

Committee Office

Outputs

Secretariat support and procedural advice to the 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, including reference to committee reports during debates in the Senate, shows that senators consider the support provided by the Committee Office to be effective.
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. As a result of workload, assistance with preparing dissenting reports or additional comments could not be provided in some cases where it was requested.
Inquiry information, evidence and reports are published promptly upon authorisation.	Information was updated promptly and accurately on committee web pages though the volume of inquiries meant that committees sometimes had to set priorities in relation to which material should be published first. Submissions and other documents and reports were published consistent with the decisions of committees.
Inquiries from the public regarding committees are handled promptly and professionally.	Telephone and email queries from the public were responded to promptly and accurately. Members of the public had ready access to the material they requested regarding committee activities or procedures.

Overview

Committee Office secretariats supported the legislative and general purpose standing committees, nine select committees and four joint committees (see figure 10). During the year committees experienced a sustained period of very high workload, with large numbers of inquiries and hearings. The cost of the office in 2015–16 was \$10.7 million (\$8.9 million in 2014–15), with staff salaries comprising approximately 93 per cent of the budget. As a result of the continuing high levels of committee activity, the full-time equivalent staffing level in 2015–16 rose to 67 (58 in 2014–15).

The remaining costs were administrative (for example, transport and accommodation for secretariat staff attending hearings, advertising inquiries, printing and venue hire). Despite a further reduction in expenditure on advertising compared to previous years, these administrative costs were higher than in 2014–15 due to the high numbers of interstate committee hearings.

Committee secretariats provided administrative support to committees including processing submissions, publishing material to committee websites and arranging hearings around Australia, sometimes at very short notice. Staff also analysed the evidence committees received, drafted briefing material and reports, arranged for the tabling and publication of reports, and assisted witnesses and others to participate in inquiries. Finally, secretariats provided advice to chairs and committee members, including in relation to matters which raised complex procedural issues.

The high workload of committees had two major consequences for the support provided to committees: first, committees were at times asked to set priorities for the consideration and publication of evidence; and secondly, secretariats were not able to provide assistance with the drafting of dissenting reports and additional comments in some cases where it was requested. The pressure this workload placed upon senators is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that on a few occasions committee hearings were cancelled, or rescheduled at short notice, due to a lack of quorum. This was generally the result of senators having competing commitments with other committees.

Comments made in the Senate when committee reports are tabled or debated provide one means of evaluating the performance of the office. Several senators highlighted the contribution of committee staff when tabling such reports, or in their valedictory speeches. Similarly, debate on several bills illustrated the extent to which senators relied upon the committee inquiry into the bill to support their consideration of the proposed legislation. Informal feedback from senators and witnesses also continued to indicate high levels of satisfaction with the quality of the advice and support provided by secretariats.

Figure 10 – 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

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
 Corporations and Financial Services

Toni Matulick
 Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity
Stephen Palethorpe

Law Enforcement
Stephen Palethorpe

JOINT STANDING
 National Disability Insurance Scheme
Mark Fitt

JOINT SELECT
 Nil

Establishment of a National Integrity Commission
Jane Thomson

Health
Stephen Palethorpe

Murray-Darling Basin Plan
Mark Fitt

National Broadband Network
David Sullivan

Recent Allegations relating to Conditions and Circumstances at the Regional Processing Centre in Nauru
Toni Matulick

School Funding Investment
Mark Fitt

Scrutiny of Government Budget Measures
Lyn Beverley

Unconventional Gas Mining
Toni Matulick

Wind Turbines
Jeanette Radcliffe

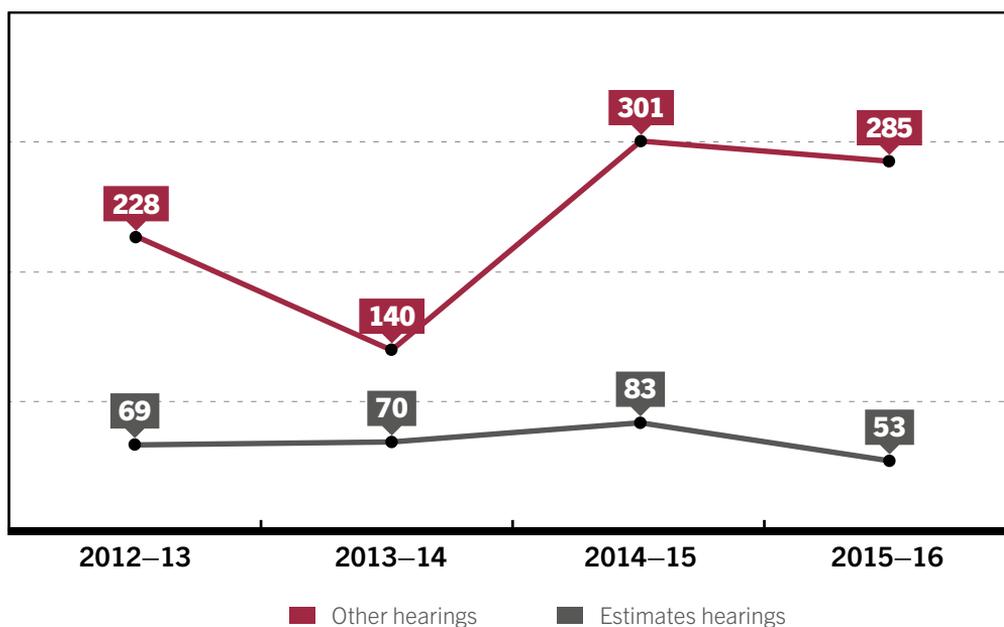
Activity levels and workload

The workload of the committees supported by the Committee Office is determined by decisions of the Senate and of the committees themselves. During this financial year, the Committee Office again faced a heavy workload in terms of the number of committees and inquiries supported. In particular, continuing trends evident in 2014–15, the office supported a large number of reference committee inquiries and select committees. The highest number of inquiries managed at one time (February 2016) was 83.

Submissions, public hearings and witnesses

The heavy workload of committee secretariats during 2015–16 is evident in the administrative support provided to committees in relation to the processes committees use to collect evidence. This included processing 12,273 submissions (compared to 9,305 in 2014–15); and arranging 336 public hearings (including 53 estimates hearings). The assistance provided by secretariats allowed committees to take evidence from 6,341 witnesses (including 2,404 witnesses at estimates hearings). In addition, secretariats supported committees by arranging 531 private meetings (including 2 stand-alone in-camera hearings) and 18 site inspections.

Figure 11 – Number of committee hearings, 2012–13 to 2015–16



To manage this volume of work the office continued to operate in a highly flexible manner with staff regularly working across committees in order to deal with peaks in workload. Assisting committees to make decisions in relation to the receipt and publication of evidence involves secretariats advising on sometimes complex procedural matters. Committees regularly adopted the advice of secretariats on those matters.

Estimates hearings

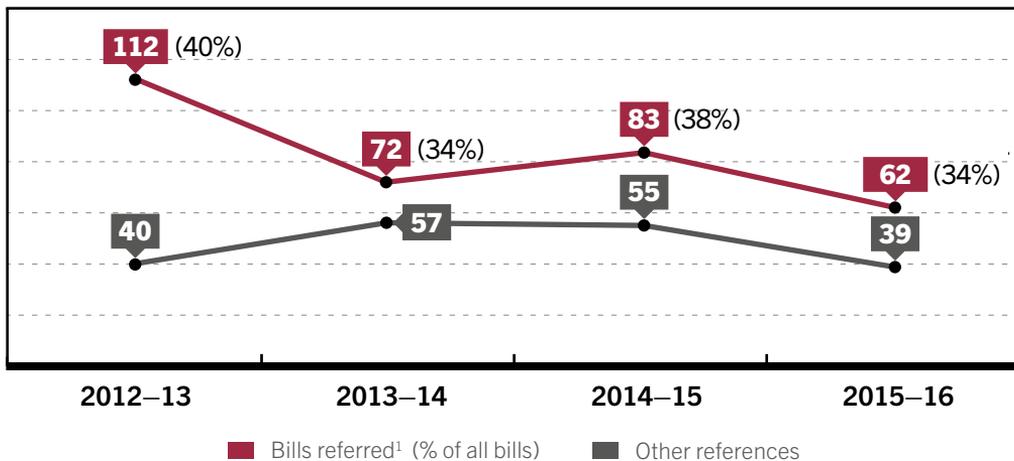
The eight legislation committees conducted estimates hearings relating to the 2015–16 Budget in October 2015 with a week of supplementary hearings and in February 2016 when a week of additional estimates hearings was held. On 19 April 2016, the Senate resolved to hold the main estimates hearings for the 2016–17 Budget on just two days: 5 and 6 May 2016. The compressed time frame for organisation and the conduct of these hearings presented some logistical issues for committees but the hearings ultimately proceeded smoothly. This reduced period for consideration of Budget Estimates is the main reason for the reduction in the number of estimates hearings compared to the previous financial year.

References and reports

As usual, committees inquired into and reported on a diverse array of topics including corporate tax avoidance, the exploitation of temporary work visa holders, domestic violence, out of home care, firefighting foam contamination, marine plastic pollution and accommodation for people with disabilities.

While the rate of new references to committees per sitting day remained high, the overall number was lower, affected by the dissolution of the Senate on 9 May 2016.

Figure 12 – Number of references to committees, 2012–13 to 2015–16¹



The office supported committees to table a total of 200 reports for the year including larger numbers of reference inquiry and select committee reports than over the previous three financial years. By contrast, the number of joint committee reports declined from 13 in 2014–15 to eight in 2015–16. There was also a reduction in the number of reports on bills, once again reflecting the impact of the election period.

¹ These figures refer to packages of bills referred to committees not to the number of individual bills referred.

Table 2 – Reports presented by legislative and general purpose standing committees, 2012–13 to 2015–16

Reports presented	2012–13	2013–14	2014–15	2015–16
Bills	94	48	95	70
Interim reports (bills)	6	5	9	2
References	32	28	38	42
Interim reports (references)	16	27	15	38
Reports on annual reports	16	16	16	16
Estimates	16	16	16	9
Total	180	140	189	177

Table 3 – Reports presented by select and joint committees, 2012–13 to 2015–16

Reports presented	2012–13	2013–14	2014–15	2015–16
Senate Select	2	6	8	15
Joint Select	6	0	4	0
Joint Statutory/Standing	23	3	9	8
Total	31	9	21	23

The quality of reports is inherently difficult to measure as each report, while initially drafted by Committee Office staff, is in the end a committee document which reflects the views of senators undertaking the inquiry. Nevertheless, informal feedback from senators and some participants in inquiries suggests that, despite the pressure created by the volume of reports, the high quality of committee reports was maintained. This was largely achieved through the dedication and expertise of core secretariat staff, the recruitment of additional research staff and, on occasion, staff from other areas of the department providing research and drafting assistance.

Public information

The provision of information to the public about the work of Senate committees is an area of particular focus for the Committee Office. In addition to regular updates, the office used the election period to review the information provided to the public, particularly through the Senate web pages, to ensure that the language used can be readily understood and to improve the structure and presentation of material which explains how to participate in committee inquiries.

The office continued to work with SPIO on a project to improve systems for the receipt and publication of answers to questions taken on notice during estimates hearings. However, the delivery of the first stage of the project was delayed as a result of other projects being given priority including a project to develop a new template for committee reports which will allow the publication of committee reports in more accessible electronic formats.

International engagement

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 which attended assemblies in Switzerland and Zambia. In addition, the secretary to the Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme supported a parliamentary delegation to the United States of America and the secretary to the Education and Employment committees supported a delegation to New Zealand.

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 2015–16, this committee met to consider issues related to unauthorised disclosure of committee documents and Committee Office workload.

Committee secretaries met regularly throughout the year to discuss administrative issues and procedural matters. The election period provided an opportunity for a more intensive focus on training and development activities with Committee Office staff at all levels including several internal training sessions directed at strengthening both procedural and administrative skills.

Performance outlook

The 2015–16 financial year again saw the Committee Office support a large number of inquiries including arranging 285 committee hearings and assisting committees to table 200 reports. This occurred despite the dissolution of the Senate and the House of Representatives bringing an end to committee activity during the final two months of the year. The office retained additional staff to meet this demand. Additional funding to the department in the 2016–17 financial year will assist the Committee Office in the short term to manage what now appears to be an ongoing trend of higher inquiry activity by Senate and some joint committees. This level of activity appears likely to continue for at least the next financial year as several committees presented interim reports indicating an intention to have matters re-referred in the 45th Parliament in order to conclude their consideration.