Committee activities

Estimates 2012-2013—Select Committee

Each year a Select Committee on Estimates considers appropriations for the coming financial year. This entails two weeks of public hearings, at which every Minister and government agency appears before the committee to answer questions on financial management and expenditure, and other matters on which these things have an influence.

This year, with the forthcoming creation of the Legislative Assembly as a separate agency, the committee is inquiring into two bills, the Appropriation Bill 2012-2013 and the Appropriation (Office of the Legislative Assembly) Bill 2012-2013.

Public hearings began on Friday, 15 June 2012 at which community and industry groups appeared before the committee. Matters discussed included:

- budgetary provision for non-government schools;
- public spaces, such as parks and bus interchanges;
- animal welfare protection;
- affordable housing;
- harm minimisation measures for people consuming alcohol, tobacco and/or other drugs; and
- measures needed to eliminate barriers to full social participation by senior citizens, people with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and young people from disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances.

On Monday, 18 June 2012, the Treasurer and Treasury officials appeared before the committee and discussed financial and economic management and other matters.

The Treasurer also appeared on the morning of Tuesday, 19 June. Matters discussed included:

- tax reform and tax forecast accuracy;
- conveyance duty rates and thresholds and land valuation;
- savings initiatives;
- return of water and sewage business to ACTEW Corporation Limited;
- contingency disaster recovery testing of government IT systems; and
- change to accounting standard for employee benefits.

Later in the morning the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Recreation appeared together with his officers. Matters discussed included:

- reconciliation of the tourism budget;
- the Australia Forum;
- domestic visitors to the ACT; and
- the National Capital Tourism education program.

In the afternoon the Minister for the Environment and Sustainable Development and relevant officers appeared. Matters discussed included the establishment and functions of the Gungahlin to City Project Office and discussion of the Auditor-General’s recent report on Development Application and Approval System for High Density Residential and Commercial Developments.

On day four, Wednesday, 20 June 2012, the Attorney-General appeared with relevant officials. Matters discussed included:
the courts’ backlog;
- budget reductions, staffing and employee expenses;
- budgetary constraints on the work of the Human Rights Commission; and
- emergency responses for children at risk.

In the afternoon the Minister for Economic Development and directorate officers appeared before the committee. Among matters discussed were:

- staffing levels for the Economic Development Directorate;
- the land release program;
- the land rent scheme;
- the government office block project and government accommodation in Gungahlin; and
- the Affordable Housing Action Plan.

Thursday, 21 June saw the Minister for Health appearing with relevant officers. Matters discussed included:

- cross-border health receipts;
- funding for acute services;
- the National Partnership on Preventative Health;
- the corruption of, and measures to correct, timeliness data for individual triage categories and National Emergency Access Target data;
- waiting times for surgery in the ACT;
- subacute health care;
- the Women’s and Children’s Hospital;
- the Tuggeranong Health Centre;
- mental health, justice health and alcohol and drug services;
- public health and cancer services;
- health monitoring of the ACT population;
- chronic disease management;
- health promotion grants;
- private health insurance;
- dental health services; and
- Calvary Hospital.

On the morning of day six, Friday, 22 June, the Minister for Territory and Municipal Services appeared before the committee with relevant directorate officers. Matters discussed included the role of and activities conducted by the Heritage Library, service delivery by CanberraConnect and its future integration with other directorates and funding for cycling infrastructure, including along Majura Parkway.

In the afternoon of 22 June 2012 the Minister for Education and Training appeared together with his officers. Discussion included matters relating to:

- allegations of bullying at the Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT);
- employment rates for students exiting CIT;
- funding levels and enrolments at CIT;
- CIT solutions; and
- vocational education and training, apprenticeships and trade programs.

Later in the afternoon the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs appeared before the committee. Matters discussed included:

- the implications of the 2012 Closing the Gap report;
- housing and the Billabong Aboriginal Corporation;
- the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body and the Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs; and
- the Chances program.

Monday, 25 June 2012 saw the Minister for Police and Emergency Services appearing before the committee with relevant officers. Emergency Services matters discussed included ambulance and fire station relocations, the relationship between the Emergency Services Agency (ESA) and Emergency Management Australia, the Farm Fire Wise program, staffing levels, training, and recruiting for the ESA, responses to 000 calls to the ESA and compliance with guidelines regulating the use of non-executive private-plated vehicles in the Territory.

Matters discussed for ACT Policing included:

- the use of tasers by ACT Policing;
. the current workforce strength of ACT Policing, and planning to meet future workforce requirements;

. random roadside drug testing;

. the Mental Health Community Policing Initiative;

. traffic enforcement; and

. the Alcohol Crime Targeting Team.

Later in the morning, the Attorney-General and relevant officers appeared before the committee. Matters discussed included:

. the courts backlog and the “blitz” to reduce the backlog;

. introduction of a docket system in ACT courts;

. establishment of the ACT Sentencing Database;

. a new case management system for ACT courts;

. the Supreme Court project; and

. the Fine Enforcement Scheme.

In the afternoon, the Minister for Community Services appeared with her officers. Matters discussed included:

. the National Disability Insurance Scheme and associated funding to community groups;

. social housing and housing for people with disabilities;

. staff turnover in disability services;

. superannuation expenses;

. the Disability Information Support Hub;

. the House with No Steps; and

. budgetary savings.

Tuesday, 26 June saw the Chief Minister appearing before the committee with her directorate officers. Matters discussed included savings initiatives, the Hawke Review, open government reforms, strengthening performance and accountability, the “Measuring our progress” website and the return of savings from the Executive back to the Government.

Later in the morning the Minister for Territory and Municipal Services made her second appearance before the committee. Further discussion on the establishment and functions of the Gungahlin to City Project Office occurred.

In the afternoon, the Minister for Education and Training appeared with his officers. Matters discussed included:

. the financial position of the Directorate;

. Enterprise Bargaining Agreements;

. salaries and the Territory's ability to attract teachers from outside the ACT;

. special needs transport;

. budgetary savings;

. capital works, toilet block upgrades and classrooms;

. student-teacher ratios;

. the ACT Teacher Quality Institute;

. NAPLAN;

. student counsellors; and

. ESL teaching.

Wednesday, 27 June saw the Minister for Education and Training once again appearing before the committee, together with relevant officers. Matters discussed during the morning included:

. students with a disability, funding, the Student-Centred Appraisal of Needs and students with a disability in non-government schools;

. funding for non-government schools more generally;

. Gonski reforms;

. the National Partnership for Teacher Quality and the National Partnership for Literacy and Numeracy; and

. administrative arrangements for particular ACT schools, including preschools.

The Minister for Environment and Sustainable Development appeared in the afternoon with relevant officers. Matters discussed included:

. staffing and locations of staff for the Directorate;

. arrangements for the Directorate under the new ACT directorate structure;

. the Heritage Unit and heritage matters;

. accountability indicators;
. biodiversity offsets and the Biodiversity Calculator;
. the most recent State of the Environment Report;
. the implications of the Carbon Tax;
. green energy and the feed-in tariff;
. e-waste, the Material Recovery Facility, and waste reduction;
. funding and expenditure on programs;
. storm water;
. waste management at shopping complexes;
. sewerage arrangements; and
. water quality and management, including ACT lakes and ponds.

On day ten, a number of Ministers and officers appeared before the committee, including the Minister for Corrections, the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment, the Minister for Industrial Relations, the Minister for the Arts and the Minister for Community Services.

Matters discussed included:
. capacity and accommodation arrangements at the Alexander Maconochie Centre;
. long service leave portability schemes;
. sham contracting; and
. the Workers Compensation Amendment Bill 2010.

Friday, 29 June 2012 saw the following Minister’s appearing before the committee:
. Minister for Community Services;
. Minister for Ageing;
. Minister for Multicultural Affairs;
. Minister for Women; and
. Minister for Gaming and Racing.

The Speaker of the Assembly also appeared before the committee on Friday, 29 June as well as the ACT Auditor-General.

Transcripts of public hearings can be found here.

The committee is due to report to the Assembly on Tuesday, 14 August 2012.

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**Parliamentary Education**

The Strategy and Parliamentary Education Office has conducted a range of activities for community groups, groups from who English is a second language and ACT public servants during June.

On 13 June the office hosted the second in a series of four public service seminars on the ACT budget process. Presentations were given from the Auditor-General’s office, ACT Treasury Directorate, and MLAs discussed the roles they play in the estimates process.

Fifteen ACT public servants from the Economic Development Directorate attended a half-day seminar (7 June) on how the Assembly works with presentations from the Committee Office, Chamber Support Office and the Strategy and Parliamentary Education Office. Participants visited the library and attended Question Time and provided positive feedback on the seminar.

The Adult Migrant Education Program is run by the Canberra Institute of Technology and students and their teachers visit the Assembly on a regular basis to gain a better sense of how the system of government works in the ACT. Two groups of fifteen students recently came to the Assembly and participated in a program specifically developed to meet their needs. They visited the Chamber, learned about Assembly proceedings, toured the building and participated in a mock election.

On 26 June, four women and their carers from Advocacy for Inclusion visited the Assembly to learn more about the role of MLAs and how MLAs can advocate on their behalf. The group visited the Chamber and participated in a presentation on voting and democracy conducted by staff from Elections ACT.

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**Next sitting**

The Assembly will sit again during the week beginning 14 August 2012.

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