

Committee Office

Output

Provision of secretariat support 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 President, Deputy President, committee members and senators, as expressed through formal and informal feedback mechanisms, with the quality and timeliness of advice and support to committees.

Formal and informal feedback shows that senators consider the support provided by the Committee Office to be effective.

Advice, documentation, publications and reports are timely, accurate and of a high standard. Tabling deadlines met in all but extraordinary circumstances.

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.

Information about inquiries, evidence published by committees and reports are available to the public promptly online or in hard copy.

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. This role includes providing procedural advice and administrative support to committees by processing submissions, arranging meetings and public hearings, analysing the evidence received by committees, drafting reports, and assisting witnesses and the general public to participate in committee inquiries.

The Committee Office is led by the Clerk Assistant (Committees). The cost of the Committee Office in 2013–14 was \$ 7.7 million (\$8.1 million in 2012–13), with staff salaries comprising approximately 79 per cent of the budget. The remaining costs were administrative (for example, advertising inquiries, venue hire, transport and accommodation).

The Committee Office consistently met deadlines for providing briefing material and draft reports to committees during the year, and often did so against significant time pressures. In addition, secretariats provided clear and accurate procedural advice to chairs and

committee members including in relation to matters which raised complex procedural issues for committees to consider. Secretariats also provided efficient management of inquiries including processing submissions and arranging hearings at locations around Australia occasionally at very short notice.

Comments made in the Senate when a committee report is tabled or debated provide one means of evaluating the performance of the office. Senators regularly singled out the contribution of committee staff when tabling reports. In addition, several retiring senators took the opportunity to acknowledge in their valedictory statements the support they had received from committee secretariat staff. Informal feedback from senators and witnesses also continued to indicate high levels of satisfaction with the advice and support provided by secretariats.

The workload of committee staff is determined by the level of activity of the committees they support. Prior to each round of estimates hearings, the department provides the Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee with a report on committee office workload and staffing. Although the average level of activity for the year was lower, due to the election period, the report provided in May 2014 recorded a lower overall level of demand, due to reduced activity during the election period, but quickly rising once sittings resumed to the same elevated levels seen in the previous two parliaments.

The office managed up to 71 inquiries at once and prepared 149 reports. The full-time equivalent staffing level in 2013–14 was 53 (57 in 2012–13).

Management and leadership

Committee secretaries met regularly throughout the year to discuss departmental and office management issues and procedural matters encountered by secretariats.

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 2013–14, this committee met twice and considered procedural issues related to Senate estimates hearings and the duplication of inquiries by Senate and House of Representatives committees.

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

Community Affairs
Jeanette Radcliffe
Economics
Kathleen Dermody
Education and Employment
Julia Agostino
Environment and Communications
Christine McDonald
Finance and Public Administration
Lyn Beverley
Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
David Sullivan
Legal and Constitutional Affairs
Sophie Dunstone
Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
Tim Watling

Joint statutory and standing committee secretariats

Corporations and Financial Services
Toni Matulick
Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity
Stephen Palethorpe
Law Enforcement
Stephen Palethorpe
National Disability Insurance Scheme
Mark Fitt

Select committee secretariats

Joint select
Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples
Toni Matulick
DisabilityCare Australia¹
Lyn Beverley
Senate select
Cyber Safety²
Christine McDonald
Abbott Government's Commission of Audit³
Lyn Beverley
School Funding
Stephen Palethorpe
National Broadband Network
David Sullivan
Abbott Government's Budget Cuts
Lyn Beverley
Health
Stephen Palethorpe

1. Ceased on 5 August 2013
 2. Ceased on 30 August 2013
 3. Ceased on 19 June 2014

Activity levels

The overall workload for 2013–14 was high despite the year including an election period. For example, Senate committees conducted inquiries into legislation to repeal the Minerals Resource Rent Tax and the carbon tax, the performance of the Australian Securities and Investments Commission, biosecurity and quarantine arrangements relating to the importation of fresh produce, the overseas aid program and the care of people living with dementia. Joint committees examined and reported on issues including the spectrum for public safety mobile broadband.

As an indication of the level of committee activity, 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 committees

Reports presented	2010–11	2011–12	2012–13	2013–14
Bills	82	73	94	48
Interim reports (bills)	10	2	6	5
References	41	26	32	28
Interim reports (references)	29	14	16	27
Reports on annual reports	15	16	16	16
Estimates	15	17	16	16
Total	192	148	180	140

Table 4 Reports presented by select and joint committees

Reports presented	2010–11	2011–12	2012–13	2013–14
Senate select	9	2	2	6
Joint select	2	5	6	0
Joint statutory	6	19	23	3
Total	17	26	31	9

Bill inquiries continue to account for the largest number of inquiries, though there was a significant reduction in the number of bill inquiries compared to the previous financial year due to the election break. Of the 212 bills introduced into the Parliament in 2013–14, 72 (or 34 per cent) were referred to committees supported by the Senate department. The numbers of references to joint committees administered by the department decreased to historically more usual levels whilst there was an increase in reports from Senate select committees compared to the previous 2 years. Figure 10 indicates the number of references to committees over recent years.

Figure 10 Number of references to committees



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 and references committee, which continue for the life of a parliament and are re-established at the commencement of each new parliament. While legislation committees are responsible for considering 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 November 2013 with a week of supplementary hearings for the 2013-14 Budget. A week of additional estimates hearings was held in February 2014. The main estimates hearings for the 2014-15 Budget took place between 26 May and 5 June 2014. Two committees held additional hearings to further consider the estimates for particular agencies.

Senate select committees

During 2013-14, the Committee Office supported six Senate select committees. Two of those, the Select Committee on the Abbott Government's Commission of Audit and the Select Committee on Cyber Safety presented final reports. In addition, the Senate Select Committee on the National Broadband Network presented an interim report in March 2014.

Joint committees

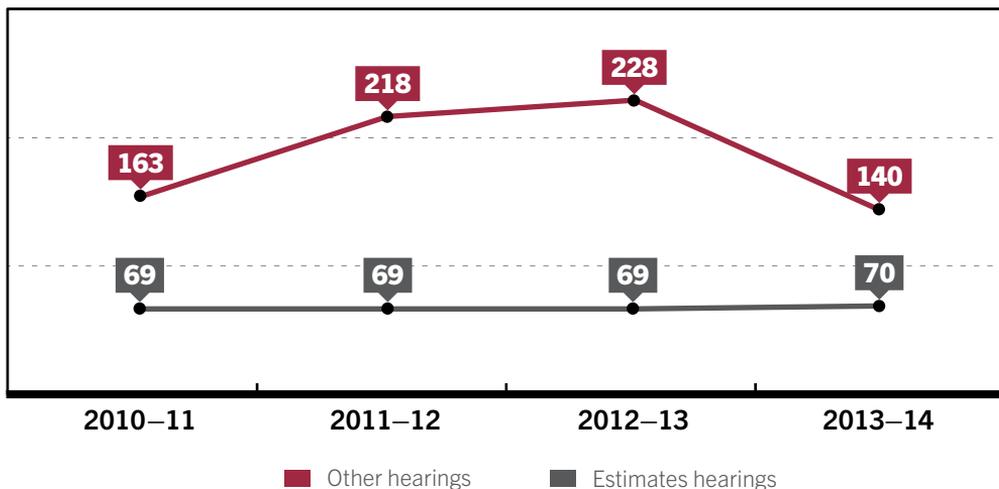
During 2013–14, the Committee Office continued to support three joint statutory committees: Corporations and Financial Services, the Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity, and Law Enforcement.

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 DisabilityCare Australia, which each built on the work of similar committees established in the 43rd Parliament.

Submissions, public hearings and witnesses

In 2013–14, the Committee Office processed 5,813 submissions, 10,353 form letters and, in one inquiry, 11,100 emails expressing individual opinions on a bill. The office also organised 210 public hearings (including 70 estimates hearings) and arranged for 6,236 witnesses to provide evidence (4,437 appearing at estimates hearings). Secretariats also arranged approximately 459 private meetings. Figure 11 shows the number of hearings held over the past 4 financial years.

Figure 11 Number of committee hearings



Specialist advice

One request for specialist advice was made during 2013–14. This was legal advice requested by the Joint Select Committee on the Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, at a cost of approximately \$9,000.

Information management

An area of growing focus for the Committee Office is the provision of information to the public about the work of Senate committees. The Committee Office continued to work closely with SPIO during the year to provide information about committee activities to the general public through the Senate website and social media. Enhancements to the Shared Committees Information Database (SCID) which provided more functionality to committee webpages as well as some internal administrative improvements were delivered early in the year.

International engagement

In 2013–14, 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) taking on the role of secretary to the Australian parliamentary delegation to the Inter-Parliamentary Union. The office also supported the Pacific Parliamentary Partnerships program by seconding two Committee Secretaries: one to the Samoan Legislative Assembly for three months and the other to the Parliament of the Cook Islands for one month. The Secretary to the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee also supported a delegation by that committee to Vanuatu and New Zealand as part of an annual parliamentary committee exchange program.

Performance outlook

During the year, the Committee Office provided high quality support to committees often whilst managing a large number of inquiries, many with tight deadlines. This was achieved because the office operated in a very flexible way with staff working for different committees as required. As a very high proportion of the budget of the Committee Office is committed to staffing, there is limited scope for any future budget reductions to be absorbed without an impact on the level of support provided to committees.