



Opening Statement before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics

Mary Dawson – Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner
Ottawa, Ontario, May 2, 2017

Introduction

Mr. Chair and honourable members of the Committee, I thank you for inviting me to appear before you today as the Committee considers my Office's budgetary submission for the 2017-2018 Main Estimates.

I am accompanied by Sandy Tremblay, Director of Corporate Management.

I will begin by briefly describing how I have organized my Office and its operations to support my mandate of administering the *Conflict of Interest Act*, which applies to some 2250 public office holders, and the *Conflict of Interest Code for Members of the House of Commons*.

I will next review our historical budgetary requirements, with reference to some of our activities in the past year, and to the internal management framework that I have put in place to ensure the effective, efficient and economical use of public resources.

Against this background, I will then discuss our current budgetary requirements.

Organization and Operations

My Office conducts a range of activities in support of my administration of the Act and the Members' Code. I have organized it into five divisions.

We provide confidential advice to Members and public office holders, review their confidential reports, maintain internal records of that information, and administer a system of public disclosure. These activities are handled by the Advisory and Compliance division. It is our largest division, reflecting my primary goal of helping Members and public office holders meet their obligations through education and guidance. In 2016-17, beyond the initial compliance processes for the 315 new reporting public office holders and some 200 Members of the House of Commons, advisors in my Office had almost 2400 communications with Members and public office holders.

We also undertake education and outreach, and conduct public communications and media relations. These activities are conducted by the Communications, Outreach and Planning division, which also contributes to policy development, compiles research, and coordinates my Office's interactions with Parliament and external organizations.

Although prevention is the major focus of my Office, we also investigate possible contraventions of the Act and the Members' Code. The Investigations division has responsibility in this area. The Legal Services division also makes a critical contribution to examinations and inquiries, as well as providing strategic legal advice on all facets of my Office's work.

Since I last appeared before you, I have released four examination reports. Two examinations and one inquiry are ongoing, and one examination is suspended. We dealt with 45 case files in the past fiscal year and had no remaining case assessments to complete at the end of the fiscal year.

Another activity area relates to the administrative structures, processes and services required for the organization to operate. The Corporate Management division oversees the development and implementation of internal management policies, and the delivery of services and advice on human resources, finance, information technology, information management, and the management of Office facilities. It also administers service agreements with external partners.

General administrative and logistical support for all of these activities is provided by my own small team in the Commissioner's Office.

Human Resources

My Office has a total of 50 indeterminate positions, two of which are currently vacant.

Last year I reduced my already small management team by one position, and it now includes just four senior managers. As well, two new positions were added to the Office to enable us to fulfill compensation and financial management functions internally. Services in these areas were previously provided by Public Services and Procurement Canada, and by the Library of Parliament under service agreements. We continue to contract with the House of Commons for information management and information technology services. We outsource other services to reduce costs where appropriate, such as classification, commissionaire services, the employee and family assistance program and auditing.

As an Officer of the House of Commons, my independence from the government of the day is assured in several ways, including by my status as a separate employer. As an entity of Parliament, my Office is not generally subject to legislation governing the administration of the public service or to Treasury Board policies and guidelines. I have, however, taken steps to ensure that we respect the principles followed in the public service and in Parliament to the greatest extent possible in staffing matters and other aspects of resource management.

Management Initiatives

In the past fiscal year, in addition to building our in-house compensation and financial management capacity, my Office strengthened its internal management framework through a variety of measures.

For example, we took steps to improve the way we organize and manage electronic records, implemented a more comprehensive security program, and purchased a videoconference system to enable us to remotely conduct interviews during examinations and inquiries.

We also entered into a new agreement with the Canada School of Public Service that gives our employees access to a wide range of learning opportunities. When we were required to start using new content management software for our intranet site, we took the opportunity to reorganize and expand this key internal communications tool.

This fiscal year, while continuing the day-to-day work of administering the Act and the Members' Code efficiently and effectively, we will build on recent initiatives in a variety of activity areas. This includes a major upgrade of our case management system and the replacement of our human resources and financial systems.

Previous Budgetary Requirements

My Office, which was created in July 2007, maintained an annual operating budget of \$7.1 million in its first five years of operation, with no increases. In years six and seven, I was able to offer small overall budget reductions.

In each of the past two years, I sought and received a slight upward adjustment in order to cover an increase in contributions to the employee benefit plans, as determined by Treasury Board. In 2016-17, my Office was allocated an operating budget of \$6.97 million.

Even accounting for those variations, every year we have returned some surplus funds to the federal treasury. Our estimated surplus for 2016-17 is in the order of \$600,000.

I have always maintained a reserve to allow my Office to respond to exceptional circumstances that could significantly impact our workload. The reserve is also intended to provide for IT projects associated, for example, with the Office website, our client management database, the public registry and our intranet.

2017-18 Budgetary Requirements

This year, I am seeking a budget of \$6.9 million.

This amount is down slightly from the \$6.97 million that my Office received last year. The decrease results from lower employee benefit plan contributions. The employer contribution was reduced from 16.8 per cent to 15.7 per cent in accordance with the percentage set by Treasury Board.

I have budgeted for a reserve of \$400,000 in 2017-18, the same as last year.

Given the nature of my mandate, salaries remain by far our largest budgetary expenditure. Non-salary expenditures are mostly related to the standard costs of running an office and the costs of outsourced services.

Conclusion

I thank the Committee again for inviting me to discuss the budgetary requirements of my Office, and I direct its attention to the availability on my Office website and in my annual reports of detailed financial and other information.

This concludes my opening statement. I will be pleased to answer your questions.