

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, 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, eight select committees and five joint committees (see figure 10). During the year committees continued to experience a sustained period of heavy workload, with high numbers of inquiries and hearings. The cost of the office in 2016–17 was \$10.6m (\$10.7m in 2015–16), with staff salaries comprising approximately 95 per cent of the office's total expenses. As a result of the continuing high levels of committee activity, the full-time equivalent staffing level in 2016–17 rose to 68 (67 in 2015–16).

The remaining costs continued to be administrative (for example, transport and accommodation for secretariat staff attending hearings, advertising inquiries, printing and venue hire). These administrative costs continue to be high 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 a number of consequences for the support provided to committees including that committees were at times required to prioritise inquiries and the consideration and publication of evidence; secretariats were not always able to provide assistance with the drafting of dissenting reports and additional comments and reports were drafted to increasingly tight time frames which limits the depth in which committees can pursue inquiries. The pressure this workload placed upon senators continues to be manifested in the rescheduling of hearings at short notice because of competing demands to attend multiple hearings and the number of requested extensions to reporting timeframes.

Again, 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. Similarly, senators continue to place reliance on committee inquiries to inform debate on bills. 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
Tim Bryant, 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
Mark Fitt

Education and Employment
Stephen Palethorpe

Environment and Communications
Christine McDonald

Finance and Public Administration
Lyn Beverley

Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
David Sullivan

Legal and Constitutional Affairs
Toni Matulick

Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
Jane Thomson

JOINT STATUTORY
 Corporations and Financial Services

Patrick Hodder

Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity

Sophie Dunstone

Law Enforcement

Sophie Dunstone

JOINT STANDING

National Broadband Network

Ann Palmer

National Disability Insurance Scheme

Gerry McInally

JOINT SELECT

Nil

Exposure Draft of the Marriage Amendment (Same-Sex Marriage) Bill

Gerry McInally

Funding for Research into Cancers with Low Survival Rates

Sophie Dunstone

Future of Public Interest Journalism

Tim Watling

Lending to Primary Production Customers

Stephen Palethorpe

National Integrity Commission

Sophie Dunstone

Red Tape

Gerry McInally

Resilience of Electricity Infrastructure in a Warming World

Patrick Hodder

Strengthening Multiculturalism

Gerry McInally

Activity levels and workload

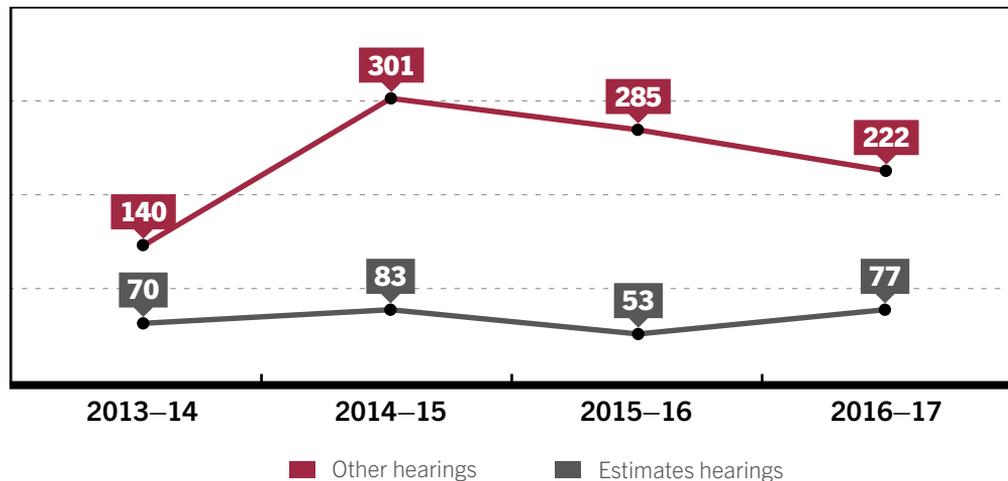
The simultaneous dissolution of both houses of Parliament in 2016 meant that the 45th Parliament did not commence until 30 August 2016. Committees in the new Parliament were not established until the first weeks of September. Despite this, committee workload remained high.

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. The highest number of inquiries managed at one time (February and June 2017) was 71.

Submissions, public hearings and witnesses

The continuing heavy workload of committee secretariats during 2016–17 is evident in the administrative support provided to committees in relation to the processes committees use to collect evidence. This included processing 9,208 submissions (compared to 12,273 in 2015–16). This figure does not include the more than 20,000 emails and letters received by the Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee as part of its inquiry into the Native Title Amendment (Indigenous Land Use Agreements) Bill 2017. In addition, secretariats arranged 299 public hearings (including 77 estimates hearings) at which 7,143 witnesses appeared (including 3,899 witnesses at estimates hearings). Secretariats also supported committees by arranging 593 private meetings and 18 site inspections.

Figure 11 – Number of committee hearings, 2013–14 to 2016–17



Again, 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

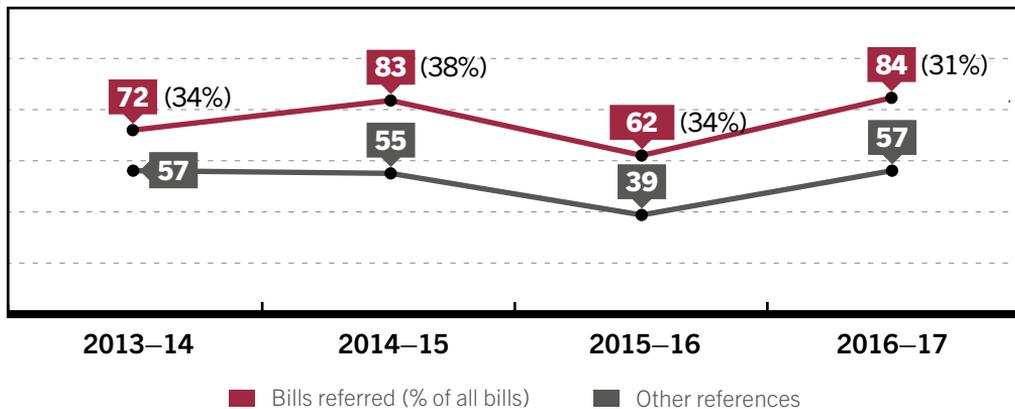
Estimates hearings proceeded as scheduled in 2016–17. The 77 hearings that were held in 2016–17 were higher than the previous year because of the compressed time frame due to the election break in the previous year.

References and reports

As usual, committees inquired into and reported on a diverse array of topics including the future of Australia’s aged care sector workforce, white collar crime, coal fired power stations, gender segregation in the workplace, the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, and airport and aviation security.

Despite the 2016 election, the total number of references returned to 2014–15 levels.

Figure 12 – Number of references to committees, 2013–14 to 2016–17¹



The office supported committees to table a total of 158 reports, which is high for an election year. The 2015–16 total of 200 reports was higher than usual as a result of the high number of interim reports that committees tabled in response to the simultaneous dissolution, unanticipated at the time the inquiries were originally referred.

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, 2013–14 to 2016–17

Reports presented	2013–14	2014–15	2015–16	2016–17
Bills	48	95	70	63
Interim reports (bills)	5	9	2	3
References	28	38	42	46
Interim reports (references)	27	15	38	7
Reports on annual reports	16	16	16	16
Estimates	16	16	9	16
Total	140	189	177	151

Table 3 – Reports presented by select and joint committees, 2013–14 to 2016–17

Reports presented	2013–14	2014–15	2015–16	2016–17
Senate Select	6	8	15	4
Joint Select	0	4	0	0
Joint Statutory/Standing	3	9	8	3
Total	9	21	23	7

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 continues to be maintained. This was largely achieved through the dedication and expertise of core secretariat staff, increased by recent extra funding, 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 ongoing focus for the Committee Office.

The office continued to work with SPIO on projects to improve systems for writing reports and managing the high volume of answers to questions on notice provided to committees during estimates.

International engagement

Committee Office staff acted as presenters for international delegations visiting Australia and one secretary, the secretary to the Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme, supported a parliamentary delegation to Kiribati and Tonga. The Clerk Assistant (Committees) provided secretariat support to an Inter-Parliamentary Union delegation.

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 2016–17, this committee met to consider issues related to the operation of standing orders relating to the operation of estimates hearings and the use of technology to expedite committee work.

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

Performance outlook

The 2016–17 financial year again saw the Committee Office support a large number of inquiries despite the slight reduction in sitting days. This level of activity appears likely to continue for at least the next financial year.