



Opening Statement before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics on budgetary submission for 2014-15 Main Estimates

Mary Dawson – Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner
Ottawa, Ontario, May 6, 2014

Mr. Chair, thank you for inviting me to appear before you today as the Committee considers my Office's budgetary submission for the 2014-2015 Main Estimates.

With me today is Denise Benoit, Director of Corporate Management.

I will briefly describe my Office's organization and operations, then I will talk about our financial needs for the current fiscal year and discuss any relevant considerations.

Organization and Operations

In support of my mandate to administer the *Conflict of Interest Act* for public office holders and the *Conflict of Interest Code for Members of the House of Commons*, I have organized my Office into five divisions.

Reflecting our primary goal of helping public office holders and Members meet their obligations under the Act and the Code through education and guidance, Advisory and Compliance is the largest division, accounting for about one-third of my staff. This group provides confidential advice to our stakeholders. It reviews their confidential reports, maintains internal records of this information, and administers a system of public disclosure.

In keeping with my emphasis on education and advice as the best way to achieve compliance, the Policy, Research and Communications division coordinates education and outreach activities. It also contributes to policy development, compiles research, conducts public communications and media relations, and coordinates our dealings with Parliament and external organizations.

While the major focus of my Office is on prevention, we also investigate possible contraventions of the Act and the Code. Our Reports and Investigations division leads our investigations and coordinates the preparation of our annual reports.

Legal Services also plays a critical role in our investigations, and provides strategic legal advice on all facets of our work.

Our 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 our shared services agreements with other organizations.

Finally, my own small team in the Commissioner's Office provides general administrative and logistical support for the Office.

There are 49 positions in my Office. Although staff turnover remains low, four positions are currently vacant as a result of employee departures. Before staffing these positions, we are assessing operational requirements.

2014-15 Estimates

For the first five years after my Office was created in July 2007, we maintained an operating budget that remained unchanged at \$7.1 million. I considered that would be sufficient once my Office was fully operational, although we have never had to spend the full amount.

We have implemented measures to reduce expenditures, such as using email rather than regular mail to communicate with our stakeholders, using webcasts to participate in conferences, thereby reducing travel costs, and centralizing certain purchases and functions. In 2013-14, we decided not to immediately fill positions that became vacant during the year, and eliminated one position in the Corporate Management division. We have also reduced the amount set aside as a reserve to cover unexpected situations.

Some of those efficiencies were identified in a spending review that I initiated in 2012-13. As a result of that review, I was able to proactively offer an overall budget reduction of 1.4% for the last fiscal year.

This year, I have offered a further reduction of 1.4%, as I expect my Office to be able to fund its operations with a budget of just \$6.9 million in 2014-15. This amount is sufficient to discharge my mandate in its current form, although any changes resulting from the current reviews of the Act and the Code could have resource implications for my Office.

Management Framework

My Office is an entity of Parliament that is not subject to most Treasury Board policies and guidelines, or to most legislation governing the administration of the public service.

Nevertheless, we have worked to establish and maintain an internal management framework based on the principles of sound resource management followed in the public service. Over the past fiscal year, for example, we have formalized practices already adopted by the Office, through the development and implementation of internal directives related to expenditure management, including travel, conference and hospitality expenses, and the use of acquisition cards.

My Office continues to rely on the expertise of other entities of Parliament as well as Public Works and Government Services Canada for the delivery of shared services.

We have agreements with the House of Commons for technology and security, with the Library of Parliament for accounts payable and external reporting, and with PWGSC for compensation. These arrangements provide greater efficiency and one more level of scrutiny in the management of resources.

In the past fiscal year, we have had our internal controls for expenditure management assessed by the Library of Parliament, and I am pleased to report that we have had very positive results.

I am also pleased to report that, for the third year, the annual financial statements for my Office were audited independently and we again received a positive opinion.

Other Management Initiatives

We continue to follow good management practices in other areas of our operations as well.

Building on our strong policy framework in the area of human resources, we implemented over the last year policies and guidelines to address occupational health and safety, disability management and the duty to accommodate, and management of specific forms of leave. We recently introduced our new directive on performance management which is consistent with the approach being taken in the public service. We are also in the process of developing competency profiles for all positions.

In May 2013, my Office contracted with an external company to carry out an employee satisfaction survey. We achieved a response rate of 98% and overall survey results suggest that employees are generally satisfied.

We have acted to address concerns that were raised regarding opportunities for advancement within the Office, employee empowerment and the establishment of a conflict resolution mechanism.

We have nearly finalized the development of a performance measurement strategy to demonstrate the effectiveness of my Office in fulfilling its mandate.

We recently reviewed and updated the strategic plan for my Office, identifying priorities and projects going forward. Our strategic priorities for 2014-2015 include:

- Addressing any changes arising from the reviews of the Act and the Code;
- Updating the public registries;
- Completing an internal practice manual;
- Implementing our performance measurement strategy;
- Continuing to identify opportunities for cost savings;
- And, succession planning.

Thank you once again to the Committee for inviting me to discuss our budgetary requirements. I will be pleased to answer your questions.