February 2007, despite a deadline of 29 March 2007.

In the two and a half months that references committees operated, only one matter was referred to them. Forty-one meetings (both public and private, together with inspections) were held and three reports were tabled. Following the restructuring of the committees, reference work outstanding was completed by the new committees.

Table 11 **References committees—activity 2002–03 to 11 September 2006**

	2002–03	2003–04	2004–05	2005–06	2006
Meetings (number)					
Public	136	115	85	75	22
Private	112	133	131	101	17
Inspections/other	44	21	17	16	2
Meetings (hours)					
Public	518	528	347	334	106
Private	41	72	55	38	4
Matters referred					
Bill/provisions of bills	23	11	26	12	0
Other (inc. annual reports) ^a	1	2	2	0	1
Reports presented^a	10	21	41	19	3
Submissions received	1,953	3,954	891	1,117	271
Witnesses	1,719	1,294	1,007	802	356

Note: Meeting hours have been rounded to the lowest whole hour.

^a Excludes estimates.

Select committees

A select committee is an ad hoc committee created to inquire into and report on a specific matter. It usually has a limited life and ceases to exist when it presents its final report.

No select committees were established during 2006–07; nor did any select committee report and thus expire.

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.

At 30 June 2007, the Committee Office was supporting three statutory joint committees: Corporations and Financial Services, the Australian Crime Commission, and the Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity. However, for most of 2006–07 it supported only two committees, as the Parliamentary Joint Committee on the Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity did not hold its first meeting until 10 May 2007.

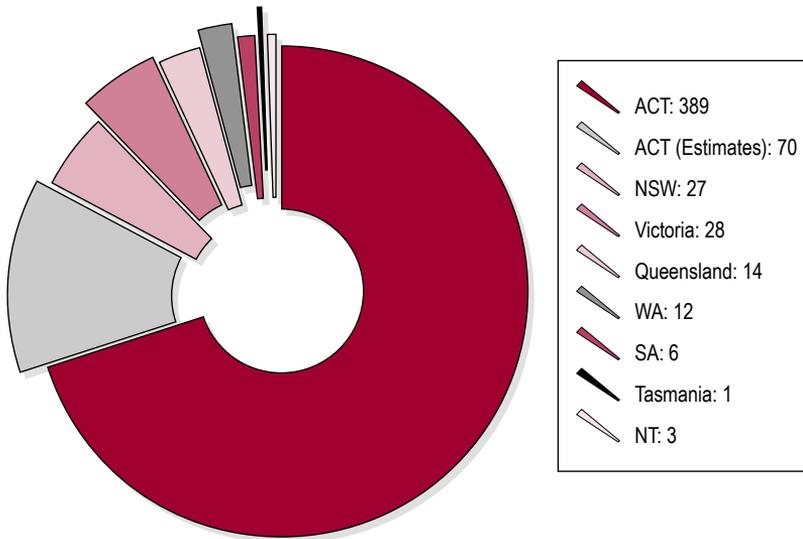
The committees held 52 meetings (public and private, and inspections), for a total of 93 hours. They received 160 submissions and heard 178 witnesses. The comparable figures for 2005–06 were 73 meetings, 130 hours, 187 submissions and 306 witnesses.

Meetings

Senate committee secretariats supported 550 meetings, hearings and site inspections during the year, compared with 536 in 2004–05 and 597 in 2005–06. These figures include statistics relating to estimates hearings held by the committees.

Committees have continued to reach out to communities by travelling interstate, including to regional centres, to hold hearings and site visits. A breakdown of meetings by location appears in Figure 16.

Figure 16 **Committee meetings by location, 2006–07**



Significant changes in functions and services

The debate over the government’s proposal to restructure the Senate’s committee system and the ensuing inquiry by the Procedure Committee gave the Committee Office clear notice of the impending changes. The office took that time to prepare, resulting in a smooth transition. Committees were reappointed and conducted their first meetings in a routine manner. Other necessary adjustments, such as updating websites, were identified and managed in order to minimise potential problems arising from the restructure. The restructure did not result in any significant changes to the structure of the Committee Office.

Work continued on the development of a web-based information system. In 2006–07, the objectives of the proposal were refined. The Senate Centralised Information Database project will include an increase in the use of dynamically generated website information, reducing workloads within secretariats and providing greater flexibility in delivering committee information. It is expected that this phase of the database project will be implemented by early 2008.

As flagged in the 2005–06 annual report, the procedural manual was finalised and distributed to all Committee Office staff in October 2006. The administration manual, which provides advice on administrative matters relating to committee activities, is substantially completed and will be circulated to staff after consultation.

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Work on guidelines to assist committees when making decisions on privacy and other matters related to publishing submissions, particularly on the internet, has progressed.

Factors, events and trends influencing performance

Committee workloads continued to be uneven throughout 2006–07. While some committees struggled with a large number of active inquiries, others received limited work. The practice of reallocating staff from underutilised secretariats to those with heavier workloads was continued. This reallocation of staff extended to creating sub-secretariats where an inquiry was moved from a particularly busy secretariat to an underutilised one. Staff recognise the benefits to personal and corporate development from being exposed to the work practices of other committees. Requests from busy secretariats for assistance are now routine, and the response is ready, willing and cooperative. Although some concern is still expressed at the loss of ‘corporate knowledge’ for some inquiries, committee members have accepted that the process is managed so that any such loss is minimised and they appreciate the willingness of ‘guest’ staff.

The constriction of timeframes for inquiries, particularly legislation inquiries, also influenced the performance of the Committee Office. Some reporting dates preceded the passage of bills through the House of Representatives. The limited time to consider complex and often controversial legislation was noted by committees in reports and by senators in debate.

The committee also notes the complexity of copyright law and the issues raised by the Bill which, in the context of the short timeframe, has made the committee’s task challenging.

(Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee Report—*Provisions of Copyright Amendment Bill 2006*, November 2006, p. 38)

We gave people so little time to prepare their comments on the legislation. We gave the committee itself and the secretariat a ridiculously short time to present the report.

(Senator Moore, Child Support Legislation Amendment (Reform of the Child Support Scheme—New Formula and other Measures) Bill 2006 debate, transcript, 8 November 2006, p. 124)

The short timeframes for inquiries often required committee staff to work long hours and, on occasion, weekends to ensure that committees met the deadlines and provided reports that canvassed and analysed the issues raised by witnesses. Nonetheless, committees sometimes expressed frustration that the reporting deadlines meant that some issues could not be addressed.

... the Committee wishes to record that this very short inquiry has provided insufficient time to analyse the specifics of some concerns raised in evidence, especially in relation to longer term possible impact of these reforms.

(Community Affairs Committee Report, National Health Amendment (Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme) Bill 2007 [Provisions], June 2007, p. 1)

The impact on staff morale is particularly significant when there are substantial delays between the presentation of a report and the Senate debating the legislation.

Evaluation

The principal means of evaluating the performance of the Committee Office in supporting Senate and certain joint committees is the biennial senators' survey. The survey was conducted early in 2007 and showed high levels of satisfaction with the work of secretariats. The level of satisfaction can be determined from the views expressed in the open-ended comments in Figure 17.

Comment made in the chamber when a committee's report is tabled or debated is another source of evaluation. As was the case in 2005–06, senators were highly positive in their comments, some of which are again listed in Figure 17.

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

Figure 17 **Senators' comments on Output Group 4 secretariats**

- 'Service is excellent.'
- '... [the secretariat] had extensive work to do in preparation, research, analysis and organisation. Their input has been valuable.'
- 'Support provided is of a very high standard.'
- '... the unsung heroes of course are the secretariat staff who deal with the complexities of this kind of legislation.'
- 'I think the secretariat services that are provided by the committee are critical. There are plenty of things that couldn't and wouldn't function anywhere near as well as they do if it weren't for the experience and knowledge and professionalism of the staff.'
- '... the committee staff ... It is not easy when you get an exercise of this magnitude and you pull it all together in six months.'
- '... to thank the committee secretariat, who once again have done a fabulous job in bringing together all of the evidence and submissions that contributed to this report.'
- '... how important it is to have the assistance of qualified, talented advisers in performing the duties which both the parliament and the Australian public expect the committees of the Senate and the parliament to do.'

Performance outlook

A continuing challenge for the Committee Office is the uneven spread of work among committees. The key to responding to these fluctuating workloads is the staff.

The office will continue its flexible approach to allocating staff to best meet the needs of committees and ensure that draft reports are prepared to the highest quality possible within the timeframes set by the committees and the Senate. Training and development will be ongoing to encourage the retention of motivated staff with the skills necessary to meet these demands. The election period and the relatively quiet period at the commencement of a new parliament both present opportunities for such training. The election period is also an ideal time for staff to take extended leave.

The strong skills base of existing staff will be matched, where necessary, by recruiting staff with strong research, administrative, writing and procedural skills.

The office will continue to explore innovative ways of using information technology to reduce routine processing work and improve productivity.