



Legislative Assembly

PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEES

The Parliament of New South Wales is made up of the Legislative Assembly (Lower House) and the Legislative Council (Upper House). One or both Houses of the Parliament may decide to appoint a parliamentary committee.

WHAT IS A PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE?

Committees are small groups of members of Parliament appointed by one or both Houses of Parliament to undertake a particular task or function. The membership of these committees tends to reflect the diverse political make-up of the House from which they are drawn, i.e. a majority from the Government and the remainder from the Opposition, minor parties and independents.

A committee which is appointed by both the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council contains Members from each House and is known as a Joint Committee.



Committees focus attention on specific issues and encourage meaningful deliberations. Usually a committee studies an issue or sets of issues and reports back to the House. Committee members are able to study the subject matter in detail and deepen their understanding of particular issues.

Committees can raise awareness of an issue among Members of Parliament and the wider public. Committee reports can make recommendations to a House or both Houses of Parliament, which may lead to changes in policy or administrative arrangements or to amendments to legislation.

HOW DO THEY WORK?

Committees are designed to be of a size that permits effective working relationships between members. While committees have rules and procedures, generally proceedings are less formal and much less adversarial than proceedings in the Chamber. Members are able to discuss issues informally and be less constrained by party discipline in committee deliberations than in debates in the Chamber. A non-partisan environment can emerge in committees, leading Members to assess issues in the interest of the public rather than simply in terms of their parties' policies.

Committees provide an opportunity for public engagement and participation in the democratic process. Committees often call for submissions from the public and hold public hearings and meetings that provide opportunities for interest groups, academics, experts and individual citizens to inform the committee of their views on particular topics. Participation in committee inquiries is a vital way for the public to engage directly with Members of Parliament.

ARE THERE DIFFERENT COMMITTEES?

Parliament appoints committees to undertake particular tasks or functions. The Legislative Assembly has four different types of committees:

Standing committees are appointed for the life of a parliament to look into particular issues, such as road safety, legal affairs, the economic development, or particular portfolio areas. The Legislative Assembly has three Specialist Standing Committees and five Portfolio Committees.

Statutory committees are created by Acts of Parliament and continue to exist while those Acts are in force. They monitor and review the work of statutory offices or bodies such as the Independent Commission Against Corruption or the Health Care Complaints Commission.

Select committees may be appointed on a short term basis to consider specific issues. Previous topics for inquiry have included tobacco smoking and bush fires.

Legislation committees may be established to consider a specific bill before Parliament and make recommendations for amendments.

Current Legislative Assembly committees are listed on the Parliament's website at:

www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees

WHAT IS A COMMITTEE INQUIRY?



Parliament can ask a committee to inquire into a particular matter. The terms of reference set out what the committee is to investigate, sometimes setting a deadline for the completion of the inquiry.

Some committees can set their own terms of reference and in certain cases Ministers can give committees terms of reference.

During an inquiry committees may gather evidence in a number of ways including:

Calling for submissions: A committee may start an inquiry by asking members of the public, relevant organisations and key stakeholders for their views. They may do so by advertising in newspapers or writing to persons or organisations with specialist knowledge or a particular interest.

Holding public hearings: A committee may invite experts and interest group representatives to public hearings to answer questions before the committee. This allows the committee to follow up points of interest and concern and for people who made a submission to amplify points and give additional information. People appearing at a hearing are called **witnesses** and the information they provide is called **evidence**.

In most cases committees take evidence in public. However, in some circumstances committees may decide that it is appropriate to hold **in camera** or private hearings.

Conducting other activities: Public hearings can be very formal events and in some circumstances committees may decide that less structured ways of gathering evidence are appropriate, for example holding public forums to enable committee members to better understand the personal experiences of individuals in relation to the matters under inquiry or having a round table discussion and briefings with key stakeholders.

Committees may also conduct visits of inspection, attend conferences or meet with committees from other parliaments.

After considering all of the evidence gathered, committees write reports with their findings and recommendations. Committee reports are then presented to the House (or Houses) of Parliament in a procedure known as **tabling**.

Within six months of a report being tabled, Ministers are required to respond to any recommendations within the report which require action within their portfolio responsibilities. Responses are to set out what action, if any, the Government proposes to take in relation to each recommendation. The Government's response is tabled in the House and published together with the committee's report on the Parliament's website.



HOW CAN I FOLLOW THE WORK OF A COMMITTEE?

Committees regularly update their web pages with information on current inquiries, submissions, public hearings and reports.

The web pages for individual committees also provide details of committee membership and the contact details for the support staff that assist the committees in their work.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information on any aspect of committee work please visit the Parliament's website at:

www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees

Follow the link to the relevant committee and contact the Inquiry Manager.

Other leaflets in this series are:

- *Preparing submissions to committee inquiries;* and
- *Information for committee witnesses.*

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