18th Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories

Standing Committee on Rules and Procedures

Report on the Review of Standing Committee Public Engagement and Transparency

Chair: Mr. Kevin O'Reilly

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May 30, 2017

SPEAKER OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Mr. Speaker:

Your Standing Committee on Rules and Procedures is pleased to provide its Report on
the Review of Standing Committee Public Engagement and Transparency.

Kevin O'Reilly
Chair
Standing Committee on
 Rules and Procedures

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**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
RULES AND PROCEDURES**

**REPORT ON THE REVIEW OF
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INTRODUCTION

The Standing Committee on Rules and Procedures was tasked on February 25, 2016, by Motion 10-18(2), with recommending a process for standing committee public engagement and transparency, taking into account public input and a review of other jurisdictions. Much of this work was described in the Committee's interim report, presented on November 1, 2016, and is not repeated in this final report. The Committee's work on this matter is paralleled by a similar effort by Cabinet to increase the openness of government.

The goal of measures taken to date and of those now recommended is to promote greater public understanding of committees' work and enable greater participation in the democratic process, with increased transparency and opportunities for public engagement. This is particularly important in our Legislative Assembly, where standing committees play a critical role in our unique consensus system of governance.

BACKGROUND

Members of the 18th Assembly recognize the need for greater transparency and accountability. We are committed to providing the public with more information about our decision-making process and better opportunities to take part. As noted in the Committee's interim report, "the ultimate goal is to promote a culture of openness in which citizens provide input, monitor progress, and see that their participation is valued by decision-makers."

The Legislative Assembly and its committees regularly use a variety of tools to engage the public and provide information, including our website, news releases, social media, in-house television broadcasting system, radio and television rebroadcasts of proceedings, publication of Hansard (which is also used unofficially and free of charge by OpenNWT), town halls, public meetings, and public requests for comments on specific reports and legislation. Of course, the Assembly's public gallery is open during Session, and the Legislative Library will assist anyone in finding information.

Recommendations in this report are intended to improve and expand upon these activities, particularly to benefit public interaction with standing committees.

PUBLIC TRANSPARENCY AND ENGAGEMENT IN THE WORK OF THE 18TH LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Soon after the Committee began its work on public engagement and transparency, Members of the 18th Assembly amended their Guiding Principles and Process Conventions to state that "the business of consensus government should be carried out in public, unless there are compelling reasons to meet in private. Public meetings should be the rule and not the exception." This convention has been successfully implemented.

In its interim report, the Committee recommended that, working with Legislative Assembly staff, each standing committee should:

1. Improve the ease-of-use and access to committee webpages and add the following information to what is currently provided:

   a. known schedule, and public matters being considered; and
   b. meeting notices, agendas, witnesses' submissions and presentation materials.

   Specific requests for public input and contact information for the committee should be prominently displayed and readily accessible.

2. Identify, in advance, whether a meeting or a portion of a meeting may be held *in camera,* and how this will be reflected in the agenda. A committee may decide to hold an *in camera* meeting or portions of a meeting *in camera* to:

   a. Deal with administrative and personnel matters;

   b. Consider correspondence or a draft report, including the Committee's own reports;

   c. Receive a background briefing;

   d. Deal with subject matters requiring confidentiality, such as budget items or bills that have not yet been introduced in the Assembly;

   e. Do strategic planning, including sessional meetings of the Standing Committee on Priorities and Planning, which focus on preparing for business in the House; or,

   f. Any other matter that would or would likely entail private or privileged information.

3. Ensure that consideration is given to the use of plain language and summaries where appropriate in public communications and reports.

These measures have been enacted or are in the process of being implemented. Committee webpages are being much expanded, with a prominent access link on the Assembly's main page. The Committee provided guidance to Legislative Assembly staff on committee website content, navigation, and public schedules. The new committee pages are undergoing pre-launch testing. Additions to the committee pages include a meeting calendar, information about public participation, committee business, agendas and materials for public meetings, committee reports, and news releases. Committees have heard that meeting notices and supporting material should be posted earlier, but notice is not always received well in advance. All committees and Cabinet should try to improve public notice of meetings.

Standing committees also experimented with Facebook Live to air public briefings. Since January 2017, the Legislative Assembly provided live video of public committee meetings to viewers on social media. As of May 15, 17 public committee meetings were streamed live on Facebook with an average of 400 views per video. The most-viewed was the first, featuring the Standing Committee on Priorities and Planning's press conference about the 2017-2018 budget. In light of the success of the pilot project, live-streaming of public standing committee meetings and other events is now our practice. The Legislative Assembly's Facebook page has more than 700 followers.

Since the Standing Committee on Rules and Procedures' interim report, we sought additional feedback from the public and Members of the Assembly. Submissions were solicited on the Committee's webpage, Facebook, and by other means, but none were received. As part of the process, the Chair met with a transparency advocate.

The Committee also received a presentation from the Minister of Transparency and Public Engagement on the Open Government initiative, which may produce findings relevant to standing committee procedures.

As a result of this additional engagement, the Committee considered several other issues.

1) Providing Members' attendance information in a spreadsheet format that can be easily analysed: This information is already publicly available, but not in spreadsheet format because no such software is used to compile the data.

2) Publishing standing committees' travel expenses: Committee travel expenses have been available on request. The Standing Committee on Rules and Procedures recommends that these expenses be regularly posted on each committee's webpage.

3) Digitization of Hansard transcripts of proceedings prior to the 14th Assembly: Hansard transcripts are searchable on the Assembly's website back to the 14th Assembly. Hansard was first produced digitally during the 12th Assembly, but the document formatting is inconsistent with current requirements. Digitizing Hansard prior to the 12th Assembly is an even larger endeavour. The Committee notes that this topic is outside the scope of its mandate, but agrees that adding earlier Hansard transcripts to the Assembly's searchable website is desirable if it can be done cost-effectively. All Hansard transcripts are currently available to the public by request to the Legislative Assembly Library.

4) Indexing of Hansard: It was suggested to the Committee during its consultations that indexing of Hansard, suspended several years ago as a cost-saving measure, be restored to improve searchability. Assembly staff informed us that this is a goal of the new Hansard production team. Again, this topic is outside the scope of the Committee's mandate, but we recommend completion of this project.

5) Producing and publishing records of decision by standing committees or summaries of committee business: Audio/video recordings of public committee meetings are available on the Legislative Assembly's YouTube site and by specific request. The Committee suggests that the Standing Committee on Government Operations produce summaries of its work or records of decision on a pilot basis. Should this prove successful, it could be adopted by other standing committees.

6) Publishing committee correspondence: Submissions to standing committees respecting public hearings on legislation and other matters will be published on committee webpages; previously, they were available on request. Other correspondence may be published at committees' discretion, subject to the provisions for in-camera matters described earlier.

7) Consistency of processes for public engagement and transparency: The Committee suggests that Chairs of the standing committees discuss these processes twice annually, with a view to potential improvements. Each standing committee should also review its public engagement and transparency at least annually, against a common checklist of questions such as those developed by the Standing Committee on Rules and Procedures to solicit input for this final report.

CONCLUSION

Public engagement and transparency of standing committees is being improved on an on-going basis. New methods and technology will arise over time; change is the only constant. Standing committees must adapt to their current circumstances and provide timely, useful information to the public in convenient ways. The Standing Committee on Rules and Procedures is confident that the work done in this area over the past year represents a significant improvement on what was previously available, and establishes a sound foundation for future evolution.