

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>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, 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>

REPORT ON PERFORMANCE – OUTPUT GROUP 4

Analysis

During 2007–08, 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.

The workload for committee secretariats during 2007–08 was unevenly distributed, as a result of the election period in the second half of 2007 and a light sitting pattern in the first half of 2008.

The reporting timeframes for bills inquiries were tighter than ever before in the period prior to the 2007 election, with an average reporting deadline of 14.7 days. Since the beginning of the new parliament, bills referred to committees have had a 49-day average reporting deadline, which is a longer timeframe than at any time since 2003–04. The combination of the pre-election and post-election timelines resulted in a 38-day average reporting deadline for 2007–08, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Referrals and deadlines for bills inquiries, 2005–06 to 2007–08

	2005–06	2006–07	2007–08
Number of bills introduced into parliament	165	243	197
Number of individual bills referred	78	107	65
Proportion of total individual bills referred	47%	44%	33%
Packages of bills referred	59	79	50
Proportion of total packages of bills referred	36%	33%	25%
Reporting deadline (total number of days)	1,619	2,360	1,924
Average reporting deadline (days)	27	30	38

The full-time equivalent staff figure for 2007–08 was 53, a figure similar to that for the previous year. The quieter period experienced by committees during the election period was balanced by a need for staff to service the newly appointed select committees in the second half of the year. Staffing numbers fell below 49 in the middle of the year but were above 55 at the end of the year, in response to the increasing pace of committee activity.

The variability of work patterns, a feature highlighted in recent annual reports, persisted in 2007–08. The Committee Office continued the system under which the busiest secretariats borrowed additional staff from those with lighter schedules.

Six select committees were established in the second half of the year, four of which required secretariat support between February–March and June 2008.

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

The cost of the Committee Office in 2007–08 was \$8.0 million (\$8.3 million in 2006–07). The costs included expenses for staff travel, accommodation and venue hire and, in accordance with the relevant committee’s decision, the costs of travel and accommodation for 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 were paid by the Department of Finance and Deregulation.

Figure 14 shows the structure of the Committee Office.

Figure 14 Elements and responsibilities of the Committee Office

<p style="text-align: center;">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</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</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>David Sullivan</i> Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity <i>Jacqui Dewar</i>	Agricultural and Related Industries <i>Jeanette Radcliffe</i> Housing Affordability in Australia <i>(ceased to exist 16 June 2008)</i> State Government Financial Management <i>Stephen Palethorpe</i> Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities <i>John Carter</i> Fuel and Energy <i>Roxane Le Guen</i> National Broadband Network <i>Maureen Weeks</i>

REPORT ON PERFORMANCE – OUTPUT GROUP 4

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 a wide variety of parliamentary privilege issues, such as the unauthorised disclosure of committee proceedings, the power of committees to call witnesses, the protection of those witnesses, and adverse reflections on persons made in evidence to committees. Advice was also provided on a number of matters arising out of estimates hearings, including claims of confidentiality relating to advice provided by departments to ministers and the bases on which information can be refused to committees. The Senate did not make changes to standing orders relating to committees during the year.

Legislative and general purpose standing committees

Eight legislative and general purpose standing committees are established pursuant to standing order 25 as permanent committees and continue for the life of each parliament. They are re-established at the commencement of each new parliament, with their membership determined by the Senate.

During 2007–08, the Senate referred 74 matters to standing committees, 50 of which were bills or packages of bills. As shown in Table 4, those committees tabled 101 reports, excluding reports on estimates.

Table 4 **Activities of standing committees**

	2005–06	2006–07	2007–08
Meetings (number)			
Public	148	150	90
Private	252	267	207
Inspections/other	16	11	3
Meetings (hours)			
Public	638	660	445
Private	83	130	70
Matters referred			
Bills/provisions of bills	93	79	50
Other ^a	12	27	39
Reports presented^b	99	109	101
Submissions received	9,436	3,028	3,905
Witnesses	1,895	1,860	1,165
Extensions of time granted	55	33	25

a Includes 15 annual reports.

b Excludes estimates; includes reports on annual reports.

As shown in Table 5, the cycle for 2007–08 commenced with estimates hearings in May–June 2007; no supplementary hearings were held in October–November 2007 (because of the federal election). Additional estimates proceeded as usual in February 2008, in the week following the start of the Forty-second Parliament. The 2008–09 budget estimates hearings took place in May–June 2008.

Table 5 **Activities of committees considering estimates, 2006–07 to 2008–09 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	February			
2008–09	322	–	–	–	2,901	5,701
2007–08	333	<i>Not held</i>	183	516	1,832	4,004
2006–07	334	187	194	715	4,329	9,335

a Main hearings.

b Supplementary hearings.

Overall, the 2007–08 budget cycle estimates involved 333 hours of hearings and about 33,700 questions. At the May–June 2008 estimates hearings for the 2008–09 budget cycle, committees sat for a total of 322 hours and senators asked about 34,800 questions.

Sixteen reports on estimates were prepared by committees and tabled, eight after the budget estimates and eight following the additional estimates.

Select committees

A select committee is an ad hoc committee created to inquire into and report on a specific matter. In most cases, a select committee ceases to exist when it presents its final report.

The Senate established six select committees in 2007–08. One of those committees, the Select Committee on Housing Affordability in Australia, presented its report to the Senate on 16 June 2008 and no longer exists.

The Committee Office continues to provide secretariat support for:

- two select committees established by the Senate on 14 February 2008
 - the Select Committee on Agricultural and Related Industries
 - the Select Committee on State Government Financial Management
- one select committee established on 19 March 2008, the Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities
- two select committees established on 25 June 2008
 - the Select Committee on Fuel and Energy
 - the Select Committee on the National Broadband Network.

Select committees are taking on new features, some of which were previously the domain of standing committees. For example, the Select Committee on Agricultural and Related Industries, which was initially charged with considering issues relating to farm fertilisers, was given a new reference on 25 June 2008 to consider food production in Australia. The reporting date of 27 November 2009 for the second reference substantially extends the term of the select committee. The Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities was established to operate for the life of the parliament, reporting at stipulated times during that period.

In addition, the resolutions of appointment for each select committee provide for both ‘full’ members and ‘participating’ members on committees.

The Senate has placed a number of requirements on how the select committees, particularly the Select Committee on the National Broadband Network, conduct their inquiries. The

REPORT ON PERFORMANCE – OUTPUT GROUP 4

resolution of appointment for the Select Committee on the National Broadband Network includes in the committee's terms of reference a number of organisations from whom formal submissions are to be requested, and the categories of expertise of organisations and individuals from whom contributions will be invited. It also places a formal requirement on the committee to take evidence in a 'manner that is open and transparent to the public'.

These changes add to the workload and responsibilities of Committee Office staff and make it more difficult to staff the select committees with officers with the necessary skills.

During 2007–08, select committees held 43 meetings (public and private), for a total of 142 hours. They received 211 submissions and heard 207 witnesses. No select committee existed during the previous year.

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.

During 2007–08, the Committee Office supported three statutory joint committees: Corporations and Financial Services, the Australian Crime Commission, and the Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity.

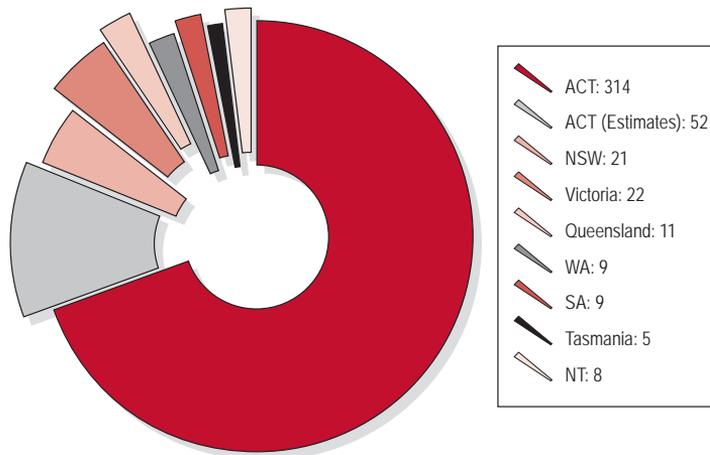
The committees held 56 meetings (public and private and inspections) for a total of 61 hours. They received 72 submissions and heard 105 witnesses. The corresponding figures for 2006–07 were 52 meetings, 93 hours, 160 submissions and 178 witnesses.

Meetings

Senate committee secretariats supported 451 meetings, hearings and site inspections during the year, compared with 550 in 2006–07. Those figures include statistics relating to estimates hearings held by the committees.

Committee members place considerable value on engaging a broad range of people as they conduct each committee inquiry. This is achieved by travelling interstate, including to regional centres, and by conducting telephone and video conferences. A breakdown of meetings by location appears in Figure 15.

Figure 15 Committee meetings by location, 2007–08



Database development

Work continued on the development of the Senate Centralised Information Database (SCID). A few problems in the initial stages delayed the proposed first trial of accepting and processing submissions through a web-based system. A working prototype was available for demonstration in the final weeks of 2007–08. The first trial will be conducted early in 2008–09.

During the election period, committee secretariat staff members gathered historical information to populate the database so that it can be operational as soon as testing is completed. The system is designed to reduce the workloads facing secretariats when they deal with short inquiries that necessitate rapid processing of submissions.

The SCID system will also assist secretariats in managing the privacy of those making submissions, by automatically generating lists that keep witnesses' personal details separate from their submissions.

Australian Research Council project

Given that not all committees had ongoing inquiries over the election period, this period presented an ideal opportunity for the researchers who staff the Committee Office to undertake work as part of the Australian Research Council project Strengthening Parliamentary Institutions (see Output Group 3).

Three papers relating to the work of Senate committees were researched and written by staff of the Committee Office. All three papers focus on aspects of committee work and are intended to assist in informing staff about the work of committees.

Dr Richard Grant and Mr Glenn Ryall took a new look at the much discussed question of how to measure the effectiveness of committees. They surveyed the views of committee secretaries from the Senate and the House of Representatives on the merit and applicability of 40 possible indicators of the effectiveness of committee inquiries. The work highlighted the difficulties in using the same criteria to assess the effectiveness of committees regardless of the type of committee and the nature of the inquiry.

The second paper was prepared by two staff members of the secretariat for the Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, Ms Jackie Morris and Ms Sophie Power. They considered participation in inquiries by examining the impact of set factors on the number of submissions received by the committee during the Fortieth Parliament and the Forty-first Parliament. In doing so, they were able to draw some conclusions about the extent to which their committee is able to access community views during its inquiries on policy issues and proposed legislation.

The final paper was prepared by Dr Ian Holland, with research assistance from Ms Julie Dennett, Ms Jacquie Hawkins, Ms Jackie Morris, Mr Peter Short, Ms Di Warhurst and Ms Jo Woodbury. It considered the role of Senate committees in the course of the Senate's deliberations on legislation. The paper looks at six issues, drawing conclusions as to the impact of committee recommendations on the legislative process, among other things.

All the papers included primary research, which took considerable time. The research not only contributes to the aims of the project and the literature on parliaments but also gives the staff a unique view of their work on behalf of Senate committees. It is perhaps this perspective that is most valuable to the work of the Committee Office, as it empowers staff to approach their work with a renewed vigour. (See Appendix 5 for publication details.)

REPORT ON PERFORMANCE – OUTPUT GROUP 4

Factors, events and trends influencing performance

Overall workload declined in 2007–08, partly due to the limited committee inquiry activity in the several months of the election period. However, this averaging masks high levels of activity that occurred at the end of the previous parliament and, in particular, in the new parliament.

The period before the November 2007 election was marked by continuing severely constricted timeframes for legislation inquiries, and by a dearth of reference inquiries. By contrast, 2008 has seen increased timeframes for legislation inquiries and a burgeoning of general reference work.

Both before and after the election period, a number of committees received a disproportionate share of references. At one time, for example, the Standing Committee on Economics was conducting 14 inquiries simultaneously. The Committee Office continued to respond to the uneven distribution of inquiries by reallocating staff from the underutilised secretariats to those with heavier workloads. Staff recognise the benefit to themselves and to the department of becoming a guest worker on another committee, and respond positively to their temporary transfers.

Senate committees continue to exist after an election is called, and some committees continued to work actively on inquiries during the election period. Among them were:

- the Standing Committee on Community Affairs, which continued its inquiry into the cost-of-living pressures on older Australians and held a public hearing, attended by eight senators, in Brisbane on 8 February 2008
- the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, which continued to draft its final report into Australia's involvement in peacekeeping operations.

Staff took the opportunity provided by the election period to complete the usual end-of-parliament tasks, such as archiving, and to undertake training and development not always possible during busier periods. Some staff members also took extended leave during that period.

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 latest survey, conducted in early 2007, showed high levels of satisfaction with the work of secretariats, as was reported in the previous annual report.

Comments made in the chamber when a committee's report is tabled or debated are another source of evaluation. As was the case in 2006–07, senators were highly positive in their comments, some of which are listed in Figure 16.

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

Figure 16 **Senators' comments on Output Group 4 secretariats**

'I want to thank the secretariat in particular ... for their wonderful work and the professionalism with which they pulled together this report. We thank them very much for their assistance.'

'I want to ... put on record my thanks ... most particularly to the secretariat of our committee because of the ridiculous time frame that was presented to our committee to present this report.'

'I also want to thank the committee secretariat ... which, at the same time as doing its other committee work, has carried the work of this select committee absolutely excellently, and I am very grateful for its professional support.'

'I also thank the secretariat for their efforts over the many months of deliberations and hearings and for their responses to the submissions that were made.'

'I also want to thank the secretariat of the committee, who worked so well to ensure that all of the people who wanted to be part of this process could be part of it and were effectively engaged and able to have their voices heard ... In a quite difficult time they were able to work with the committee to present a reasonable and balanced report which puts forward the issues ...'

Performance outlook

The level of Senate committee activity is likely to remain elevated during the next 12 months, with high levels of legislative work, a renewed interest in general references, and the requirement to support newly established select committees.

The Committee Office responded to the increased pace of committee activity toward the end of 2007–08 by increasing its staff numbers, and will continue to monitor its resource levels in the next year. The key resource which the office provides to committees is its people. The office will continue to recruit and seek to retain staff with strong research, administrative, writing and procedural skills.

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.

The office is adopting innovative ways to meet the needs of Senate committees by using information technology to reduce routine processing and improve productivity. One highlight of the new year will be the pilot program and eventual rollout of the SCID system to assist secretariats to efficiently manage their inquiry processes.