

Resourcing for committees

- 2.1 No review of committee operations or infrastructure could be complete without an examination of the resources available for undertaking those operations. Therefore the Committee included as its fifth term of reference: ‘factors influencing the effectiveness of House committees, including resources and structural issues’.
- 2.2 The Committee considers that resources are one of the most significant determinants of the committee system’s effectiveness. By ‘resources’ the Committee refers to funding, staffing and support services, and time.
- 2.3 The Department of the House of Representatives (DHR) currently supports 26 committees. The Department’s Committee Office supports the bulk of those: 12 House general purpose standing committees and nine joint committees.¹ The remainder are supported by smaller secretariats in other parts of the DHR, often by staff who perform other roles in support of the work of the House aside from committee support.
- 2.4 Chapter 1 described some of the contributions that an effective House committee system can make to a healthy democracy. In this chapter, the Committee considers the current resources available to the House committee system in relation to funding, staffing and time, and options for optimising its resourcing arrangements.
- 2.5 In the same way that the effectiveness of House committees can not be measured without an examination of the adequacy of their resources, in turn, elements of these resources, particularly funding and staffing, need to be put in context. For this reason the Committee makes some reference to the DHR as a whole, although it acknowledges that departmental resources are not within the scope of the terms of reference.

¹ As at 21 April 2010, the DHR is also supporting the Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety.

Funding committee work

- 2.6 The *Financial Management and Accountability Act 1997* designates the Clerk as the Chief Executive of the DHR with responsibility for managing the Department's resources in an efficient, effective and ethical way. The Speaker is accountable to the House of Representatives for the Department, and the Clerk is responsible for the day to day management of the Department. The *Parliamentary Service Act 1999* also makes the Clerk, under the Speaker, responsible for the management of the Department, for advising the Speaker on matters relating to the Department and for assisting the Speaker to fulfil his accountability obligations to the House.
- 2.7 The DHR and the Clerk of the House of Representatives are subject to the same budgetary responsibilities and processes as apply to executive government agencies and heads of agencies. The Departmental budget estimates are prepared up to four years in advance, because of a requirement for agencies to submit three years of forward estimates in each budget process. Annual estimates are then adjusted (according to a formula set by the Department of Finance and Deregulation) to take account of inflation, wage changes, and executive government directives, such as the efficiency dividend.
- 2.8 The budget process is relatively inflexible. The only possibility for the DHR to vary its budget is if it makes a Portfolio Budget Submission (or New Policy Proposal) to the Expenditure Review Committee. In practice, the DHR rarely submits a request for additional funding.
- 2.9 In 2009–10, the DHR allocated \$13.345 million (60 per cent) of its overall budget (\$22.188 million)² to the Committee Office to provide:
- Procedural, research, analytical and administrative support for the conduct of inquiries and other activities of committees and the publication of the final report.³

2 Department of the House of Representatives, *Portfolio Budget Statement 2009–10*. All budget figures include only departmental appropriations (and exclude administered appropriations and special accounts) as listed under the main appropriation bill.

3 Department of the House of Representatives, *Portfolio Budget Statement 2009–10*; Department of the House of Representatives, *Annual report 2008–09*, p. 9. In addition, several House domestic committees are supported and funded by areas of the Department outside the Committee Office. For ease of reference, references to the budget and staffing for the House committee system are restricted to the Committee Office in this report.

- 2.10 The average allocation to each committee supported by the DHR Committee Office was \$434 800 in 2008-09.⁴ The bulk of this comprises staff salaries.⁵ The remainder consists of administrative costs, such as printing of reports, staff travel in support of committee meetings and hearings, and venue and catering costs for meetings and public hearings.⁶
- 2.11 The DHR has acknowledged that its overall budget is under significant pressure and has affirmed its commitment to continuing to support committee activities to the greatest extent possible within available resources.⁷ It advises that it has looked to technological developments to maintain service provision in the context of decreasing resources, but notes that this is not a sustainable situation in the longer term.
- 2.12 Given the contribution that committees make to the development of policy and scrutiny of government, the Committee considers a well-resourced and effective committee system can deliver savings to government and the Australian public by minimising the need for the use of much more expensive external consultancies. In addition, committee processes and practices offer proven consistency, transparency, and opportunities for consultation at a national level.
- 2.13 Between 2005-06 and 2009-10, the DHR budget has *decreased* by 7.18 per cent. Over that same period, the budgets of the Australian National Audit Office and the Commonwealth Ombudsman have *increased* by 3.86 per cent and 70.02 per cent, respectively. Significantly, the Department of the Senate's budget has also increased during that time, by 5.19 per cent.⁸

4 Calculated from information in Department of the House of Representatives, *Annual report 2008-09*, p. 29.

5 Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission No. 6*, p. 15. The Department's submission to the Joint Standing Committee of Public Accounts and Audit's 2008 inquiry into the effects of the ongoing efficiency dividend on smaller public sector agencies includes a discussion at p. 6 of the proportion of the staffing component in small agency budgets.

6 Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission No. 6*, p. 15.

7 Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission No. 6*, p. 14.

8 Calculated from information in *Portfolio Budget Statements*, 2005-06 to 2009-10, adjusted to 2009-10 prices using the consumer price index; June 2010 index calculated using Treasury forecast of percentage change through the year. Figures include only departmental appropriations under the main appropriation bill.

Committee conclusions

- 2.14 The Committee is concerned that the DHR's resourcing is under pressure, particularly when its budget changes are compared with some other departments. Although there have not been any dramatic decreases in the Committee Office budget in recent years, committees have been more active and have undertaken more innovative, resource-intensive activities. While such changes would normally necessitate additional funding, this has all been achieved within relatively stable funding levels. It is apparent to the Committee, however, that both the level of staffing and the continuity of staffing in the Committee Office have not been stable. This is discussed further at paragraphs 2.25 and following.
- 2.15 It is vital that the DHR is funded adequately to continue to support the House committee system to an appropriate standard. There is also a need to ensure that the DHR is appropriately funded to accommodate any changes in administrative and research support that may result from the recommendations contained within this report.
- 2.16 Funding should also accommodate the acceptance of recommendations made throughout this report, including:
- increases in supplementary committee membership, which may increase the administrative burden on secretariats;
 - the likely increase in the number of subcommittees and sectional committees, particularly for committees with broad areas of responsibility;
 - increasing the number of inquiries into bills and delegated legislation;
 - changes in the number and type of inquiries conducted, as a result of giving committees the power to initiate their own inquiries;
 - introducing new ways of gathering evidence and using new technologies;⁹ and
 - continuing and enhancing promotional and community outreach activities and the broadcasting of committee proceedings.
- 2.17 Aside from the quantum of funding, the Committee is interested in how the budget is determined. Some individuals and organisations support parliaments being able to determine their own funding levels and

9 Although such technologies can save committees time and the expense of travelling to meet with witnesses, start-up and maintenance costs are relevant considerations.

priorities, which they believe signals a healthy degree of independence from the executive government.¹⁰

- 2.18 There is a disconnect between the way decisions are made to refer work to committees, and how committee budgets are managed. Ministers and the House currently refer matters to committees for inquiry. If this Committee's later recommendations are accepted, there will be more referral of bills and committees will be able to initiate their own inquiries. Work is allocated to committees by a range of different people, each acting separately from each other, but all impacting on a central budget. Moreover, the trend for committees to do more innovative and interactive work, although welcomed, will also increase pressures on committee resources.
- 2.19 In a 'fixed budget' environment under the current system, responding to these evolving demands is the responsibility of the Clerk of the House of Representatives. The Clerk manages a set budget that is used to provide services to committees, whose work grows each year as a result of external forces.
- 2.20 Over the years, there have been several inquiries into the operation of the committee system.¹¹ A regular pattern emerges of an increase in the number of committees until resources are unsustainably stretched, followed by a reduction in the number of committees. The Committee believes that this pattern will continue unless the House itself takes a management role in setting priorities for committee work.
- 2.21 The Committee is concerned that the House itself does not currently have formal input into determining its funding levels and priorities, including for committee work. This is a long-standing matter that various committees have commented on from time to time. For example, although it did not make a specific recommendation for change, in 1976 the Joint

10 Hon. D Hawker MP, 'Funding arrangements for the Parliament of Australia: A view to the future', 37th Presiding Officers and Clerks Conference, Perth, July 2006, D Beetham, *Parliament and Democracy in the Twenty-first Century: A Guide to Good Practice*, Inter-Parliamentary Union, Geneva, 2006; W Berry MLA, *The application of the Latimer House Principles in developing a legislature's budget: parliamentary autonomy versus executive prerogative*, 38th Presiding Officers and Clerks Conference, July 2007; Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, *Commonwealth (Latimer House) Principles on the Three Branches of Government*, 2003, viewed 17 March 2010, at: <<http://www.thecommonwealth.org/document/181889/34293/35468/37744/latimerhouse.htm>>; M Couderc, 'The administrative and financial autonomy of parliamentary assemblies', *Constitutional and Parliamentary Information*, No. 177, 1999.

11 Most notably: Joint Committee on the Parliamentary Committee System, *A new parliamentary committee system*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1976, p. 1; *Ten years on; It's your House; Sessional order 344; Promoting community involvement; Media coverage; House committee procedures*.

Committee on the Parliamentary Committee System noted the greater level of financial independence enjoyed by committees of the British and Canadian Parliaments, and:

... the inappropriateness of the present arrangements whereby parliamentary activity, including parliamentary committees, can be curtailed by government financial restrictions. The Committee considers that the Presiding Officers alone should be responsible for determining the funds required for parliamentary committee operations and the methods of expending these.¹²

- 2.22 The Committee notes with interest the proposals that have been made from time to time for improved funding for the House and for accountability arrangements. For example, following a recommendation of the Senate Select Committee on the Parliament's Appropriations and Staffing in 1981, the Senate established a Standing Committee on Appropriations and Staffing. The select committee also recommended that a similar committee be appointed in the House, but – for reasons the Committee is not aware of – this did not eventuate.¹³ More recently, a former Speaker, the Hon. David Hawker MP, moved a private Member's motion for the appointment of a House Appropriations and Administrative Committee that would, among other things, consider House estimates, and proposals for administrative change to the DHR.¹⁴
- 2.23 The Committee agrees, in principle, with the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit's (JCPAA) recommendation for the establishment of a parliamentary commission to recommend funding levels for the parliamentary departments.¹⁵ As noted above, the Senate has a Standing Committee on Appropriations and Staffing that carries out this function.¹⁶ Most overseas parliaments with a similar tradition to Australia's have more direct input in determining their funding levels and priorities.¹⁷ An

12 Joint Committee on the Parliamentary Committee System, *A new parliamentary committee system*, Australian Government Printing Service, Canberra, 1976.

13 H Evans, *Odgers' Australian Senate Practice*, 11th edition, Department of the Senate, Canberra, 2004, pp. 119–20.

14 H.R. Deb. (22.2.2010) 1471–2.

15 Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit, *Report 413 – The efficiency dividend and small agencies: size does matter*, Parliament of Australia, Canberra, December 2008, Recommendation 2.

16 Senate standing order 19.

17 H.R. Deb. (22.2.2010) 1471–4; Hon. D Hawker MP, 'Funding arrangements for the Parliament of Australia: A view to the future', 37th Presiding Officers and Clerks Conference, Perth, July 2006, p. 11; Scottish Parliament, *Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body*, viewed 17 March 2010 at: <<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/corporate/spcb/index.htm>>.

interim measure would be the establishment of a committee to oversight the House's funding and services.

- 2.24 The Senate's funding arrangements appear to be more flexible than the House's, particularly in relation to the funding of committee work, perhaps because of its Appropriations and Staffing Committee. The Committee notes that the approach to funding House committee work has changed over the years. In its submission to the JCPAA inquiry into the effect of the efficiency dividend on small agencies, the DHR advised that, in the early 1990s, its budget had been routinely supplemented by \$250,000 for each additional committee supported by the Department.¹⁸ This automatic adjustment no longer takes place in the House.

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that:

- **the Leader of the House act to establish a bipartisan House Committee on Appropriations and Staffing, chaired by the Speaker, to make recommendations to the House on:**
 - ⇒ **estimates of the funding required for the operation of the Department of the House of Representatives; such estimates, once agreed by the House, are to be conveyed by the Speaker to the Minister for Finance and Deregulation;**
 - ⇒ **proposals for changes to the administrative structure of, or service provision by, the Department of the House of Representatives;**
 - ⇒ **administration and funding of security measures affecting the House; and**
 - ⇒ **any other matters of finance or services referred to it by the Speaker or the House; and**
- **the Liaison Committee of Chairs and Deputy Chairs have a more active role in monitoring the resources available to committees, with the Chair to report to the House Committee on Appropriations and Staffing on committee activities and resource levels.**

18 Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit, Inquiry into the effects of the ongoing efficiency dividend on smaller public sector agencies: Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission No. 10*, p. 10.

Staff support for committee work

- 2.25 Apart from the availability of Members, the greatest requirement for a successful committee system is the availability of adequate staff resources:

Committees need an adequately large body of appropriately skilled support staff to ensure committees are able to develop an expertise in their policy areas in order to better scrutinise the government and hold it to account.¹⁹

- 2.26 Parliamentary committees are serviced by secretariats of professional parliamentary officers. Generally, secretariats are led by a committee secretary, who is assisted by one or more inquiry secretaries and research and administrative staff. Although a number of staff members have areas of expertise, all are expected to move between committees if required, enabling the Committee Office to respond to changes in committee activity levels.

- 2.27 Staffing costs comprise approximately 85 per cent of expenditure on services for committees administered by the DHR.²⁰ Following significant reductions in departmental appropriations, the DHR Committee Office was restructured in 1996–97. This involved a reduction in the number of committee secretaries, an increase in research capacity at less senior levels, and greater flexibility in the movement of staff between committees and between secretariats. Between 1996 and 2000, the number of committee secretaries was reduced from 17 to nine, and has since been reduced to eight.²¹ The revised arrangements have also:

... placed greater pressure on committee secretaries in terms of managing the work of more than one committee.²²

- 2.28 Currently, excluding domestic committees²³, secretariats generally comprise seven to 10 managerial, research and administrative staff. However, the eight secretariats in the Committee Office support, between them, 21 House and joint committees. Five secretariats support three committees each, and the remaining three secretariats each support two.
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19 Dr P. Larkin, *Submission No. 14*, p. 3.

20 Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission No. 6*, p. 15.

21 Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit, *Inquiry into the effects of the ongoing efficiency dividend on smaller public sector agencies*: Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission No. 10*, p. 9.

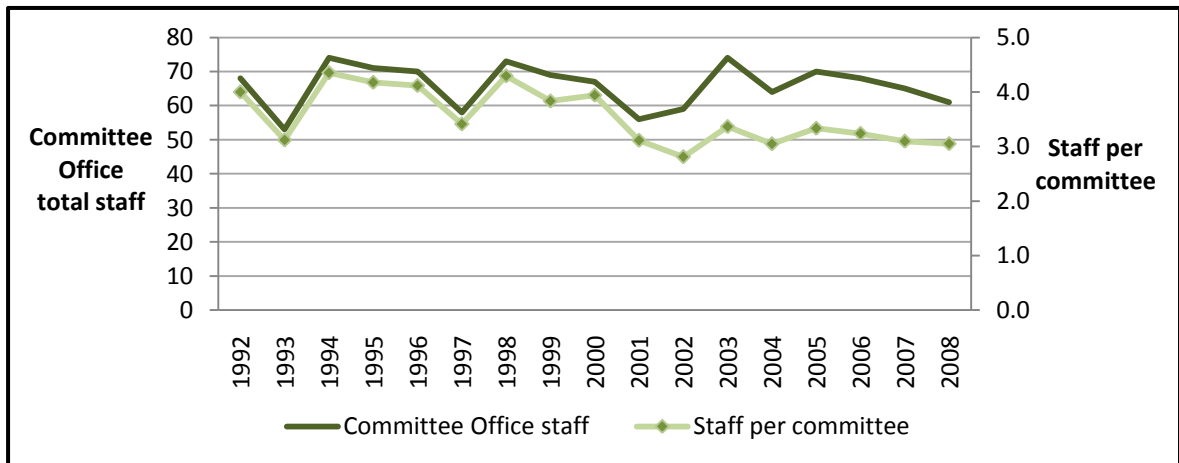
22 Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission No. 6*, p. 15.

23 Domestic committees are supported by areas of the DHR outside the Committee Office. Staff members supporting these committees often carry out other roles in addition to their committee duties.

- 2.29 Staffing levels in the Committee Office have remained reasonably constant over the years, but an increase in the number of committees has resulted in a pro-rata reduction in available research and administrative capacity. From 1992 to 2008, pro-rata staffing levels have moved from a peak of 4.4 in 1994 to 3.1 in 2008. In 2008–09, the House and Senate Committee Offices each comprised 61 staff. Pro-rata, this equates to 3.1 staff per committee in the House, compared with 3.4 in the Senate.²⁴
- 2.30 Based on figures from the DHR’s submission, figure 2.1 indicates that pro-rata staffing levels closely followed overall staffing trends until 2001.²⁵ Since that time, the increase in the number of committees supported by the House of Representatives (from 17 in 2000 up to 22 in 2003 and 20 at present) has resulted in a gap between overall and pro-rata staff numbers.
- 2.31 Although the DHR acknowledges that a reduction in the number of committees may restore balance to the pro-rata staffing levels, it notes that:

... tightening budgetary circumstances may see further contraction of staff and will inevitably put further strain on resources.²⁶

Figure 2.1 Committee Office staffing, 1992 to 2008



Source Department of the House of Representatives, Submission No. 6, p. 15.

24 Calculations based on: Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission No. 6*, p. 15; Department of the Senate, *Annual report 2008–09*, pp. 50, 57.
 25 Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission No. 6*, p. 15.
 26 Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission No. 6*, pp 16–17.

- 2.32 Professor Marsh assesses that staffing in the House of Representatives lags well behind such resources for parliamentary committees in the UK:

Both the funds assigned to committee work and the capacity of committees to engage specialist support for particular enquiries are much larger in the UK.²⁷

- 2.33 Various Chairs and Deputy Chairs reported a number of issues associated with the amount of staff turnover in the Committee Office. Although Members acknowledge that some movement of staff between committees is to be expected, excessive turnover may compromise the accumulation of corporate knowledge and the development of expertise in particular policy areas, as well as disrupt the progress of committee inquiries and activities.

- 2.34 One of the key functions of committees is information gathering and taking account of community views.²⁸ This sometimes necessitates extensive travel by committees, and they must be adequately resourced for these purposes. That is, secretariats need to be funded to enable necessary travel (although the Committee acknowledges no specific evidence was received regarding necessary travel that could not be funded) and a sufficient number of suitably qualified staff whose personal circumstances allow them to travel for work.

- 2.35 Professor Geoffrey Lindell suggests making better use of modern communication facilities to reduce costs associated with committees gathering evidence from interstate witnesses.²⁹ Greater use of technology could have real advantages in terms of resource savings. The DHR, however, notes that there is a limit to these efficiencies:

Through technological innovation the Committee Office has been able to maintain a high level of service to committees despite tightening resources. ... However, there is a limit to the role technology can play and it is certainly no replacement for experienced and skilled staff.³⁰

27 Professor I. Marsh, *Submission No. 13*, p. 4.

28 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment and Workplace Relations, *Submission No. 12*, pp. 1-2.

29 Professor G. J. Lindell, *Submission No. 4*, p. 1.

30 Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission No. 6*, p. 16.

- 2.36 Several witnesses – including some committee Chairs and Deputy Chairs – suggested that committee resources appeared to be coming under increasing pressure.³¹ However, one Chair stated that his committee is adequately resourced.³²

Committee conclusions

- 2.37 Over the years, there has been increased flexibility and mobility of staff within the House Committee Office. Secretariats have drawn on specialist advisers from the public and private sectors, as well as secondees from government departments, and they continue to do so. This has ensured the availability of specialist advice, but the Committee considers there is scope to increase the amount of specialisation among the Committee Office's own, permanent staff.
- 2.38 While acknowledging the importance of mobility and flexibility and the fact that many staff seek out new subject areas to develop their professional knowledge and skills, many Chairs and Deputy Chairs were concerned that too much movement of staff between committees could compromise the efficiency of the House committee system and result in a loss of 'corporate memory'.
- 2.39 The Committee notes that, if some other recommendations (considered later in the report) regarding the number and structure of committees are adopted, there may be significant changes to staffing arrangements in the Committee Office. The Committee is also aware that committees vary in the number and nature of inquiries they undertake, and that the parliamentary cycle necessitates variations in work programs. It therefore does not wish to be prescriptive at this stage or to make any specific recommendations regarding mobility. It does, however, record its concerns regarding what it sees as excessive staff turnover in the Committee Office and asks that the DHR monitor this issue over the coming years. Whether the increased turnover the Committee has observed is a natural element of general public sector and demographic issues of the 21st century, or can be attributed to other causes particular to the Committee Office, is something that the Committee would like the Department to consider.

31 Associate Professor S. Rice OAM and Dr M. Rimmer, *Submission No. 11*, pp. 4-5, 7; Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission No. 6*, pp. 14-7; Mrs A. Ellis MP, *Submission No. 16*, pp. 3-4; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, *Submission No. 19*; some Chairs and Deputy Chairs consulted as part of this inquiry.

32 Mr S. Georganas MP, *Submission No. 8*, p. 3. Mr Georganas chairs the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing.

- 2.40 Commitments by Committee Office staff to supporting the work of the House and its committees have changed over the last ten or so years, with a number of senior staff volunteering to take on activities beyond their immediate secretariat work. The outreach work done by the DHR, and often managed by the Liaison and Projects Office established in 1998–99, has involved some senior Committee Office staff from the beginning.³³ This includes involvement in presentations on parliamentary committee work at seminars, assisting with liaison work with, for example, the departments that are ‘shadowed’ by the committees they support, and being involved in formulating and implementing media strategies for these committees.
- 2.41 Further, the Committee has observed that senior Committee Office staff have supported the Main Committee since soon after its establishment in 1994, by working as deputy clerks at the table. The hours of operation of the Main Committee have increased over time and it would seem that, as a natural consequence, additional hours have been required of support staff and the hours available for committee work have decreased.³⁴
- 2.42 The Committee is aware of the implications of the small size of DHR for the maintenance of its service to the House and its Members in their parliamentary duties, and committees. Although the ‘extra’ activities by some Committee Office staff are valuable in terms of their professional development, and give welcome strength and flexibility to DHR’s capability, the Committee questions whether these additional roles have been factored in adequately to allocations of staff to committees.
- 2.43 The Committee also notes that the capacity of senior committee staff has been affected by broader public sector reforms and the restructuring of the Committee Office in the 1990s. As a result, needs and expectations have changed, and committee secretaries have greater managerial responsibilities (in common with their public sector counterparts).³⁵ Again, the Committee is concerned that, although it is appropriate for the DHR to keep pace with public sector reforms, it may not have been resourced suitably and that time taken away from either supervising colleagues’ work on the ‘core’ elements of research, analysis and drafting, or

33 Department of the House of Representatives, *Annual report 1997–98*, p. 3; Department of the House of Representatives, *Annual report 1998–99*, pp. 15, 32–3.

34 For example, the Main Committee sat for 112 hours in 1997–98 (Department of the House of Representatives, *Annual report 1997–08*, p. 104), and 267 hours in 2008–09 (Department of the House of Representatives, *Annual report 2008–09*, p. 68).

35 Department of the House of Representatives, *Annual report 1995–96*, p. 22.

undertaking that themselves, may not have been acknowledged adequately in allocation of staff to committees.

- 2.44 It is essential that the House committee system continues to be serviced by adequate numbers of staff with the appropriate qualifications and knowledge of the parliamentary and committee context. The Committee supports a review being conducted to determine the adequacy, or otherwise, of current staffing levels in the Committee Office.
- 2.45 The Committee also supports the DHR undertaking negotiations with the Department of Finance and Deregulation to establish a process for funding committee work in a way that provides certainty and responsiveness to the House's needs.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that:

- **prior to the commencement of the 43rd Parliament, the Speaker arrange for an external review of staffing levels within the Department of the House of Representatives Committee Office, incorporating a work analysis to determine the nature and level of secretariat support necessary for the ongoing and inquiry work of committees, to ensure that the House committee system is supported by an adequate number of appropriately qualified staff;**
- **the ongoing funding for committees supported by the Department of the House of Representatives be restored to pre-1995–96 levels, in real terms; and**
- **the Department of the House of Representatives and the Department of Finance and Deregulation undertake negotiations to establish a sound basis for funding the work of committees supported by the Department of the House of Representatives, that provides greater certainty and is more responsive to the House's needs, with a view to a new system being implemented in time for the 2011–12 budget process.**

Resources for members: maximising their contributions

- 2.46 The other essential human resource for effective committees is the participation in and leadership of committees. Members come to Parliament with a range of experiences. Despite this, participating in parliamentary committees can be a demanding and, at times, complex responsibility.³⁶ In its discussions with other committee colleagues, the Committee noted that there may be aspects of the House committee system that could be better explained for those new to committee work.
- 2.47 An effective committee system requires adequate and appropriate resources, including background education for Members participating in committee work. Members (particularly Chairs and Deputy Chairs) need to be fully aware of what their committee roles entail, to ensure that they make the maximum contribution to this aspect of their work, in the service of the Australian public. This includes, for example, Committee Chairs receiving adequate guidance regarding their various roles, including not only procedural and meeting management, but also information on their committee's budget.
- 2.48 The Committee acknowledges the opportunities provided by the Liaison Committee of Chairs and Deputy Chairs, chaired by the Deputy Speaker, for ongoing discussions about whole-of-committee system issues. The Committee considers the scope for increased activities of the Liaison Committee.

Committee conclusions

- 2.49 The provision of information sessions for committee members and Chairs and Deputy Chairs, mainly at the beginning of a Parliament but also with an ongoing component, would be particularly valuable for Members new to the House committee system and to Chairs and Deputies new to their roles.
- 2.50 New committee Chairs and Deputy Chairs may be interested in participating in specialised information sessions at the beginning of a Parliament and also in informal mentoring provided by more experienced Chairs and Deputy Chairs.
- 2.51 The Committee notes that the DHR provides orientation sessions for new Members, including components on committee work.³⁷ The Committee

36 Doctors for the Environment Australia, *Submission No. 17*, p. 1.

37 At the beginning of each Parliament, the DHR holds information sessions for new Members. These sessions cover a range of matters, including the operation of the House committee

considers that some of this information may be given to Members too early in the Parliament, perhaps when they are being overwhelmed with information on a range of aspects of their new roles. Similarly, the utility of sessions run later in the Parliament may be compromised by Members' availability, as the full range of demands on their time come into force.

- 2.52 One way to overcome these difficulties would be to have some of these briefing materials available electronically, so that all Members can access them easily at a time convenient to them. Another (complementary) avenue would be to retain the committee information in the orientation sessions given to new Members at the beginning of a Parliament, and hold a follow-up session approximately three months later, to allow Members to discuss matters and ask questions, once they have had some committee experience.
- 2.53 The Liaison Committee of Chairs and Deputy Chairs would be well-placed to draw on relevant expertise of its membership to provide meaningful and contextualised guidance to Members new to their various committee roles, whether member, Chair or Deputy Chair.

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that the Speaker develop options for providing induction to Members on their roles as committee members, Chairs and Deputy Chairs. Such induction should include information on roles and responsibilities, powers, communication and committee resources. These initiatives should be in place for the commencement of the 43rd Parliament.

Competing demands on Members' time

- 2.54 All of the committee system's roles, outlined in Chapter 1, contribute to the Parliament's effectiveness. These contributions could be strengthened by ensuring the widest possible range of backbench participation and by reducing some of the competing demands on Members' time. The latter would not necessarily decrease committee members' workloads, but

system. Over the course of the Parliament, Members are also invited to attend regular briefings, which cover a range of procedural and administrative issues relevant to Members' parliamentary work. Members may also raise questions relating to any aspect of House or committee administration and procedure at a weekly 'drop in centre' meeting in sitting weeks.

would ensure that they are better able to devote themselves to the inquiries in which they are involved, to the high standards they expect of themselves.

- 2.55 Discussions consistently confirm that backbench Members see committee work as a major component of their responsibilities.³⁸ Their contributions are significant 'resources' that determine the committee system's effectiveness. This section considers the nature of committee (and other) demands on Members' time, and how these demands might be addressed to better accommodate committee work.

Sources of committee obligations

- 2.56 In addition to informal discussions among committee members, committee business is generally conducted through three types of formal meeting:
- *public hearings*, where witnesses give evidence before the committee and interested members of the media and public, and members of the community may make statements on a range of issues. Public hearings can be broadcast via radio, television and the internet, and a transcript of proceedings (*Hansard*) is usually publicly available shortly afterwards;
 - *private briefings*, where witnesses may give evidence before the committee and secretariat staff. These are closed to the public, are not broadcast and no transcript is publicly available; and
 - *private meetings*, which are closed to all but committee members and secretariat staff. This is when the committee conducts its routine business and where members discuss and decide on matters, such as reports of inquiries.
- 2.57 Private meetings are usually held in Parliament House during sitting weeks, but may occur at other times and places. Private briefings and public hearings may also be held in Parliament House during sitting weeks, but regularly take place in other capital cities and regional areas around Australia, usually in non-sitting weeks.

38 Roundtable discussions with Chairs, Deputy Chairs and other members of committees, both during the present inquiry and the Committee's inquiry into the conduct of the business of the House.

Sitting weeks

- 2.58 During sitting weeks, Members divide their time between committee work, contributing to Chamber and Main Committee proceedings, party commitments, meeting with visiting parliamentary delegations and other guests, constituent work, and a range of other meetings and functions.
- 2.59 Considerable evidence, from across the political spectrum, suggests that the work of committees could be better integrated into the work of the House. Meetings held in Parliament House during sitting weeks are often interrupted because of formal votes and quorum counts in the Chamber. This can be particularly frustrating when the committee is holding a public hearing or private briefing: Members are mindful of the inconvenience to witnesses, particularly those who have travelled considerable distances to assist committees as well as to the process of gathering the necessary evidence for the committee's work.

Non-sitting weeks

- 2.60 In non-sitting weeks, Members' responsibilities range from constituent and community work, travel on official parliamentary business (including, but not limited to, committee business), personal and family commitments, and political party obligations. Committees also schedule many public hearings and meetings outside Canberra in non-sitting weeks.
- 2.61 In the past, the sitting pattern has, where practical, included at least two non-sitting weeks preceding any House sitting fortnight or single sitting week. In recent years this has not always occurred, particularly during the Autumn and Winter/Budget sittings. In the 2010 sitting pattern, for example, all non-sitting breaks in the first half of the year are only one week long.³⁹ These short breaks between sitting fortnights can be challenging for Members, particularly those in regional and distant areas who may be prevented from spending adequate time in the electorate.
- 2.62 These shorter breaks can also make it more difficult for committees to achieve a quorum (or even a sub-committee quorum) to gather evidence, or result in witnesses being heard by only a small proportion of the committee membership.

39 House of Representatives, *Scheduled sittings for 2010*, viewed 10 January 2010, at: <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/info/sittings/index.htm>.

Redressing the balance

- 2.63 Many members of the community and media are unaware of the range of demands placed on Members, particularly during non-sitting weeks. Given the public benefits of committee work, the Committee considers that more could be done by the House to accommodate committee work within its existing structures. Members consistently expressed their desire to carry out as much high-quality committee work as possible.
- 2.64 In Chapter 4, the Committee considers some committee-specific reforms that may assist Members, including limiting the number of committees and the permanent positions on them, and increasing flexibility to allow Members to participate fully in inquiries that are of particular interest to them. In Chapter 7, the Committee discusses options for better integrating the work of committees into Chamber and Main Committee proceedings. Some other possible reforms relate to the structures of the House, such as the parliamentary sitting pattern and arrangements for public hearings during sitting weeks. These are considered below.

The impact of the parliamentary sitting pattern

- 2.65 The DHR suggests that changes to the parliamentary sitting calendar over a number of years have affected Members' availability for some committee work, particularly interstate hearings.⁴⁰
- 2.66 The Committee urges the Government to ensure that, where possible, each single sitting week or sitting fortnight is preceded by at least two non-sitting weeks. The Committee notes that similar recommendations have been made by past Procedure Committees, and therefore does not wish to elaborate on these here.⁴¹ The Committee is hopeful, however, that the Government will reconsider this long-standing issue.

Minimising disruptions in sitting weeks

- 2.67 Committees are subsidiary bodies of the House and, as such, committee meetings are often disrupted by Members needing to attend divisions in the Chamber. The Committee recognises that the Chamber is the first priority. However, Members respect the needs of witnesses who may be giving particularly distressing evidence before a committee, or who may have travelled long distances to meet with the committee. There are a

40 Department of the House of Representatives, *Submission No. 6*, pp. 4–5.

41 *Days and hours*, recommendation 1; *About time*, recommendation 10; *Time for review*, recommendation 12.

number of circumstances where responsibilities to the Chamber may need to be balanced against these other considerations.

2.68 There are various options that could assist in these circumstances. Some options presented to the Committee included:

- proxy votes or pairing arrangements for Members participating in public hearings or briefings when a division is called in the Chamber;
- having periods of 'committee only' time included in the weekly and/or annual schedule of parliamentary sittings, to ensure that at least some committee meetings are guaranteed not to be disrupted by Chamber proceedings; and
- electronic voting in the Chamber, to speed up formal votes.

2.69 The Committee recognises that the present arrangements may be problematic. It therefore favours a future committee undertaking an inquiry into options for minimising disruptions to committee meetings in sitting weeks.

