

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Appointment and Composition of the Committee

The Standing Orders of the Legislative Assembly provide for the appointment of an all-party Standing Committee on Public Accounts. The Committee is appointed for the duration of the Parliament (that is, the period from the opening of the first session immediately following a general election to the dissolution of Parliament).

The membership of the Committee reflects proportionately the representation of parties in the Legislative Assembly. All members except the Chair are entitled to vote on motions; the Chair may vote only to break a tie.

In accordance with the Standing Orders, a Standing Committee on Public Accounts was appointed on December 10, 2007, for the duration of the 39th Parliament. The membership of the Committee when the House adjourned for the summer recess on June 3, 2010, was as follows:

Norm Sterling, Chair, Progressive Conservative
Peter Shurman, Vice-chair, Progressive Conservative
Aileen Carroll, Liberal
France Gélinas, New Democrat
Jerry Ouellette, Progressive Conservative
David Ramsay, Liberal
Liz Sandals, Liberal
Maria Van Bommel, Liberal
David Zimmer, Liberal

Role of the Committee

The Committee examines, assesses, and reports to the Legislative Assembly on a number of issues, including the economy and efficiency of government and broader-public-sector operations; the effectiveness of programs in achieving their objectives; and the reliability and appropriateness of information in the Public Accounts.

In fulfilling this role, pursuant to its terms of reference in the Standing Orders of the Assembly, the Committee reviews the Auditor General's Annual Report and the Public Accounts, holds a number of hearings throughout the year, and reports to the Legislative Assembly its observations, opinions, and recommendations. Under the Standing Orders, the Auditor General's Annual Reports and the Public Accounts are deemed to have been permanently referred to the Committee as they become available.

In addition, under sections 16 and 17 of the *Auditor General Act*, the Committee may request the Auditor General to examine any matter in respect of the Public Accounts or to undertake a special assignment in an area of interest to the Committee.

AUDITOR GENERAL'S ADVISORY ROLE WITH THE COMMITTEE

In accordance with section 16 of the *Auditor General Act*, the Auditor General and senior staff attend committee meetings to assist the Committee in its

review and hearings related to the Auditor General's Annual Report and the Public Accounts.

Committee Procedures and Operations

GENERAL

The Committee may meet weekly when the Legislative Assembly is sitting. With the approval of the House, it may also meet at any time when the Legislative Assembly is not sitting. All meetings are open to the public with the exception of those dealing with the setting of the Committee's agenda and the preparation of committee reports. All public committee proceedings are recorded in Hansard (the official verbatim report of debates in the House, speeches, other proceedings in the Legislative Assembly, and all open-session sittings of standing and select committees).

The Committee selects matters from the Auditor General's Annual Report for hearings. These matters typically relate to the Auditor General's value-for-money audit work. The Auditor General, along with the Committee's researcher, briefs the Committee on these matters, and the Committee then requests senior officials from the auditee to appear and respond to questions at the hearings. Since the Auditor General's Annual Report deals with operational, administrative, and financial rather than policy matters, ministers rarely attend. Once the hearings are completed, the Committee reports its comments and recommendations to the Legislative Assembly.

The Committee also follows up on when and how the ministries, Crown agencies, and organizations in the broader public sector not selected for hearings will address the concerns raised in the Auditor General's Annual Report. This process enables each auditee to update the Committee on what it has done in response to the Auditor General's recommendations since the completion of the audit.

MEETINGS HELD

The Committee met 19 times during the October 2009–June 2010 period to complete reports on hearings related to sections from the *2008 Annual Report* for subsequent tabling in the Legislative Assembly, and to hold hearings on the Auditor General's special report on Ontario's Electronic Health Records Initiative (issued in October 2009) and hearings related to the following sections from the Auditor General's *2009 Annual Report*:

- Assistive Devices Program;
- Bridge Inspection and Maintenance;
- Education Quality and Accountability Office;
- Infection Prevention and Control in Long-term-care Homes;
- Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat;
- Ontario Disability Support Program;
- Teletriage Health Services;
- Unfunded Liability of the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board; and
- Unspent Grants, Public Accounts of the Province.

REPORTS OF THE COMMITTEE

The Committee issues its reports to the Legislative Assembly. These reports summarize the information reviewed by the Committee during its meetings, as well as make comments and recommendations.

All committee reports are available through the Clerk of the Committee (or on-line at www.ontla.on.ca), thus providing the public with full access to the findings and recommendations of the Committee.

After the Committee tables a report in the Legislative Assembly, it requests that ministries, agencies, or broader-public-sector organizations respond to each recommendation either within 120 days or within a time frame stipulated by the Committee.

During the period from September 2009 to June 2010, the Committee submitted the following reports relating to sections of the Auditor General's *2008 Annual Report* to the Legislative Assembly:

- *Adult Institutional Services;*
- *Brampton Civic Hospital Public–private Partnership Project;*
- *Child and Youth Mental Health Agencies;*
- *Community Mental Health;*
- *Employment and Training Division;*
- *Gasoline, Diesel-fuel, and Tobacco Tax;*
- *Ontario Clean Water Agency;*
- *School Boards—Acquisition of Goods and Services;* and
- *Special Education.*

In addition, the Committee submitted a report relating to the *Long-term-care Homes—Medication Management* section of the Auditor General’s 2007 *Annual Report*. The Committee also issued a report titled *Public Accounts Committee Best Practice 2009*, to highlight some innovative practices for consideration by future committees to enhance the effectiveness of their work, particularly in relation to recommendations involving organizations in the broader public sector.

FOLLOW-UP ON RECOMMENDATIONS MADE BY THE COMMITTEE

The Clerk of the Committee is responsible for obtaining responses from ministries, agencies, and organizations in the broader public sector on the actions taken in response to the Committee’s recommendations. The Office of the Auditor General

also reviews these responses and, in any subsequent audits of that operational area, follows up on the actions reported.

COMMITTEE MOTION TO CONDUCT A SPECIAL AUDIT

On October 21, 2009, the Committee requested that the Auditor General of Ontario “at his discretion, conduct spot audits on the use of consultants by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, the 14 LHINs, and Ontario’s hospitals.” The Auditor General submitted a special report relating to this work titled *Consultant Use in Selected Health Organizations* to the Speaker of the House in October 2010.

OTHER COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES

Canadian Council of Public Accounts Committees

The Canadian Council of Public Accounts Committees (CCPAC) consists of delegates from federal, provincial, and territorial public accounts committees from across Canada. CCPAC holds a joint annual conference with the Canadian Council of Legislative Auditors to discuss issues of mutual interest. The 31st annual conference was hosted by Quebec and was held in Quebec City from August 29 to 31, 2010.