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Parliamentary Committees

What is a Parliamentary Committee?

Parliamentary committees are part of the established procedure of most Westminster-style parliaments. In Western Australia, both the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council have established a number of committees to carry out much of the work of their respective Houses. In doing so, committees assist Parliament in its functions of legislating; monitoring and reviewing legislation, administration and expenditure; gathering information; and publicising issues.

A parliamentary committee is a group of members of parliament appointed by the House in which they sit (or both Houses in the case of joint committees) to undertake detailed work on its behalf and report back to the House on completion of investigations.



Legislative Assembly Committee Meeting

The Legislative Assembly generally appoints five members to its committees, while Legislative Council committees have between four and seven members appointed from that House. Joint committee members are drawn from both Houses, with equal numbers appointed from each.

Each committee consists of members drawn from both the government backbench and non-government members. Ministers are generally not able to serve on committees as this may create a conflict of interest with their role in the executive government. Members often serve on one or more committees.

Committee proceedings are proceedings of the Parliament, as they are delegated the same rights, powers and immunities as the Houses. Parliamentary committees operate in accordance with the Standing Orders or rules of their respective House. Service on a committee carries the same responsibility as service in the Parliament itself.

Why are Parliamentary Committees Important?

Parliamentary committees are important, as they:

- facilitate the division of labour, in that more than one committee can meet at a time (except when a House is sitting, unless by leave);
- provide a more bipartisan forum than the House for addressing issues;
- provide a more practical forum in which to hear evidence from witnesses;
- are able to seek advice from experts and travel; and
- provide an avenue of public communication between the Parliament and the public.

Types of Committees

There are several types of committees, including standing, select and sessional committees.

Standing Committees

Standing committees are established by each House at the commencement of each Parliament and exist for the duration of that Parliament (usually four years); however, Legislative Council standing committees survive dissolution. If the Parliament is prorogued, the standing committees in either House cannot meet or transact business, although they remain in existence.

Each standing committee has a defined set of functions to perform (terms of reference) and investigates matters and undertakes inquiries within its terms of reference. Inquiries may be initiated by the committee itself or referred by the House.

The Legislative Assembly currently administers five standing committees while the Legislative Council has six. These include a Procedure and Privileges Committee in each House to examine and report on the procedures and privileges that apply to their respective Houses.



Legislative Council Committee Meeting

Select Committees

Select committees are established to carry out a specialised inquiry into a particular matter and within established terms of reference. They have a limited life and dissolve once they have reported to the House or the Parliament is prorogued, whichever occurs first.

Joint Committees

By agreement, the Houses may together appoint joint standing or select committees. Joint committees differ from other committees in that they consist of members from, and report to, both Houses of Parliament. For practical purposes each committee is administered by one House.

There are currently four joint standing committees of the Parliament.

Sessional Committees

Sessional committees are established from session to session to consider matters of internal parliamentary administration. For example, each House appoints a Parliamentary Services Committee which advises the respective

Presiding Officer on matters dealing with Hansard, Library, Security, Catering and Building Management in the Parliament. Together, the two committees meet several times a year, as both Presiding Officers are jointly responsible for policy issues in the Parliament.

Powers of committees

Standing and select committees have extensive powers to call and examine witnesses, call for written submissions, documents and records, and can undertake investigative travel.

Other Committees

Legislation Committees

On occasions, the Legislative Assembly has referred a bill to a Legislation Committee. Legislation Committees allow for detailed scrutiny of legislation to occur outside the debating Chamber and allow more efficient use of time through the simultaneous consideration of different pieces of legislation. Once the Legislation Committee has concluded its consideration of a bill, the next stage is the third reading in the Legislative Assembly.

Estimates Committees

Annually the Legislative Assembly appoints two estimates committees to examine and report on the proposed expenditure contained in the Estimates for the various departments and agencies that are funded from the Consolidated Fund (budget).

The Legislative Council Estimates and Financial Operations Committee conducts hearings on government spending and operations throughout the year.

For more information about parliamentary committees, visit the Parliament of Western Australia's website www.parliament.wa.gov.au.