

Parliament of Victoria



How to host a committee inquiry

A guide to exploring
the committee process
in the classroom

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About this resource

This resource is designed to guide teachers through the process of running a parliamentary committee inquiry with your class. The activity aims to help students understand how parliamentary committees work and the role they play in law reform.

You may choose to use this 'how to' guide on its own and devise an inquiry topic yourself or with your class. Options for doing so are provided throughout this resource.

You can also use this guide in conjunction with pre-prepared case studies, that navigate you and your students through an actual inquiry process that resulted in changes to legislation or government policy.

Each inquiry case study provides an overview of the process that was followed and the perspectives that were explored, along with a guide to examining various considerations that would inform the development of any final recommendations to the parliament coming out of the inquiry.

Some of the more detailed case studies also include, where appropriate, excerpts from public submissions, committee hearings, and an overview of related laws in other jurisdictions.



[You can find the case studies that accompany this activity here.](#)

How to host a committee inquiry:

The people

Committee members

The Victorian parliament operates 16 committees that are formed of members from different parties and from one or both houses of parliament. Committees hold inquiries to investigate particular issues and often call for input from the wider community. Some committees are focused on particular subject areas, while others oversee the operations of parliament.

Parliamentary committees do not have any powers to change laws themselves, however, they do often consider possible changes to legislation or government policy and make recommendations to parliament.

At the end of its inquiry process, a committee will present its findings and any recommendations to the parliament in a final report. This is called 'tabling' the report. Once the report is tabled it is made available to the public and the government can choose whether to implement a committee's recommendations.



[Learn more about
parliamentary committees](#)

Secretariat staff

The committee secretariat is a small team of parliamentary staff that supports a committee. The secretariat comprises the committee manager, inquiry officers, research assistants and administration officers.

The secretariat gathers evidence and works with the committee to produce the report on behalf of the committee, and organises public hearings, including where applicable/possible, regional or online public hearings.

The committee manager oversees this work and helps the researchers produce the first draft of the report. The committee chair then approves the draft report which is referred to as the ‘committee chair’s draft’. This draft is then given to all members of the committee and worked through to produce a final report that the majority of the committee can agree on.

If a committee member doesn’t agree, they can write what is referred to as a minority report, which provides an explanation of their concerns or alternative perspectives. This is included as an appendix to the published report.

Committee managers also have a responsibility for staff wellbeing and act as the liaison between the committee and the secretariat.

Stakeholders

In the context of this resource, ‘stakeholders’ is a term used to refer to the broad and diverse range of people or groups that a committee may wish to hear from on a given issue.

Businesses, industries, public services, academics, community groups and individuals can all be stakeholders.

It can be anyone who has an interest in the issue because of the way they may be affected by the decisions to be made, and they can contribute insights and information based on their profession, expertise or lived experience.

Stakeholders will typically contribute to an inquiry process by providing a written submission or presenting evidence to committee members at a public hearing. They might also become involved in less formal ways, like taking part in a community forum or responding to a survey.

How to host a committee inquiry:

The process

This committee inquiry activity will see students undertake individual or group research to examine a chosen topic from different perspectives, and develop a series of questions that they would like to ask if they were a committee member in a public hearing. They can use this research to run their own ‘public hearing’, breaking into groups that represent the key participants in this process.

This section describes the key stages of a committee inquiry and the roles of the people and groups involved. The suggested activities at each stage will see students experiencing different aspects of this process as you work through your chosen topic. There are a few different ways to approach each activity and opportunities for alterations to best suit the needs of your class are provided throughout.

All stages of the inquiry are addressed in this resource, though much of the activity focuses on research and public hearings. Other stages, such as reporting to parliament, can be addressed through class discussion, and thinking routines are provided as prompts for this.



[Learn more about current and recent parliamentary inquiries](#)



1

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The instructions and guidelines by which a committee must conduct their inquiry



2

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

The public and interested parties can make submissions to the committee. The committee may also contact people or organisations with specialist knowledge to request a submission.



3

RESEARCH

The committee conducts its own research. Where appropriate, this may include site visits or consultation with other jurisdictions.

4

PUBLIC HEARINGS

The committee invites key stakeholders to present their insights or opinions, specialist knowledge, or lived experience.



5

REPORTING TO PARLIAMENT

Once the committee has gathered enough information, it releases a report that is tabled (presented) in parliament and made publicly available.



6

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Once a report has been tabled in parliament, the government has six months to respond. The response must indicate whether the government supports any recommendations in the report.



1. Terms of reference



Either the Legislative Assembly or Legislative Council can give a topic to one of its committees to investigate. In some situations, a committee can also decide to investigate a topic itself. The instructions given to investigate a topic are called ‘terms of reference’. They describe the subject of the inquiry, identify key questions that should be answered and set boundaries. They also specify the timeframe in which the committee is required to report back to parliament.

Terms of reference for this activity are provided in each of the accompanying case studies.

If students are investigating their own topic, you could set the terms of reference for them, or they could be negotiated as a class.

If you are basing this activity on a current or past committee inquiry, you could use the terms of reference (or a variation of) from that inquiry. You’ll find this information on the relevant inquiry page on the parliament’s website, or in the opening pages of the published report. Visit the committees section of the parliament’s website to search current and past inquiries.

2. Public submissions



Providing the opportunity for the public to present information to a committee is a critical part of the inquiry process. Depending on the nature of the topic, committee members may invite particular sectors, communities, industries, organisations or individuals to contribute their perspectives or expertise. Often they put out a call for broader input from the general public. A submission will usually be a written document that expresses a particular point of view and offers information for the committee’s consideration.

This activity does not focus on the process of calling for public submissions, although using available public submissions might be useful as research for students to consider.

If you’re focusing on an issue that relates to a current or past inquiry, students could read some of the public submissions that are available on the relevant committee webpages to get an understanding of the

different views that have been presented. In some instances, the pre-prepared inquiry case studies will provide samples and/or excerpts to demonstrate a range of perspectives that were offered for these inquiries.

Alternatively, if the class is developing its own inquiry topic and time permits, students could ask their peers, the school community, or families to write a short submission or complete a survey.

3. Research



Secretariat staff play an important role in gathering information for consideration by the committee. This will often involve a range of research methods, such as literature reviews and analysis of data, interviews, and community discussions. Where appropriate, committee members and the secretariat may also conduct site visits as part of the information-gathering process.

As parliamentary staff, the secretariat is required to present an unbiased and balanced perspective in their research and reporting. They will ensure a diversity of views and provide objective evidence to support the members' decision-making process. They may identify the kind of information that is most applicable to the issue at hand, for example, lived experience vs. statistical data, and they will often look at what is happening in other states or countries.

The research that informs these decision-making processes can be presented in final reports to parliament to provide context for the recommendations that are put forward.

This stage provides all students with an opportunity to experience the work of secretariat staff, conducting research and gathering evidence on behalf of the committee. This research will form the basis of the public hearing to be conducted in the next stage.

There are two options for conducting research, depending on the class time available.

The first option is to ask students to conduct their own research.

The second option is to provide students with the material from one of the accompanying case studies.

If you are using an accompanying case study as the topic for this activity, you may like to use the information and questions in the ‘Exploring perspectives’ section of that resource, either as a starting point or in addition to the students’ research. It will contain a combination of excerpts from public submissions and/or hearings, stories of lived experiences and/or details of relevant legislation in other jurisdictions. This may be especially useful if class time is limited.

In an actual committee inquiry, not all people involved (the committee, the secretariat, and the stakeholders) will conduct the same research and to the same depth, but having all students approach the research phase can:

- help their understanding of the issue and the range of perspectives more broadly
- help develop their critical thinking in analysing and selecting evidence to present from a particular perspective
- provide opportunities to think critically about what type of questions elicit the best response for use as detailed evidence, and
- provide opportunities to discuss the different roles in a committee inquiry, and different expectations of the different groups. For instance, a stakeholder group may not have the opportunity to talk about all the issues they want to raise due to the terms of reference or the line of questioning in the public hearing.

Each of these dot points themselves could be the basis for class discussion if there are opportunities for an even more in-depth approach to the research phase of the committee inquiry process.

The questions on the following page could be used as the basis for students’ research, for planning their presentations in the public hearings phase, or as part of classroom discussion.

Perspectives

- What groups, organisations and/or individuals might be interested in this inquiry?
 - What arguments, insights and experiences might they present?
 - Are these arguments informed by lived experience, professional experience, or subject expertise? What evidence would each stakeholder be likely to present?
 - In thinking about their arguments, could there be additional or alternative solutions that the stakeholder group might offer? For example, they might suggest things that could be done before a problem arises, or things that could be done afterwards; they might focus on punishments, or focus on incentives.
- Are any site visits necessary? What would be the reasons for the visit, what questions would it answer, and what would the committee hope to learn?
- What arguments might be presented about this enquiry in the media and across social media? Whose perspectives are being represented?

Legislative considerations

- What laws exist in other jurisdictions, either throughout Australia or internationally? How might they inform or be adapted for legislation in Victoria?
- Who might be effected by changes in legislation, and what might the effects be?
- Should there be any limitations or exceptions to the law or circumstances where the law may be applied differently?

Lines of inquiry

- What questions might you ask different stakeholder groups?
- **‘Creative questions’** and **‘Creative question starts’** thinking routines and the **‘Question matrix’** are useful tools for generating a range of questions.

4. Public hearings



As part of its inquiry process a committee may invite or require people to attend a public hearing to provide their views and answer questions for the committee. The information given to a committee is called evidence. The committee will want to hear from people who have experience or expertise that is relevant to the inquiry, who are called witnesses.

Committee hearings are normally open to the public and the media, and may also be streamed on the parliament's website. Hearings often take place at Parliament House but can also be held in the community.

This stage will see the class dividing into groups to run their own public hearing, using their research and the questions they have devised to support their respective roles.

Breaking into groups

There are two different ways that you could approach this activity, based on how you would like to break your class into groups.

Option 1

Split the class into the following groups:

- Several stakeholder groups, each presenting from different perspectives
- The committee, asking questions to elicit deeper insights from the stakeholders

Each of the stakeholder groups will present their arguments to the committee. While the stakeholder groups are presenting and answering questions, you may want the other groups to take notes on, for example:

- Suggestions of any limitations to the law or alternative responses to the issue
- Any perspectives or arguments that may be useful to their own group
- Any additional perspectives or arguments that may be useful to support their findings and recommendations in the next stage

- Any evidence presented that may not fit into the terms of reference

These notes can act as evidence that the committee and secretariat can refer to when the class meets to discuss their findings and recommendations as part of the ‘reporting to parliament’ phase.

Option 2

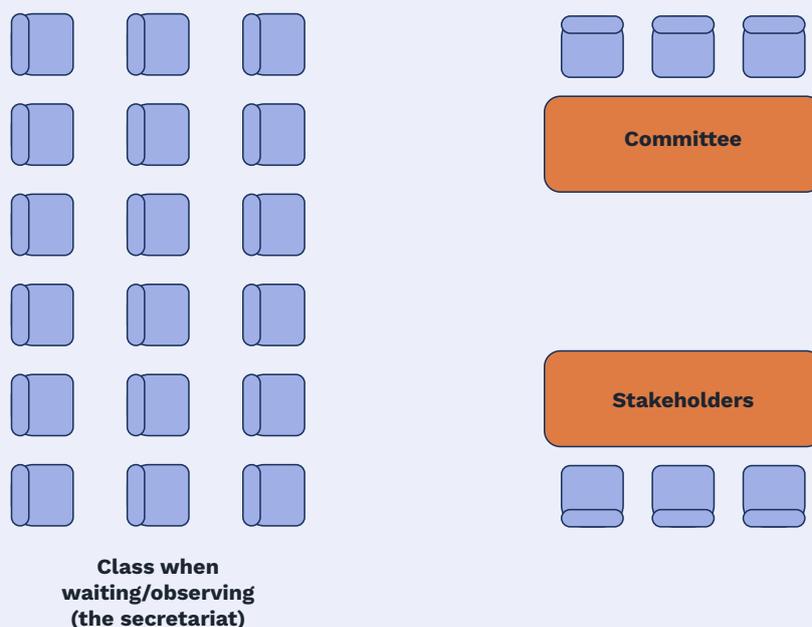
Each group has a turn serving as the committee and representing the views of a stakeholder group, with students rotating through these roles. Again, you may want any students not presenting to take notes as indicated above.

Depending on your class size, the number of perspectives you would like represented at the public hearings, and the amount of available class time you have, you may wish to:

- have more stakeholder groups
- have students work in smaller groups, pairs or individually
- take the committee role yourself, either by presenting alternative perspectives and evidence or asking stakeholder groups questions that challenge their perspectives or extend their arguments.

Classroom setup

If time and space permit, you may wish to set your classroom up in the form of a committee hearing, such as the one pictured here.



Stakeholder presentations and committee questions

Stakeholder presentations could vary in length depending on the amount of class time available, but approximately two to three minutes would be sufficient, plus additional time for committee questions.

The length of question time can also vary depending on the amount of class time available. As a guide, approximately two minutes, or four to five questions would be sufficient.

During the stakeholder presentations, depending on group size, you might like to split the stakeholder groups up into two smaller groups: one with responsibility for presenting and the other responsible for answering committee questions.

If needed, the committee group could also be split up, with each of the smaller groups taking responsibility for asking the different stakeholders questions.

Tips for stakeholders

Students should present from the perspective of a particular stakeholder group. These could reflect groups that have presented at actual committee hearings, or a different group selected by the students.

To ensure different arguments and a range of possible solutions are presented, stakeholder groups should represent varying perspectives on the issue, and present a range of considerations (barriers, needs or other possible solutions).

To do this, students could argue:

- Effects of any proposed legislation change on individuals or groups
- Limitations or exceptions to the legislation that should be considered
- Any additional considerations for the legislation.

Tips for the committee

The committee should ask each of the stakeholder groups questions at the conclusion of their presentation. This may involve critically selecting the most appropriate questions from the list they have generated in their research.

Students could consider the type of committee they want to be and how that informs the questions they want to ask. For instance, the Legal and Social Issues Committee might have a different line of questioning to an oversight and integrity committee that is looking at accountability.

The questions they ask the stakeholder groups may need to be adjusted, taking into consideration what perspectives each group might have.



The Public Accounts and Estimates Committee Inquiry into the Budget Estimates.

5. Reporting to parliament



At the end of its inquiry process, a committee will present its findings and any recommendations to the parliament in a final report. This is called ‘tabling’ the report. Once the report is tabled it is made available to the public and the government can choose whether to implement a committee’s recommendations.

Once a committee has heard from all stakeholder groups, it should spend some time deliberating before presenting its findings and recommendations. While this is usually the committee’s responsibility, with the support of the secretariat, you may like all groups to summarise their findings and recommendations.

This can provide an opportunity for students to refer back to their notes they took during the stakeholder presentations, and for the different groups to compare and contrast any potential differences in the findings and recommendations. This comparison could provide an opportunity to discuss the priorities and needs of different groups and some of the benefits and limitations of the committee process.

Students may find it useful to use the following structure:

- The top five things they learnt from the hearings (findings)
- Three to five recommendations
 - These recommendations could inform government policy, work of independent bodies (for example one of the commissions), a review process, new legislation, or further investigation
 - Sometimes there are no recommendations provided in a committee report. If this is the case, the committee must provide reasons for this.

Alternatively, this could be done as an ‘exit card’ activity with students providing, for example:

- The finding they consider most important
- One recommendation
- A benefit and limitation of the committee process

Reflection questions

The questions below are designed to help students further develop their understanding and evaluate the roles of different groups represented in the committee inquiry process, and analyse and evaluate the effectiveness of this process as a whole.

Alternatively, you may like students to complete a SWOT (strength, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis.

The people: Considering perspectives and evidence

- How might the various political views and party policies impact on the questions asked by the committee and its final recommendations?
- What different perspectives were offered throughout the committee process?
- How important to the process are individuals who provide evidence to parliamentary committee inquiries? What is the value of individuals' personal stories and lived experiences?
- What difficulties might the secretariat experience in presenting an unbiased and balanced research throughout the inquiry process (i.e. remaining apolitical) throughout the inquiry process?
- Were some perspectives considered in more detail, or considered more important than others?
 - How might this affect the recommendations and the findings of the committee?
 - Is it important to consider all different perspectives in every committee inquiry? Why/why not? What might be the limitations or benefits in doing so?
 - Consider social, political, historical, economic, medical, religious and legal perspectives

- How did the classes findings and recommendations compare to the actual finding and recommendations?
- How did the findings and recommendations reflect public, political or expert opinion reported in the media and on social media?
 - To what degree do you think media and social media should and does influence the committee process? What might be the benefits and limitations of any influence?

The process: Evaluating the effectiveness of committee inquiries

- Why might the committee process be an important part of the process of making and reforming laws?
- What were the strengths and weaknesses of the process? Was it an effective way to determine how to change the law?
- How might the structure of the inquiry process limit or enhance parliament's ability to reform legislation?
- How does the parliamentary committee process compare to the processes of the Victorian Law Reform Commission or a royal commission?

Curriculum links

This classroom-based inquiry is designed to assist students with learning how parliamentary committees work using an example of law reform. The classroom-based inquiry can be used flexibly to explore the committee process, the need for law reform, the law-making process more broadly, and how people can take an active role in the law-making process. Therefore, as well as addressing aspects of the VCE Legal Studies study design for Unit 1 and 4, the classroom-based inquiry can also be used to address aspects of Years 7 to 10 Civics and Citizenship within the Victorian Curriculum. The connections to these areas of the curriculum are included in more detail below.

VCE Legal Studies

As well as developing their skills in and understanding of legal terminology, and parliament's role in the process of making and reforming laws based on a recent committee inquiry, students also develop a range of skills and understandings relating to VCE Legal Studies Unit 1 and Unit 4, especially Unit 4, Area Study 2.

Unit 1: Area of Study 1, Legal Foundations, Outcome 1

Through participating in the classroom-based inquiry students have the opportunity to explore and evaluate:

- the role of individuals in the law-making process
- the principles of justice: fairness, equality and access
- the characteristics of an effective law, such as it reflects society's values; is enforceable; is known; is clear and understood; and is stable
- sources of law, such as statute law

Unit 4: Area of Study 1, The people and the Australian Constitution

Through participating in the classroom-based inquiry students have the opportunity to explore and evaluate:

- The role of the Crown and the houses of parliament (Victorian) in law-making (such as the roles of committees)
- The division of constitutional law-making powers of the state and commonwealth parliaments, including exclusive, concurrent and residual powers (such as the limitations of the Constitution on the ability for state parliament to respond to law reform, and how these limitations may shape the committee inquiry process, for example the terms of reference).

Unit 4: Area of Study 2, The people, the parliament and the courts

As the classroom-based inquiry uses a recommendation for law reform by a parliamentary committee, students have the opportunity to explain, analyse and evaluate:

- The factors that affect the ability of parliament to make law, including
 - The roles of the houses of parliament
 - The representative nature of parliament
- The reasons for law reform
- The role of a parliamentary committee and its ability to influence law reform
- One recent example of a recommendation for law reform by one parliamentary committee
- The ability of parliament and the courts to respond to the need for law reform.

Note: The date of the most recent activity in parliament is included on each inquiry supplement. For Unit 4 Area of Study 2, action on the committee inquiry must be within the last four years.

Victorian Curriculum

Years 7 & 8

Through the use of the committee inquiry in the classroom students:

- investigate key features of the law-making process
- evaluate how these processes demonstrate the principles of justice
- explore how the diverse views of Victorian society are represented in the law-making process
- identify and evaluate ways of actively participating in the process.

Specifically, the classroom-based inquiry addresses “the role of the houses of parliament, and the division of powers” (VCCCG018), “the freedoms that enable active participation in Australia’s democracy” (VCCCG019), “explain how citizens can participate in Australia’s democracy, including the ... use of lobby groups, interest groups and direct action” (VCCCG020), and “explain how groups express their identities” (VCCCC026).

Years 9 & 10

As well as a preparation activity for VCE Legal Studies, the classroom-based inquiry develops student understanding, analysis and evaluation of:

- Australia’s political system
- the key features and values of systems of government (specifically the process of making laws)
- ways people can be active and informed citizens in different contexts, taking into account multiple perspectives and ambiguities.

Specifically, by exploring the committee system through the classroom-based inquiry, students will address “the process through which government policy is shaped and developed” (VCCCG038), “analyse contemporary examples and issues relating to Australian democracy” (VCCCC035, for example through exploring multiple perspectives on an issue, voice and representation) and “how and why groups participate in civic life” (VCCCC037).