



New Zealand House of Representatives: Recent changes to select committee financial scrutiny

*Wellington, New Zealand
March 2024*

The New Zealand House of Representatives relies heavily on its select committees to conduct detailed and regular scrutiny of the executive. Select committees undertake two types of financial scrutiny on an annual basis:

- examining the Government's proposed spending as set out in the Budget/estimates of appropriations (estimates examinations)
- reviewing the past performance and current operations of public sector entities (annual reviews)

Estimates examinations and annual reviews generally involve committees sending questions to entities and Ministers for written response, receiving advice from the Office of the Auditor-General, holding public hearings of evidence, and producing a report summarising their findings.

In 2023, the House made substantial changes to how select committees conduct financial scrutiny.¹ These changes include the introduction of the following:

Scrutiny weeks

There is a new requirement for the House's annual sitting calendar to include two dedicated scrutiny weeks (one for annual reviews and one for estimates). During these weeks, the House will not sit, members are required to attend committee meetings in person, and witnesses are expected to make themselves available. This change should make it easier for committees to organise their hearings and to hold longer hearings.

In-depth annual reviews

In-depth annual reviews are a new procedure for reviewing public organisations. These reviews involve hearings of at least three hours, and a structured agenda that guides what topics are discussed.² Public sector entities that perform the most important functions (and spend the most money) will be subject to in-depth annual reviews.

Review briefings

Most annual review hearings take place in December and February. Committees can have large workloads during this time period, making it difficult to arrange hearings and give each annual review meaningful and proper consideration. Review briefings are a new procedural category that would allow committees to hold shorter, and more frequent, hearings outside the congested annual review period.

¹ These changes are explained in more detail in chapter 6 of the [Review of Standing Orders 2023](#).

² Examples of structured agendas are available on [the New Zealand Parliament website](#).

Scrutiny plans

The previous approach to scrutiny was ad hoc. Committees decided once a year who to call in for a hearing and for how long. There was little to no planning in terms of topics, outcomes, or initiatives that members were interested in or that would benefit from scrutiny.

There is a new requirement for committees to devise and publish plans at the start of the Parliament covering their planned scrutiny activities for the rest of the three-year term. Scrutiny plans are intended to help to develop a culture of systematic scrutiny and provide greater focus to committees' scrutiny activities.

Scrutiny activities reports

Committees are required to make at least two reports during a parliamentary term about the implementation of their scrutiny plans. It is envisaged that these activities reports will provide focus for committees, and committees will explain any updates or changes to their scrutiny priorities.

Broader scope for annual reviews

The scope of annual reviews has been broadened slightly to include an organisation's strategic documents. This enables questioning focused on progress against strategic objectives, and future plans for further progress. Nonetheless, annual reviews continue to primarily be about reviewing the entity's performance over the previous financial year.

Introductory remarks

Witnesses have been guided to keep introductory remarks very brief: approximately 3 minutes for a hearing of 60 minutes, and approximately 6 minutes for a hearing of 120 minutes or longer. This change is intended to stop witnesses filibustering and reducing the time available to members to ask questions.

Sustained questioning

Chairs of committees have been encouraged to facilitate more sustained questioning by members.