Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory

Standing Orders Committee

Business Paper

SUBJECT: Review of Estimates Committee Process—Department of the Legislative Assembly

Introduction

Since the conduct of the initial Estimates Committee proceedings on 17-19 September 2002, officers of the Department of the Legislative Assembly have conducted a series of discussions with a view to analysing the administrative and procedural aspects of the Committee's operation and suggesting improvements and refinements to the operation of the Estimates Committee for future reference.

A summary of the outcomes of those discussions is provided for the consideration of the Standing Orders Committee.

On 24 September 2002 officers of the department conducted a 'post-committee' analysis session with relevant officers of the Northern Territory Treasury. This session mainly focused on the processing and distribution of written questions from Members through the committee secretariat to ministerial offices and departments and the processing of replies to written questions from departments to ministerial officers to the secretariat and ultimately the committee.

On 6 November a workshop was convened involving relevant Legislative Assembly officers for the purpose of compiling recommendations and observations for consideration by the Standing Orders Committee and to review administrative and resource support for the future operation of an Estimates Committee.

The following notes are presented under the general headings which mirror the areas of interest and concern which were identified in the debate on the occasion of reference to the Standing Orders Committee.

Written Questions

There is general agreement that the timely provision of written questions and answers facilitated the efficient and effective conduct of proceedings. In line with this observation, discussions have been held with Treasury officers as described above, and officers of the Legislative Assembly have been involved in the development of scoping the future development of software for a database to manage the administration of written questions and answers.

Treasury IT officers have submitted a proposal for the development of software. In broad terms, the scope of the proposal is to facilitate the processing of written questions without re-keying; to minimise any editorial work by the Secretariat; to facilitate the timely transmission of written questions to the appropriate ministers and officers of the Public Service; and the return of written replies for processing by the secretariat and distribution to members of the Committee. Details of the proposal and its current status are attached (**Attachment A**).

At this stage the Department of the Legislative Assembly advised that further development of the proposal may be able to be undertaken under the current contractual arrangements for the provision of IT services which will obviate the requirement for going to tender. Further progress in this matter will be advised to members of the Standing Orders Committee in due course.

Alternative venues and logistical arrangements

In line with the undertaking to provide the Standing Orders Committee with details of costs and alternative proposals for venues for the conduct of an Estimates Committee process. A working group, headed by Graham Gadd, Clerk Assistant, was established to present costings and options for alternative venues including layouts, estimates of work required, in particular, the establishment of an alternative venue in the level 4 dining area and any other requirements to improve the operation of the Litchfield Room and is.

The group also reported on options for operating two or more venues concurrently and the impact on *Hansard*, and any financial and human resource implications. A summary of the report is at **Attachment B**.

Comparative costs for the operation of a single committee and simultaneous committee meetings are provided in the summary. While the cheapest available option would be to operate Estimates Committees from the Chamber and the Litchfield Room, it is submitted that the fitout of the level 4 dining room area to facilitate committee hearings would have a long term benefit for more flexible operation of the building as it would be available for other activities including conferencing.

Timing and scheduling of hearings

There was general agreement that it would be easier to manage future hearings of Estimates Committee/s by spreading the hearings over a period extending beyond three sitting days. This would facilitate the scheduling and rostering of ministers and other witnesses in an orderly manner, subject to an agreement or resolution of the time for each portfolio unit.

The proposed sitting pattern for the Legislative Assembly for 2003 has notionally scheduled Estimates Committee/s to be conducted during the second sitting week of June (24, 25, 26). This is the second 'three-day bloc' of a two-week sitting period. Accordingly, it could be available for Estimates Committee/s to meet on Friday 20 June, Monday 23 June and Tuesday 24, Wednesday 25 and Thursday 26 June. In broad terms, utilising five days for sittings it would be possible to conduct 40 hours of hearings in a timeframe that would not require any late night sittings. A range of scheduling options can be developed for the consideration of the Committee. It is proposed that a range of options be provided for the Committee.

Staffing

It was generally agreed that while there were significant peaks of activity which did put some pressure on a limited number of officers from this department, Treasury, ministerial and departmental officers, it was agreed that the sittings of the Estimates Committee more or less imposed a volume of workload and time pressures which mirrored that for a routine Assembly sitting week. It was agreed, that in future all issues relating to excessive hours of duty would need to

be addressed before the same process was conducted in May/June 2003. However, it was also agreed that there is no requirement for additional staff to be employed for the conduct of Estimates Committee/s. The exception would be for the possible requirement for supplementary *Hansard* keyboard and editing staff in the event that two committees were operating simultaneously.

Layout/seating

Some officers indicated that the extended room layout for the hearings, which entailed provision of seating for all Members of the Legislative Assembly, provided some difficulties. It was submitted that a restriction could be placed on the number of Members seated at the Committee table at any one time during proceedings. Alternative seating arrangements for the Litchfield Room and proposed for level 4 can be provided to the Committee.

Written Questions

It was suggested that a more restrictive format for written questions and a limitation on multi-part questions would facilitate the processing of written questions. This issue can be addressed in the context of the development of the software for the written question database described above.

Questions on notice

It was generally agreed that the time limits placed on answering questions taken on notice presented a significant difficulty in the coordination of replies in time for tabling in the Assembly before the consideration of the annual Appropriation Bill in the Committee-of-the-Whole. The experience of the September 2002 hearings prompted the suggestion that questions taken on notice should be answered as soon as possible in writing but no later than the first sittings following the presentation of the report of the Estimates Committee. In the case of the hearings in 2003 this would be the first sitting day in August.

Whole of Government/generic questions

It was agreed that generic questions and those questions asked of all agencies or a multiplicity of agencies should be dealt with at the commencement of the hearings of the committee. In line with this suggestion it was submitted that those 'whole-of-government' or generic questions should be answered initially by the Treasurer and/or officers of the Treasury. Accordingly, it was suggested that the hearings of the Estimates Committee/s should be scheduled so that the Treasurer was the first Minister appearing for examination and that whole-of-government and generic questions and any other questions that needed such treatment could be dealt with on behalf of all agencies at that time by the Treasurer. The issue of scheduling could be resolved in principle when the terms of reference of the Estimates Committee are considered by the Assembly.

Conclusion

The above observations and suggestions are submitted on behalf of officers of the Legislative Assembly who are available to provide any further and better particulars which the Committee may require.

Ian McNeill
Clerk of the Legislative Assembly

Current Status

A draft statement of requirement (specification) has been prepared by Mr Chris Beaumont, IT Manager, ITNT, Department of Corporate Information Services (attached).

This has been provided to Garry Russell, Strategic Adviser, DCIS and Naoko Kitazato, Information Systems Manager, Department of the Legislative Assembly, who will be responsible for the preparation of the final documentation.

Discussions have been held with the Leader of the Opposition's office re their requirements and the process that is required to serve their needs.

I have spoken to Don Parker, Chief Minister's office, in respect of how the database should be set up to provide ministerial officers and agencies with an efficient process to handle the answers to questions. Don Parker will convene a meeting of ministerial officers to talk through all issues and come back to the Secretariat.

The specification issues are being presented to the Department's IT on-site manager.

Terry Hanley
Secretary
Public Accounts Committee

ESTIMATES COMMITTEE HEARINGS

<u>SINGLE COMMITTEE VENUES</u>

Litchfield Room $ 4,000

Dining Room Level 4 $90,000

Chamber $12,000
or $47,000 (media plus sound mixer)

<u>DUAL SIMULTANEOUS COMMITTEES</u>

Litchfield /Dining Area $112,700
Litchfield Room $4,000
Dining Area $90,000
Addit microphones $12,000
Hansard costs $6700

Litchfield/Chamber $34,700
Litchfield Room $4,000
Chamber $12,000
Addit microphones $12,000
Hansard costs $6700

Chamber /Dining Area $127,000
Chamber $12,000
Dining Area $90,000
Addit microphones $12,000
Hansard costs $6700